

The Fraud Scandal Engulfing Russia's Media Watchdog, Explained

October 16, 2017



Vadim Ampelonsky

The controversial Russian state agency charged with overseeing media and blocking websites has had the spotlight turned onto itself after four of its employees were charged with fraud Oct. 5.

Roskomnadzor was established in 2008 as a growing number Russian homes were hooked up to the internet and "family values" parliamentarians agitated for greater internet safety. Initially, it went after websites involved in child pornography and illegal drug sales.

Link:

<https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russian-state-watchdog-officials-charged-with-fraud-59248?src=ilaw>

But soon its brief to monitor the media brought about to closure of sites for political reasons

and in no short order Roskomnadzor became known as Russia's state censor.

The agency has reportedly [banned](#) more than 82,000 websites since 2008 for reasons ranging from support for terrorism and "extremism" to calls for demonstrations.

"Dead Souls" on the payroll

The fraud case has implicated Roskomnadzor's spokesman Vadim Ampelonsky — familiar to those who have faced the censor's scrutiny — and Boris Yedidin, the head of its legal department.

Both men were [placed](#) under house arrest Oct. 5 by the Chertanovsky Court of Moscow until Nov. 7.

Embed:

Пресс-секретарь Роскомнадзора Вадим Амперонский стал фигурантом уголовного дела: <https://t.co/LiGdkO22ss>

Фото: Facebook / Vadim Ampelonskiy <pic.twitter.com/KDunk4tnAB>

— РБК (@ru_rbc) [October 11, 2017](#)

The court also authorized the house arrest of Alexander Veselchakov, adviser to the General Director of the Chief Radio Frequency Center (CRFC), an agency under the auspices of Roskomnadzor that monitors radio frequencies.

The business daily Kommersant [reported](#) that the general director of CRFC, Anastasiya Zvyagintseva claimed she was forced to put "dead souls" on payroll to give value employees pay raises, including Yedidin. Zvyagintseva has been released pending trial.

Watching the watchers

Now independent media and bloggers, who previously felt Roskomnadzor loom large, are learning that the watchdog's officials were themselves under scrutiny.

Kommersant [reported](#) that for six months the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia's domestic intelligence, monitored the telephones of Roskomnadzor employees as well as their bank transactions.

"Roskomnadzor is Blocked," [crowed](#) a headline at the independent news site Novaya Gazeta, which has faced the threat of closure — The outlet [published](#) an essay comparing Russian officials to those in Nazi Germany and another [quoting](#) a profanity. A third warning could lead to the outlet's closure.

Ever isolated

Independent journalist Igor Yakovenko [said](#) in an online panel discussion organized by Radio Svoboda he felt "a sense of deep satisfaction" at the Roskomnadzor arrests. It turned out, he said, that the agency was no different from any other corrupt Russian government branch.

But human rights lawyer Pavel Chikov said that even if Roskomnadzor were to be disbanded, other agencies would take on its repressive functions.

"I think the country is gradually moving toward isolation, including on the Internet," he added. "The clouds are gathering over Radio Svoboda and Voice of America."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/16/the-arrests-hollowing-out-russia-media-watchdog-explained-a59253>