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STORY

An Environmental Newspaper Fights for Press Freedom in the Russian Arctic

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BY AMY MARTIN

Journalist Thomas Nilsen poses for a photo in the offices of The Barents Observer in Kirkenes, Norway. The newspaper publishes in both English and Russian and covers environmental issues in the Russian Arctic. Nilsen recently found out he was no longer welcome in Russia and he's been fighting the decision in Russian courts. Image by Amy Martin. Norway, 2018.

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If you want to keep watch on what's going on in the Russian Arctic, there might be no better perch than Kirkenes, Norway. It's a tiny town in the country's far northeast, on a section of the Arctic Ocean that Norway shares with Russia, known as the Barents Sea. And it's where Thomas Nilsen lives and edits an online newspaper called The Barents Observer.

The paper keeps a close watch on the Russian Arctic because it's part of the neighborhood, and because there's a lot at stake there, for Russians and the rest of us.

"We have to remember that half of the Arctic is Russia," Nilsen said. "And half of Russia is Arctic. And the majority of the population living in the circumpolar Arctic actually are [in Russia]."

There's also a lot going on as the region warms up. If you've heard about something happening with climate change elsewhere in the Arctic, it's happening in Russia, too — thawing permafrost, sea ice loss, deforestation, disruption of Indigenous communities; the list goes on and on.

In fact, in true Russian style, these stories are often bigger and more dramatic there than anywhere else. In Siberia, for instance, thawing permafrost (https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/08/news-arctic-permafrost-may-thaw-faster-than-expected/) has caused methane to build up and explode out of the soil, opening up huge craters (https://www.businessinsider.com/russian-exploding-permafrost-methane-craters-global-warming-2016-6) and sometimes releasing ancient anthrax spores (https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/as-earth-warms-the-diseases-that-may-lie-within-permafrost-become-a-bigger-worry/).

Resource development in the area is heating up, too, along with all the risks that can come with it. The world's biggest, liquefied natural gas plant is in north-central Siberia, threatening the future of the Nenets, an Indigenous reindeer herding culture. There are huge oil and gas projects in the eastern part of the country (http://www.gazprom.com/projects/east-program/), too, plus offshore oil drilling in the Arctic Ocean. And some of the biggest companies in the Russian Arctic are also some of the region's worst polluters.

These are big stories, but outsiders, and many Russians, almost never hear about them. The Russian Arctic is a place that needs a lot more journalists asking a lot more questions. It's a place that needs people like Nilsen.

"We can help the rest of the world understand what's happening up here by our reporting," Nilsen said. "To go to the oil field or … talk to the people living in the countryside or in the Russian Arctic, the Indigenous peoples on the tundra and so on."

Nilsen has devoted much of his life to that kind of work. He's been crossing the border to report on the western Russian Arctic for 30 years. But he says he's not going back anytime soon. In March 2017, when he was on what he says was an ordinary trip into Russia, he was stopped at the border.

"[I was] taken aside, brought into a back room with a lot of officers who very politely, but still very strong, told me that I am no longer wanted in Russia," he said.

Nilsen says he was told he poses a threat to Russia's national security, but exactly what kind of threat was a complete mystery to him.

"There was just a message coming up on … the passport control computer when I tried to enter," he said. "So, I had to hitchhike back a few hundred meters back to the Norwegian side of the border and have not been in Russia since then."

The expulsion came as something of a shock.

"I have all my papers in order, my journalist visa, my accreditation to work as a reporter in Russia," Nilsen said. "I've not even got a speeding ticket in Russia over this 30 years … I haven't violated any visa regulations or any other Russian laws or regulations, not one single time."

A few days later, the Russian embassy in Oslo issued a press release saying Nilsen was on a so-called "stop list," meaning he was no longer welcome in the country, although still without explanation.

But Nilsen was unwilling to let the matter rest. He took the FSB — the Russian security service — to court. "To find out why I am denied entry to Russia," he said. "And secondly, to get back my right to do my job as a journalist on Russian territory."

Much like its Soviet predecessor, the KGB, the FSB has a shocking amount of power and operates mostly in secret. Just figuring out that the FSB was responsible for his expulsion took three court cases, Nilsen says. Eventually though, with help from a lawyer in Moscow, his case got a hearing. Of course, since he was banned from the country, he wasn't allowed to be there for any of it.

But he says the judge in the case did a good job.

“They listened to both parties’ arguments and so on,” he said. “But then came the surprise. The ruling by the court was kept secret. The arguments and the reasons why I am not allowed to enter Russia is kept secret from my lawyer … that is a clear violation of the Russian constitution.”

Nilsen appealed the ruling all the way to the Russian Supreme Court, but the court ruled for the FSB. It said Nilsen does pose a threat to Russia, and that the FSB doesn’t have to reveal what that threat is.

Again, Nilsen didn’t stop pushing back. He's taking the case all the way to the European Court of Human Rights.

With so much secrecy, Nilsen can’t say for sure what his expulsion is all about, but he has a hunch.

“Every society that has leaders who are on the paths of totalitarian systems are afraid of the freedom of speech,” he said. “They are afraid of free journalism. So, I think that the main reason why the media in Russia and also the Barents Observer here, covering cross-border issues with Russia, is under attack is because they’re afraid.”

Afraid, perhaps, because there's a lot that people could be angry about in the Russian Arctic. In one region, waste from a nickel mining company has heavily contaminated more than a thousand square miles of forest. An outside watchdog group has twice listed the area as one of the top 10 most polluted places in the world (https://www.worstpolluted.org/docs/toptenthreats2013.pdf). Meanwhile, near

Murmansk, just across the border from Norway, one recent study (https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3713793) found dangerously high levels of heavy metals in local residents.

Almost all of the big companies moving into the Russian Arctic have close ties to President Vladimir Putin's regime, and they don't take kindly to reporters trying to hold them accountable — especially reporters like Nilsen who are attempting to inform actual Russians.

Some outside journalists still travel throughout Russia, and report on corruption and repression, but The Barents Observer is one of the very few that publishes in Russian, with the express intention of trying to provide independent journalism to the Russian people themselves. Nilsen says the outlet has thousands of readers within Russia.

His expulsion wasn't the first time The Barents Observer has been harassed by the Russian government, he says, even though the publication is tiny, with a full-time staff of two. In 2014, officials accused the Observer of being a mouthpiece for the Norwegian government and the FSB directly requested that Norwegian officials close the paper down.

"The Norwegian officials responded that, 'Ah, that's not the way it work[s] in Norway,'" Nilsen said. "We have the media freedom and authorities never interfere."

For Nilsen, this fight is about a lot more than his own freedom to report in Russia.

Putin began cracking down on independent journalism almost immediately after being elected in 2000, and ever since, reporters who write critical stories have had a tendency to die under mysterious circumstances (https://www.npr.org/2018/04/21/604497554/why-do-russian-journalists-keep-falling). A few months ago, three Russian journalists were murdered, and when an activist tried to investigate their deaths — and potential Kremlin connections — he was poisoned but survived. The Committee to Protect Journalists lists Russia as No. 11

on its Global Impunity Index (https://cpj.org/reports/2017/10/impunity-index-getting-away-with-murder-killed-justice.php), meaning that it's rare for anyone to be held accountable when Russian journalists are killed or attacked.

All of this violence and intimidation of the media has huge implications for Russians first and foremost, but Nilsen says it also matters to anyone who wants to try to understand the Russian Arctic. He says the media is needed there to serve its traditional role of ferreting out corruption and highlighting marginalized voices.

“The most untold stories that we really want to [do] are the consequences for the locals living in areas where big oil is moving in, or where the military start to rebuild their facilities,” he said. “The media's role of being the voice of like, Indigenous reindeer herders, that is what I'm most scared that we are lacking … and that is that is what journalism is all about. It's about being inside and being able to see a story from different perspectives and that is the more difficult [thing] to do today in northern Russia.”

But Nilsen remains hopeful that things can change in the Russian Arctic.

The *nevalyashka* doll in the offices of The Barents Observer has a sign on it that says, "Try to tip over freedom of expression and see what happens." It's the staff's symbol of hope. “You can try to tip over free journalism,” editor Thomas Nilsen said, “but we will always come up again.” Image by Amy Martin. Norway, 2018.

“The day we lose the hope, then it’s a kind of game over,” he said. “So, of course, we do have hope.”

Nilsen and his colleagues have created a symbol of that hope — and their determination — in the offices of The Barents Observer in Kirkenes. It’s a slightly dressed-up version of a plastic Russian doll called a *nevalyashka*, with huge green eyes and a red, round body.

If you try to knock it down, the doll bobs back up.

“You cannot tip it over,” Nilsen said.

Observer staffers stuck a sign on the belly of the doll that says, “Try to tip over freedom of expression and see what happens.”

"You can try to tip over free journalism," Nilsen said, "but we will always come up again."

Amy Martin is the executive producer of the podcast and radio program Threshold.

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