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PRIMARY SOURCE

My Life at a Russian Propaganda Network

I thought they'd let me be a real journalist at Sputnik news. I was wrong.

By ANDREW FEINBERG | August 21, 2017

“What would you do if we asked you to write something that wasn't true?”

I was sitting in a 10th-floor conference room in the K Street offices of “RIA Global,” otherwise known as the Washington, D.C., bureau of the Russian-owned Sputnik News Service, where I'd come for a job interview. It was in mid-December, just over a month after Donald Trump's upset election victory, and I'd applied to the company looking to escape from what I like to call “freelance hell,” a period in my life during which I never knew where my next paycheck would come from or whether it would be enough to keep me going.

The question took me by surprise. Sure, I knew Sputnik was state-owned and had a reputation for

sometimes playing fast and loose with facts, but was my interviewer probing my willingness to lie or did he want to know whether I possessed the honest-to-goodness ethics that are prized at most news agencies?

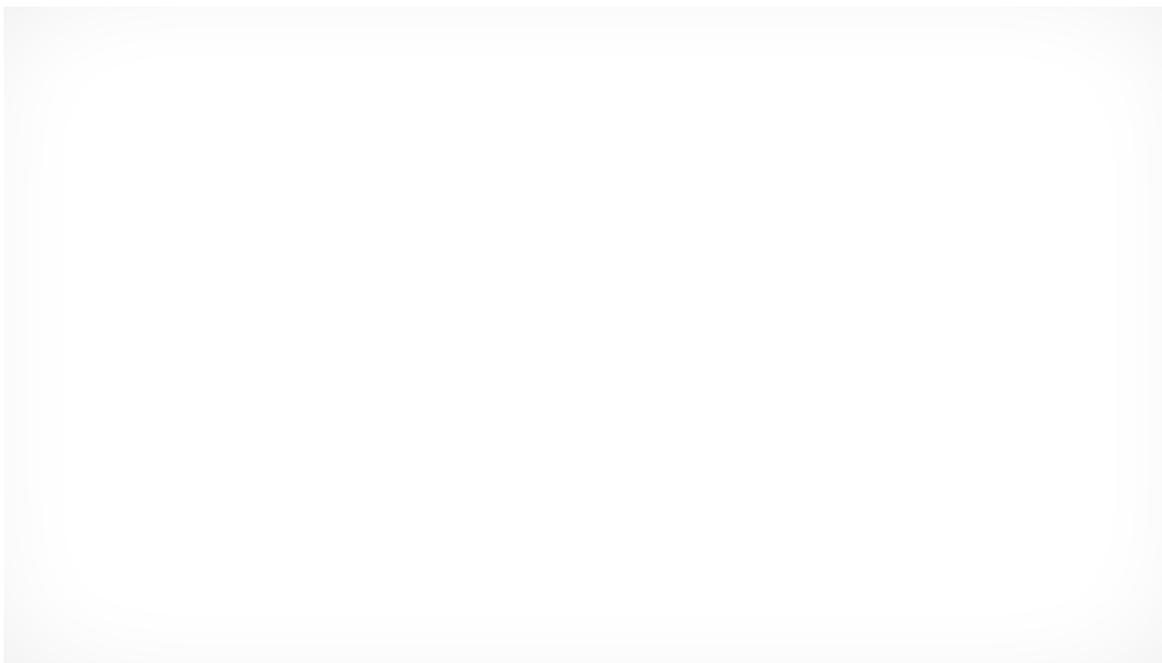
“I’d quit,” I replied.

I then explained that I wouldn’t have a problem with working for a state-sponsored news organization—even a Russian one—so long as I had the editorial independence I’d have at any journalism organization, since there are many state-sponsored news organizations, including the BBC, Voice of America, Agence France-Press and Al-Jazeera, that all do excellent work.

My interlocutor, a tall man with a thick accent named Peter Martinichev, replied that Sputnik was no different from those agencies, and, seemingly satisfied with my answer, later told me I’d been hired to be Sputnik’s first White House correspondent.

But when I walked out of the office five months later—termination letter in hand—I thought back to that moment, and given my answer, wondered why he’d hired me in the first place.

ADVERTISING



From the first day that I took a seat in Sputnik’s newsroom in January, something seemed a little off. For a place that billed itself as a major international wire service and news agency, there didn’t seem to be much experience at the top.

Most people associate Sputnik with its SputnikNews.com website, which is incendiary and outrageous enough that *Foreign Policy* bestowed Sputnik with the nickname “The Buzzfeed of

Propaganda.” But most of Sputnik’s original reporting is done by the reporters of Sputnik Newswires—a more sedate arm of the company that has its roots in the once well-regarded RIA Novosti news agency. Most wire content is hidden behind a paywall, reserved for an unknown number of subscribers, but when a wire story is important enough, it will make its way to Sputnik’s website.

As one of the reporters for Sputnik’s wire service, I reported to a triumvirate of editors: Martinichev (who’d interviewed and hired me), Anastasia Sheveleva and Zlatko Kovach. Martinichev and Sheveleva were Russian, and neither appeared to be any older than my (then) 34 years. Nor did either of them seem to know much about how journalism works in the U.S., since they found standard practices—like keeping the names of sources I was meeting with secret from them or using company resources to expense meals or drinks to facilitate the meetings with those sources—to be outrageous.

Kovach, who is Macedonian by birth but also a naturalized U.S. citizen, wasn’t even a journalist, having spent his career working for General Dynamics, which was contracted to run the *Southeast European Times*, a multilingual website that targeted the Balkans by pushing back against propaganda efforts from Russia and other countries. After funding for that program lapsed, Kovach—who says he speaks six languages fluently—switched sides in the propaganda war.

And while other co-workers (including an American or two) would copy edit my stories, the Russians (and Kovach) were the ones who were unquestionably in charge, and they had their own agenda, which didn’t always include the whole truth.

This became evident after I first began to get called on by then-White House press secretary Sean Spicer. One of the first times I asked a question on camera was on a Friday in early March 2017, when I inquired about why Trump was refusing to use the funding and authority granted him by Congress to send weapons to Ukraine to assist in that country’s fight against Russian aggression.

I didn’t know it then, but I’d broken one of the biggest unwritten rules of how things are done at Sputnik.

In practice, Sputnik’s mission statement—“Telling the Untold”—means that Sputnik’s content should reflect the Russian side of any news story, whether it lines up with reality or not. When it came to the issue of Crimea (which has been occupied by Russian-backed troops since 2014), we were never to write anything on the subject that didn’t include language noting that 90 percent of Crimea residents voted in a referendum to rejoin Russia. Of course, when I’d include details of the tanks and armed men that lined the streets while the people of Crimea voted in that referendum, it would be removed from the story before it went live.

When asking about Ukraine, I'd based the premise of my question on the reality of the situation, and the pushback, as I interpreted it, was swift.

On Monday—our next day back in the office—I received an email from Martinichev ordering me to clear any future questions I intended to ask at the White House with my editors, “so that everyone is on the same page.” That is, he instructed me, if my editors didn't have a specific question they wanted me to ask. My question “should never be a surprise,” he wrote. “We also need emergency questions in case [somebody] asks the same before us.”

So every morning I'd submit my questions via email, and his reply would almost always dismiss them in favor of his own replacement questions on other topics, with no regard to whether they were based on reality or not.

For example, about two weeks after the April sarin gas attack in Syria's Idlib province, and a week after Trump bombed a Syrian airfield in response, I emailed Martinichev two planned questions, about Syrian peace talks and government policy toward the St. Petersburg Economic Forum. In response, he referred me to an article on the website of RT, the Russian-owned cable news channel, which, like Sputnik, is controlled by the Russian government. The article talked about an emeritus professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who, based on some photographs he'd seen, had somehow come up with the idea that the attack was carried out by Syrian rebels, not the government of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad. (At that point the U.S. government had concluded not only that the Assad regime was responsible for the attack but also that the Syrian regime and Russia had attempted to cover up that fact.) Martinichev also pointed to a report that the Islamic State terrorist group had exploded an old mustard-gas shell near an Iraqi army base outside of Mosul—seemingly contradicting the U.S. government line that no one but the Syrian regime had the technology to pull off the Sarin gas attack. (He was, of course, ignoring the fact that the mustard-gas shell was probably older than I was and had caused no casualties, whereas the highly effective sarin had been dropped by an airplane.)

Sitting in the televised daily White House press briefing that day, I was ordered to ask Spicer whether the White House or U.S. intelligence community planned to review “alternate versions and new data” about the attack in response to the professor's findings and the news of the ISIS attack.

History will note that I didn't raise my hand very high for either question that day. But I did follow up with Sarah Huckabee Sanders in person, sheepishly beginning my query: “My editor will not let this go ...”

When I got back to the office, Martinichev expressed disappointment that I hadn't asked the question on camera (as if I had control over who Sean Spicer called on) and explained that Moscow wanted me to follow up with Spicer on why the ISIS chemical weapons attack hadn't caused the

U.S. government to send cruise missiles into Iraq the way it bombed Syria after Assad gassed his own people.

But the point of the question wasn't to get an answer; it was to use the platform of the televised briefing to portray the U.S. government as hypocritical for not reacting to the Islamic State's use of an old mustard gas shell the same way it had reacted to Assad's use of sarin gas against civilians.

I began to realize that Sputnik's mission wasn't really to report the news as much as it was to push a narrative that would either sow doubts about situations that weren't flattering to Russia or its allies, or hurt the reputation of the United States and its allies. Consider, for example, when Trump's budget proposed massive cuts to foreign aid sent to Ukraine. While these decreases in funding were a result of across-the-board cuts to the State Department and other agencies, I was told to ask whether such cuts were related to unspecified "corruption" in Ukraine's government. Instead of humiliating myself by asking such a stupid question on camera, I emailed a White House spokesperson. Considering how ridiculous the query was, I was not the least bit surprised when I got no reply.

Considering the U.S. government conclusion that the Russian government interfered in the 2016 election, using fake news stories and the slanted content at outlets like Sputnik to harm Hillary Clinton's candidacy and bolster Trump, one might assume that I was ordered to write stories that were unabashedly pro-Trump. I never was. Instead, the stories I was told to cover invariably could be used to push narratives that the U.S. government is hypocritical, corrupt and lacks the moral standing to confront Putin's dictatorship on human rights or any other similar issue. One prominent pro-Trump journalist who worked at Sputnik during the election told me that she was never ordered to write pro-Trump stories but often did so on her own initiative; another former Sputnik reporter said that he was pressured to exploit his contacts to get ahold of hacked emails belonging to former CIA Director John Brennan—and was fired after he refused to traffic in stolen data.

It's possible that the White House also believed that Sputnik would be a friendly outlet, as my initial reception by the White House press office was warm and welcoming, at least until I started asking questions—such as why wouldn't Trump send weapons to Ukraine and why Jared Kushner omitted meetings with Russians from his security clearance forms—that indicated I intended to do my job like any other reporter. After that, my White House access became almost nonexistent. Like many other White House reporters, I'm sure, I struggled to get questions answered and emails returned.

I was regularly criticized on social media of spreading propaganda; some people even accused me of treason. I always responded in defense of myself and my colleagues. The way I saw it, at least at

first, was that I was simply doing the job the way I'd do any other, and that I wasn't spreading disinformation. But eventually, all the little things I'd noticed about how my job at Sputnik wasn't quite like any other reporting job started to add up, and I became more and more uneasy. I realized that it didn't matter how hard I worked or how aggressively I pushed back at the strictures my bosses were putting on me—as long as I was working at Sputnik I'd be contributing to the spread of disinformation and propaganda, even if I wasn't actively writing it myself.

I started looking at job boards and asking more experienced colleagues outside of Sputnik for advice on how best to extricate myself.

If during the months since starting at Sputnik I'd began having concerns that things weren't the way I'd been promised they would be, my last week at Sputnik removed any doubt.

On May 22, the White House held a briefing with budget director Mick Mulvaney, during which I asked why a proposal to keep families with undocumented immigrant parents from getting a tax credit to help them raise children even if those children were American citizens made any sense. A columnist for the *Washington Post* noted the exchange, identifying me as Sputnik's White House reporter, and writing "Trump's budget is so cruel a Russian propaganda outfit set the White House straight."

This did not make my bosses happy. A characteristic feature of Sputnik's news wire content is that the names of reporters rarely accompany the stories they write. While I was able to push back on this practice on a number of occasions, I was never given a concrete reason for why Sputnik wants its reporters to remain anonymous. If I were to hazard a guess, it would be so that no one can be held accountable for errors, lies and half-truths in any given story. When the *Post* identified me as Sputnik's White House reporter, my bosses indicated they were not pleased, and pointed out to me that company policy was to not put bylines on stories.

I'd also pushed back against some of the more ridiculous questions they wanted me to ask at the White House, so I am sure they knew I wasn't exactly comfortable with things, either. The day after one editor in particular dressed me down over the *Post* column, I brought a suitcase to the office, ostensibly to hold the spare suit I'd been keeping there. But I was really preparing myself to clean out my desk and give my notice.

I never got that chance. On May 26—a few days after the *Post* article had pierced my anonymity—I was called into a meeting with Martinichev and another man I'd never met. This much older man, who also spoke with a thick Russian accent, called himself Mikhail Safronov and identified himself as Sputnik's Washington bureau chief, though I'd never once seen him set foot in the bureau.

“When the president comes back from Europe, we’d like you to start asking about the Seth Rich case,” Martinichev told me.

Seth Rich was a Democratic National Committee employee who had been murdered near his Washington, D.C., home in what the D.C. Metropolitan Police determined to be a botched robbery. But many on the fringes of the American right had been pushing the idea that his murder was retaliation for what they alleged was his role in leaking thousands of DNC emails to WikiLeaks during the 2016 election. Earlier that month, Fox News had run a story claiming that a private investigator had found information linking Rich’s murder to the theft and leaking of those thousands of emails, and the right-wing media universe had exploded with talk of a cover-up perpetrated by the Clintons, the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic communications consultant who was assisting Rich’s family in dealing with the feeding frenzy kicked off by the Fox story.

Was this a test, I wondered? Because there was no way Martinichev or Safronov could think this was a legitimate story, since Fox News had retracted their story several days earlier.

I replied that I wasn’t comfortable asking questions or writing about such a thing when there was absolutely no factual basis for doing so. But that story served a purpose, and Sputnik wouldn’t let it go. If Sputnik’s readers could be made to believe that Rich was the DNC leaker, it would shift blame from the Russian hackers the U.S. intelligence community had said were responsible.

That was the last straw, I told myself, and I began to open my mouth again. But before I could explain that I couldn’t continue to work there under such conditions, Martinichev spoke again.

“In that case, we are terminating your contract, effective immediately,” he said, opening a folder to present me a letter to that effect.

I asked whether I was being fired for refusing to report lies, or for any other reason, but both he and Safronov wouldn’t elaborate on any reasons, explaining that because Washington, D.C., is an at-will employment jurisdiction, they could fire me for any reason, at any time, and didn’t have to tell me why. Months later, after *Yahoo News* published a story about the circumstances surrounding my departure, a Sputnik spokesperson claimed that I was let go for “performance related issues.” If Martinichev or my other supervisors had problems with my work, I wasn’t aware of any. Nor was I aware of any problems with my work ethic, as I regularly arrived early to prepare for each day before my scheduled start time and on many days stayed past my scheduled end time. At no time was I ever told there was a problem with my performance that threatened my job.

I retrieved my suitcase, packed, and, feeling the weight of so many months of intolerable conditions lift from my shoulders, left Sputnik’s office for the last time, tweeting about my

departure as I walked out the door: “I’m no longer working for @SputnikInt — I’d love to tell you why. Please feel free to contact me.”

From my first day at Sputnik, I truly believed that even at a Russian state-owned news service, I could do good work so long as I maintained my own ethical standards. I even believed that Sputnik’s stated mission—to “tell the untold”—is one worth undertaking. Other state-owned news services aim to report stories ignored by other outlets, and to provide a different perspective on the news. Many of them do an excellent job.

But when the “untold” is untold because it’s not true, and the “alternative perspective” is a way to push a hostile government’s agenda by tearing down the reputation of other nations, all the ethics in the world can’t help you. I thought Sputnik wanted me for my skills as a journalist, but what they wanted was to use the veneer of journalism to push their own agenda. I won’t make the mistake of taking someone like Martinichev at his word again.

EDITORS’ NOTE: Martinichev denies that during the job interview he asked Feinberg about reporting untruth. He also maintains that the circumstances of Feinberg’s firing as Feinberg reports them are untrue: “The statement that Seth Rich was brought up in the final meeting is a complete fabrication,” Martinichev says. “The story had nothing to do with the grounds of Mr. Feinberg’s departure.”

Furthermore, Martinichev says, “The claim that asking questions during on-camera White House briefings was aimed at promoting conspiracy theories is nonsense. All queries are made to get the administration’s position on different issues.”

In response to Feinberg’s allegations, Sputnik’s editor-in-chief responded: “Since Politico Magazine puts so much trust in Mr. Feinberg’s statements, it would be utterly hypocritical from your side not to employ him to prove what a wonderful journalist he is. I’ll be glad if you prove us wrong. Please, let me know if you are interested in employing Mr. Feinberg. I’ll be happy to provide you with a letter of recommendation.”