



More Restrictions on Defense Information in Russia

OE Watch Commentary: As reported last month (“Tightening Security Info Space,” Sept 2020 *OE Watch*), the Kremlin continues to take steps to limit reporting on issues involving security and national defense. As the excerpt from the largely independent *Kommersant* news source suggests, operational security may not be the only driving factor behind proposed new restrictions on covering national security topics. The article begins by asserting that there is currently legislation pending, which “if adopted, will allow the overwhelming majority of information on the country’s defense to be withdrawn from legal public circulation.” It explains that if this law is passed, Russian defense information, even if the material is “not related to state secrets,” will be regarded as “confidential and limited in its dissemination, equating it to attorney’s or medical secrets.”

The author points out that as opposed to the Soviet period, when all material related to security was classified, “by the 2000s, a certain consensus had developed, within which the media and public organizations actively discussed military topics of interest to society, and the military department, industry, and government bodies shared relevant information.” This relatively open dialogue helped to resolve “disputes between industry and the military about the quality and cost of weapons, discussions about ways of developing certain types of armed forces and the military machine as a whole,” hinting that classifying all information regarding security will likely lead to greater corruption. The author goes on to argue that “these discussions turned out to be all the more weighty because people who were involved in decision-making in the field of the country’s defense regularly took part in them.”

The article concludes by asserting that “in recent years, this free movement [of defense information] has been increasingly curtailed, and if this new law is adopted, “will make it almost impossible for any discussion of the Russian armed forces.” The author warns that Russia, as “one of the leading military powers of the planet... is of interest to many,” and if all military information becomes classified (except for official press releases), readers will turn to foreign sources. These foreign sources will likely not paint a flattering picture of Russian defense topics, and Russian defense officials “won’t like the result.” **End OE Watch Commentary (Finch)**

“... The balance between secrecy and the need to share information with citizens about the state of the country’s defense has always been one of the most pressing issues for all states...”

Source: Ilya Kramnik, “В обстановке повышенной подозрительности,” [In an atmosphere of heightened suspicion] *Kommersant*, 14 August 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4457101>

The Russian Ministry of Defense has developed a bill that, if adopted, will allow the overwhelming majority of information on the country’s defense to be withdrawn from legal public circulation. The authors of the initiative propose to consider information “generated during the implementation of measures in the field of defense” and not related to state secrets, confidential and limit its dissemination, equating to attorney’s or medical secrets.

The balance between secrecy and the need to share information with citizens about the state of the country’s defense has always been one of the most pressing issues for all states. They searched for it in different ways: someone closed almost tightly, someone, on the contrary, published a lot, classifying a narrow set of really serious topics. The choice of this or that approach was dictated mainly by the organization of the state machine: where decisions in the field of military development could not be made without taking into account the position of the parliament, which is closely related to public opinion, total classification did not make sense.

Russia is not one of the countries where the opinion of parliament and society would have to be taken into account in matters of military development - the prerogative of the president of the country in this area was not in doubt either in the 1990s or now.

However, by the 2000s, a certain consensus had developed, within which the media and public organizations actively discussed military topics of interest to society, and the military department, industry, and government bodies shared relevant information. Among other things, there were disputes between industry and the military about the quality and cost of weapons, discussions about ways of developing certain types of armed forces and the military machine as a whole. These discussions turned out to be all the more weighty because people who were involved in decision-making in the field of the country’s defense regularly took part in them.

In recent years, this free movement has been increasingly curtailed, not without the participation of the military department, and the bill under discussion is a logical development of this process.

Its adoption will make it almost impossible for any discussion of the Russian armed forces, except for the reprint of press releases with predictable content, “not inferior, but superior in a number of parameters.”

...The problem, however, remains. The Russian media and the Russian segment of the Internet do not end at the state border, but exist within the framework of the global information field, where Russia, being one of the leading military powers of the planet, is inevitably of interest to many, and this interest is not exhausted and cannot be exhausted by press releases.

It is not known what effect the authors of the idea wanted to achieve, but the closure of almost all significant information on the Russian armed forces will not lead to the termination of the discussion of this topic. They will simply discuss it now, first of all, with reference to foreign sources - because if you do not tell about yourself, be prepared for what others will tell about you. You won’t like the result.