

Capitol Hill journalists revoke RT America's news credentials

By Trévon Austin
4 December 2017

The Executive Committee of the Congressional Radio & Television Correspondents' Galleries voted unanimously last week to revoke the US Capitol credentials of RT America. The committee claimed that the move was in response to RT America being forced to register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

In a letter to T&R Productions LLC, the production company behind RT America, the committee of journalists stated, "The rules of the Galleries state clearly that news credentials may not be issued to any applicant employed 'by any foreign government or representative thereof.' Upon its registration as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), RT Network became ineligible to hold news credentials."

Press credentials for Capitol Hill entitle reporters to greater access to members of Congress than the general public. This includes entry into the Speaker's lobby, the press galleries of the House and Senate Floors, and other areas. The pretext given by the executive committee is more than dubious, given that openly state-run media, like the BBC, the Japanese NHK and others have access to Capitol Hill when they seek it. The issue, of course, is that RT has ties to the Russian state, which is regarded as a major enemy by the US ruling elite.

The Executive Committee of the Congressional Radio & Television Correspondents' Galleries is not a congressional committee, but supposedly represents an independent press, the "fourth estate." With its decision, the Capitol Hill journalists have joined the executive and legislative branches in tearing up the First Amendment.

According to its website, the committee that decided to revoke RT's credentials is a conglomeration of

journalists responsible for regulating the Capitol Hill news rooms (Galleries) for media who cover the House and Senate. The organization is tasked with determining who qualifies for Gallery credentials, and works to keep broadcasters informed of Congress activities.

The organization's executive committee, which signed last week's decision, consists of representatives from broadcasting networks such as C-SPAN, CBS and ABC. The Sinclair Broadcast Group, which currently has a seat on the executive committee as well, is known for promoting heavily conservative content, and has been involved in controversies surrounding its politically motivated program decisions. In April, the group hired Boris Epshteyn, a senior adviser for Donald Trump's presidential campaign, as chief political analyst.

Officials for RT America and in Russia responded to the decision angrily. RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan denounced the committee's decision, calling out the "self-righteous defenders of 'freedom of speech'" who claimed that "FARA registration places no restrictions whatsoever" on RT's ability to perform its journalistic activities in the US.

On Thursday, RT said it earlier received assurance that registration under FARA would not affect its operations. RT quoted U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert as saying on Tuesday, "FARA does not police the content of information disseminated, does not limit the publication of information or advocacy materials and does not restrict an organization's ability to operate."

The response in Moscow has mirrored the actions taken by the committee and taken by Congress in the past. Last month, President Vladimir Putin signed legislation allowing the Russian Justice Ministry to

force news agencies to register as foreign agents, lest they face fines or a ban on their activities.

On Friday, Russian lawmakers announced their intention to ban all U.S. media from entering either houses of the Russian Parliament. The lawmakers have acknowledged that the move is in retaliation to RT being banned from Capitol Hill.

The Russian news agency Interfax said the ban would affect at least 21 US-based news outlets. This includes radio networks such as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, and news outlets such as Bloomberg News, the Associated Press, the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, CNN, CBS, and NBC.

Olga Savastyanova, head of the committee that manages access to the Duma, told reporters that under proposed new rules, “journalists from all US media outlets will be prohibited from visiting the State Duma.”

“The reason is the decision to strip Russia Today of its accreditation,” Savastyanova added. She also stated that the case related to “the inadmissibility of the encroachment on democratic values, free speech and the right to receive impartial information.”

Since October, when RT America was first asked to register as a foreign agent, the news agency has served as the primary scapegoat in the McCarthyite anti-Russian campaign facilitated by the Democratic Party and US intelligence agencies. For months, RT has been labeled as a propaganda network for the Kremlin that has “sown divisions” among American citizens.

The move to strip RT America of its credentials is antidemocratic and the direct result of the campaign to silence alternative news sources in the United States. Labeling RT America, a media outlet that often promotes material critical of the US, as a foreign agent only serves to discredit anyone who is critical of the US government.

The retaliatory actions taken by the Russian Parliament are just as dangerous a threat to democratic rights. Labeling news agencies as “foreign agents” sets a dangerous precedent for critical voices, especially left-wing and antiwar media. Amid a deepening social crisis, the ruling classes continue to attack democratic rights, including the principles of freedom of speech and the press.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>