

Finland: the fight against disinformation

Piotr Szymański

On 18 October, the Helsinki District Court announced its long-awaited verdict in the case of Ilja Janitskin and Johan Bäckman. The former was sentenced to 22 months' imprisonment, the latter to 12 months (suspended). The judgement is not final, and the defence has announced it will appeal. The period of almost one year in custody has been credited towards the imposed penalty on Janitskin. He is the founder of the racist and anti-immigrant *MV-Lehti* website, and had announced that he would stand in the most recent presidential election in Finland, although he did not obtain the required number of signatures. Bäckman is a pro-Kremlin activist associated with the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI), who has supported Russian propaganda in the media and on the ground, including travelling to Transnistria, the Donbas (he called upon Finns to join the separatists), Crimea, Abkhazia and Syria. Janitskin was found guilty of 16 charges presented by the prosecution related to the website's activities, including defamation, incitement to ethnic hatred and infringement of copyright. Bäckman was convicted of defamation and the persecution of the journalist Jessikka Aro, who has written about Russian online propaganda. Aro links both of the individuals convicted; the court found them guilty of a coordinated campaign of defamation against the journalist. The convicted must pay the costs of the process as well as an unprecedented level of damages to Aro and the other victims - a total of €238,625.

Commentary

- The sentences were welcomed by most commentators as defining the boundaries of freedom of speech in Finland, and as proof that illegal activity on the internet is not covered by immunity. The prosecution of Janitskin and Bäckman was part of a broader drive within Finland to combat Russian and anti-immigrant propaganda in the media, which has intensified since 2014. In 2015 Finland set up a special group of experts and officials from various ministries responsible for monitoring and preventing disinformation. This network is led by the head of the department of communications in the Prime Minister's office, who is a member of the defence ministry's Security Committee, an institution responsible for the country's comprehensive approach to security. The aims of Russian propaganda in Finland include discrediting cooperation with NATO and the EU's sanctions against Russia, and fomenting anti-EU & anti-immigrant feelings, as well as preserving positive sentiments towards the country's special relationship with the USSR during the cold war.

- The great importance of the Janitskin case stems from the growth in popularity of extreme nationalist groups, the Soldiers of Odin and the Finnish Resistance Movement, in a situation of crisis within the asylum system in Finland (there were 32,500 applications in 2015). This crisis has highlighted the deep social divisions in Finland regarding the state's migration policy. Janitskin's website, which specialised in spreading conspiracy theories and false information about migrants, was conducive towards the radicalisation of racist sentiments.
- It is likely that the sentences for Janitskin and Bäckman will be exploited in Russian disinformation operations against Finland. The *MV-Lehti* website has already started a campaign depicting Finland as a state which violates human rights and Janitskin as a political prisoner.