

Death of the Russian Media  
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16 April 2007

*The Death Trend*

Ivan Safronov's death highlights the continued danger faced by journalists in Russia. Russia is the third most dangerous country for a journalist, after only Iraq and Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Safronov is the fourteenth journalist, and twentieth member of the Russian media to have been murdered since 2000, the year Putin assumed the presidency.<sup>2</sup> All cases remain unsolved.

Prior to Safronov's death, the most recent murdered journalist in Russia was Anna Politkovskaya. Politkovskaya was killed contract style—four bullets, including one in the head—in the elevator of her apartment building on October 7, 2006. She was a staunch critic of the Putin administration and a fervent supporter of human rights. She argued that Putin was stifling civil liberties and taking the country back to a Soviet style dictatorship. She is well known for her coverage of the conflict in Chechnya.

Overwhelming evidence points to a trend in Russia in which journalists who are critics of the Kremlin, corruption, and human rights abuses are murdered. Murdering investigative journalists serves two purposes. One is to silence an unwanted voice which has access to a relatively wide audience through the various mediums of media. The second purpose is to convince other journalists that self-censorship would be wise.

*Press Freedom in Russia*

Each year Reporters Without Borders conducts a Press Freedom Report. The index measures the state of press freedom in the world. It reflects the degree of freedom journalists and news organizations enjoy in each country, and the efforts made by the state to respect and ensure respect for this freedom. In the 2006 Press Freedom Report, Russia ranked 147<sup>th</sup> out of a total of 168 countries.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. State Department recently released the 2006 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.<sup>4</sup> The report on Russia stated that government pressure continued to weaken freedom of expression and media independence, particularly of major national networks. Of the 2500 television stations in the

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<sup>1</sup> "Journalists Killed: Statistics and Background." *Committee to Protect Journalists*. 2006. at [http://www.cpj.org/killed/killed\\_archives/stats.html](http://www.cpj.org/killed/killed_archives/stats.html)

<sup>2</sup> See appendix for complete list.

<sup>3</sup> "Press Freedom Index 2006." *Reporters Without Borders*. at [http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=639](http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=639)

<sup>4</sup> "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Russia." *U.S. Department of State*. March 6, 2007 at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78835.htm>

country, two-thirds are completely or partially owned by the federal and local governments. Private broadcasting companies are indirectly influenced by the government through partial ownership of commercial structures such as Gazprom and Eurofinance Bank, which in turn own large or controlling stakes of media companies. Media freedom also declined due to restrictions, as well as harassment, intimidation, and killing of journalists. In addition, the report states that authorities at all levels employ administrative measures to deter critical coverage by media and individual journalists. For example, media access to events and information could be denied. The Russian government withdrew ABC's accreditation in July 2005 after ABC News broadcast an interview with Chechen rebel Shamil Basayev.

Legal actions against journalists are also used by federal and local authorities as a tool against critical coverage of government policy or operations. The Glasnost Defense Fund (GDF) estimates that in 2006 there were 48 criminal cases and almost 300 civil cases brought against journalists in Russia. In July 2006, the Russian Parliament approved a bill that amends the Law on Fighting Extremist Activity. According to the bill, extremist activity includes media criticism, such as public slander, of state officials. It is punishable by up to three years for journalists. This legislation creates a basis for government officials to stifle criticism and label independent reporters as extremists.

Press freedom is further stifled by the fact that most major media organizations in Russia are financially dependent on the government or on major financial-industrial groups. The U.S. State Department's report says that authorities at various levels undermine editorial independence and journalistic integrity in both the print and broadcast media by taking advantage of this financial dependence. Moscow media, as well as media in the outlying regions, continues to be dominated by the state-controlled Gazprom, government structures and banking interests.

A study conducted by the Russian Union of Journalists (RUJ) and the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, concluded that ninety percent of broadcast time of Russian television newscast stations is dedicated to activities carried out by the Russian authorities, President Putin or the ruling party. Putin's activities are covered in a favorable or neutral tone, while opposition parties and their activities receive little coverage.<sup>5</sup>

Until recently, there was no widespread internet censorship in Russia, although the government attempts to limit the freedoms of speech and access to information (provided for in the Russian Constitution—Article 29) under the aegis of protecting the people from extremists and terrorists. For example, Chechen separatist websites have been closed down, although the

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<sup>5</sup> “ IPI Watchlist: Russia.” *International Press Institute*. November 2006, May 2006 at [http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/watchlist\\_detail.html?country=KW0078](http://www.freemedia.at/cms/ipi/watchlist_detail.html?country=KW0078)

ultranationalist websites operate openly.<sup>6</sup> Recently, however, President Putin signed a decree to create a single entity that will license broadcasters, newspapers, and websites. This entity will also conduct editorial oversight. Russian journalists fear that Putin's creation of a super-agency with the mandate of regulating the media—print, broadcast, and the Internet—is an attempt by the Kremlin to tighten publishing controls, specifically on the online-media, which has been relatively free to date.

### *Strangling Civil Society*

In addition to the shrinking public space for press freedom, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia are encountering increased regulation. Nikolai Patrushev, head of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), argues that foreign governments establish and use NGOs in Russia for the purpose of intelligence gathering. Addressing the State Duma in 2005 he warned that "Under the cover of various humanitarian and educational programs, foreign states pursue their interests and collect data on various matters."<sup>7</sup> A new Russian NGO law that came into effect April 16, 2006 has since made NGO licensing more restrictive and cumbersome.

Amnesty International argues that the legal framework for NGOs in Russia does not respect freedom of expression and association.<sup>8</sup> In a 2006 Heritage Foundation memo, Yevgeny Volk also calls Russia's NGO law an attack on freedom and civil society.<sup>9</sup> He stated that Russian human and civil rights organizations are unanimous in their belief that the worst expectations of the new law are justified. If an NGO cannot be banned directly, the red tape, all-out control, endless check-ups, and a stepped-up financial burden could smother it.

Speaking at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Munich Conference on Security Policy held February 9 – 11, 2007, President Putin defended the new system for registering NGOs, claiming that none had been denied registration based on substantial fundamental issues. He went on to say that what bothers Russia is "... when these nongovernmental organizations are financed by foreign governments, we see them as an instrument that foreign states use to carry out their Russian policies."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bigg, Claire. "Russia: Authorities Warn of Cybercrime Epidemic." *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*. April 20, 2006 at <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/4/7D821779-4411-43D1-BF7B-D19743879DF6.html>

<sup>7</sup> Interfax, *Moscow Times*. May 13, 2005. at <http://www.agentura.ru/english/Right?id=20050513133000>

<sup>8</sup> "Russian Authorities Restrict Freedom of Press and Association." *Amnesty International*. March 12, 2007 at <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/rus-120307-editorial-eng>

<sup>9</sup> Volk, Yevgeny. "Russia's NGO Law: an Attack on Freedom and Civil Society." *Heritage Foundation*. May 24, 2006. at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1090.cfm>

<sup>10</sup> "President Putin Responds to Questions About Russia's Human Rights Record." *Human Rights Watch*. at <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/02/14/russia15328.htm>

Rather than an instrument of foreign governments, NGOs are a vital ingredient to civil society. At this point, it is instructive to review exactly what civil society is. Civil society is the realm between the individual and the state; it is an arena for public discourse. Three key points of civil society are 1) freedom of speech, 2) freedom of association, and 3) a legal system which regulates a mechanism of mediation and ways of conflict solving based on principles acceptable from the dominant norms and values. Civil societies are populated by organizations such as registered charities, NGOs, community groups, faith-based organizations, professional organizations, social movements, advocacy groups, etc. In addition, civil society facilitates increased awareness and a more informed citizenry, who make better voting choices, participate in politics, and as a result, hold government more accountable. By promoting policies which diminish the public space available for a healthy civil society, Putin is able to further centralize control and dominate public opinion.

### *Conclusion*

Traditionally, outside pressure has been necessary to convince the Kremlin that civil society concerns are important. While Russian law provides for freedom of speech and of the press, government pressure on the media persists. The Russian government uses its controlling interest in national television and radio stations, as well as influential regional ones, to restrict access to information about issues deemed sensitive. For example, it restricts media coverage of events in Chechnya. In addition, the U.S. State Department reported that during 2006 government friendly corporations bought majority or significant minority stakes in several key publications. Of the three major national television stations the government owns one (the Rossiya Channel) and has a majority interest in another (the First Channel). Journalists and news anchors at both report having received guidelines prepared by the presidential administration, indicating which politicians should be supported and which should be criticized. The government also owns the news agencies ITAR-TASS and RIA-Novosti, as well as the largest radio stations Radio Mayak and Radio Rossiya.

The autonomy of the Russian media and its ability to act as a watchdog remains weak. The Russian government is consistently expanding its control and influence of the media at both the national and local levels. This is seen as an attempt to consolidate media sources and shrink the diversity of information before the upcoming 2007-08 parliamentary and presidential elections. In his statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 27, 2007, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell stated that as the March 2008 elections approach, "succession maneuvering has intensified and increasingly dominates Russian domestic and foreign

policy.”<sup>11</sup> He also stated that in 2006 the Kremlin expanded its efforts to stifle political opposition and widen state control over strategic sectors of the economy.

Due to Russia’s steady accumulation of anti-democratic policies, unsolved murders, and its foreign policy which is increasingly in conflict with that of the United States, U.S.-Russian relations will continue to be tense and antagonistic. Improvement will be predicated upon a significant shift in Russia’s foreign policy, which will give Washington an incentive to be less critical of Russia’s domestic policy. However, too much complicity regarding Russia’s domestic policies will embolden the Kremlin to further tighten the reigns on press freedom and civil society in general, at which point classifying Russia as a democracy would be inaccurate, if it already isn’t.

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<sup>11</sup> McConnell, Michael J. “Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of the National Intelligence.” February 27, 2007. at <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2007/February/McConnell%2002-27-07.pdf>

## Appendix-Death of the Russian Media

Below is a list of murdered members of the Russian media since 2000—when Putin ascended to the presidency. All cases remain unsolved.

*\*Ordered beginning with the most recent, and descending accordingly.*

### **1. Ivan Safronov**

Safronov was a military affairs specialist for the daily national newspaper *Kommersant*. He was investigating a Kremlin arms deal with the Middle East. Found dead on March 2, 2007 after “falling” from a staircase window in his Moscow apartment building.

### **2. Anna Politkovskaya**

Politkovskaya was a crusading investigative reporter specializing in Chechnya and attached to the fortnightly national newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Shot dead in a contract killing outside her apartment block in Moscow on October 7, 2006.

### **3. Vyacheslav Plotnikov**

Plotnikov was a reporter for a local TV channel in Voronezh. His body was found in a forest on September 15, 2006, dressed in someone else's clothes. No signs of a violent death, but his colleagues are convinced that he was murdered.

### **4. Yevgeny Gerasimenko**

Gerasimenko was an investigative reporter for the regional newspaper *Saratovskiy Rasklad* who had been looking into shady local business dealings. Found dead on July 25, 2006 in his flat, where he had been tortured and suffocated with a plastic bag.

### **5. Alexander Pitsersky**

Pitsersky was a presenter on the St. Petersburg radio station Baltika, who sometimes covered criminal investigations. His body was found in his flat, where he had been stabbed to death on August 30, 2005.

### **6. Magomedzagid Varisov**

Varisov was a prominent journalist and political analyst who often criticized the Dagestan opposition in the biggest regional bi-weekly, *Novoye Delo*. Killed in a machine gun attack on his sedan in Mahachkala, the capital of Dagestan, while returning home with his wife and driver on June 28, 2005.

## **7. Pavel Makeev**

Makeev was a cameraman for Puls, a local TV station in southern Russia. Died on May 21, 2005 while covering illegal street racing in the town of Azov. His car was rammed by an unknown vehicle and his camera and tapes taken.

## **8. Paul Klebnikov**

Klebnikov was a US citizen of Russian descent. As editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine, he exposed the country's shadowy billionaire tycoons and specialized in corruption investigations. Shot dead in a contract killing in Moscow when he was struck several times by shots fired from a passing car on July 9, 2004.

## **9. Aleksei Sidorov**

Sidorov was the editor-in-chief of *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye*. He was stabbed in the chest with an ice pick or similar sharp object outside his apartment block on October 9, 2003. He was the second editor of *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye* to be murdered in a two year period.

## **10. Yuri Shchekochikhin**

Shchekochikhin was an investigative journalist, liberal MP and deputy editor of *Novaya Gazeta*. Specialized in investigating corruption in the general prosecutor's office. Died on July 3, 2003 after an unexplained allergic reaction. His colleagues believe he was poisoned.

## **11. Dmitry Shvets**

Shvets was a senior executive at a local Murmansk TV station, TV-21 Northwestern Broadcasting. He had been highly critical of local officialdom and colleagues stated that TV-21 had received threats for critical reporting on several influential politicians. Shot dead outside the station's offices on April 18, 2003.

## **12. Valery Ivanov**

Ivanov was the editor-in-chief of *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye* and managing editor of the independent channel Lada-TV, specializing in crime and corruption in the local car industry. Shot eight times in the head at point blank range outside his home on April 29, 2002.

## **13. Natalya Skryl**

Skryl was a business reporter for *Nashe Vremya*, a local newspaper based in Rostov-on-Don. She was investigating the struggle for control of a metallurgical plant. Died March 9, 2002 after being struck a dozen times with a heavy object while she was returning home the night before.

## **14. Eduard Markevich**

Markevich was the editor of *Novy Reft*, a local newspaper in the town of Reftinsky, Sverdlovsk region. *Novy Reft* often criticized public officials, and colleagues said he had received threatening phone calls. He was shot dead in the back on September 18, 2001.

#### **15. Adam Tepsurgayev**

Tepsurgayev was a TV cameraman for Reuters who filmed exclusive footage of the conflict in Chechnya. Shot dead in the village of Alkhan-Kala on November 21, 2000 by masked gunmen who burst into his home.

#### **16. Sergey Ivanov**

Ivanov was the director of the Lada-TV station in Togliatti. He showed an interest in the area's notoriously corrupt car manufacturing business. Lada-TV was a significant force on the local political scene. Shot five times outside his apartment building on October 3, 2000.

#### **17. Iskandar Khatloni**

Khatloni was a journalist investigating human rights abuses in Chechnya for the Tajik- language service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Killed by an axe-wielding attacker in Moscow on September 21, 2000.

#### **18. Sergey Novikov**

Novikov was a senior executive at the Radio Vesna station in Smolensk. He claimed to be able to prove corruption among high-ranking local officials. Shot dead on July 26, 2000 in the lobby of his apartment building. Three days before the killing, Novikov participated in a television panel on alleged corruption in the deputy governor's office.

#### **19. Igor Domnikov**

Domnikov was an investigative reporter for *Novaya Gazeta*. Died on July 16, 2000, two months after being struck with a heavy object in the entryway of his apartment building. The assailant may have mistaken him for another *Novaya Gazeta* investigative reporter, Oleg Sultanov, who lived in the same building and had received threats after reporting on oil industry corruption.

#### **20. Artyom Borovik**

Borovik was a senior executive at investigative magazine Completely Secret that exposed the misdeeds of the rich and powerful. Died on March 3, 2000 in a plane crash that the authorities believe may not have been accidental.