

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## The Crisis In Russia's Media

On October 18, 2010, eleven days after the four-year anniversary of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya's murder, three panelists gathered at Columbia University to discuss the ongoing crisis in the Russian media. "For journalists, Russia is one of the most dangerous countries in the world—it has been rated the fourth most dangerous after Iraq, Algeria and the Philippines," stated Nina Ognianova, a Program Coordinator for the Europe and Central Asia branch of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

The panel, co-sponsored by the Harriman Institute and the Dart Center for Journalism, also featured Nadezhda Azhgikhina, Executive Secretary at the Russian Union of Journalists, and Catharine Nepomnyashchy, Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Literature and Culture, Chair of the Slavic Department, Barnard College, and former Director of the Harriman Institute.

**Nina Ognianova** discussed the CPJ, which was founded 30 years ago. "We focus on advocacy efforts in fighting impunity—investigating the work-related killings of our colleagues," Ognianova said. Russia ranks eighth on the CPJ's impunity index, defined on the Committee's website as "a list of countries where journalists are killed regularly and governments fail to solve the crimes."

For the past three years a CPJ delegation has traveled to Russia to confront Russian authorities about their failure to "fairly and thoroughly" investigate the murders of journalists and to bring these cases to justice. "We travelled to Moscow with the sole purpose of prosecuting the killers of our colleagues," related Ognianova, who authored "The Anatomy of Injustice," a September 2009 CPJ report about the investigations of the murders of 17 journalists killed in the Russian Federation between 2000 and 2009. To this date only one of the killers has been punished.

Ognianova recounted that when the delegation, which consisted of four journalists, including top editors from *The Wall Street Journal* and *Time Magazine*, met with representatives of Russia's Foreign Ministry for the first time in 2007, the officials were surprisingly open with them. "It

was clear that our conversation was on the record but a representative told us some very confidential information." Generally there is almost no access to official sources in Russia and journalists have to "scramble for information." The delegation immediately reported the Ministry officials' comments at a press conference. The Foreign Ministry denied everything.

"This started a big debate, laying bare the problem of the secretive policies of Russian authorities towards the media." Since the delegation had consisted of prominent American editors and journalists, they made a lot of noise about the Ministry's behavior. Ognianova speculated that perhaps the Russian government learned from the scandal, because in 2008 the CPJ delegation was granted a meeting with the investigative committee, "the agency tasked with handling serious crimes in Russia."

In 2009 the CPJ delegation was able to meet with the investigative committee again, this time in order to present their report, "The Anatomy of Injustice." The report contained recommendations for the committee. "We examined the flaws of the investigations and pinpointed the concrete failures of the investigators, taking a very reportorial approach in bringing these problems to the public." Representatives from the Office of the Prosecutor General accepted the report, but challenged some of the cases on the list and argued about the authenticity of the information. "To their credit they invited us to return in a year and to receive a progress report from them about implementing our suggestions."

The CPJ delegation returned this September. "We were received by a high-level delegation from the investigative committee and given a three-hour meeting. We met with top investigators who were dealing with these cases concretely (there are now 19 on our list)." The delegates were able to question the investigators directly responsible for trying to solve these crimes. "This time the detectives did not try to dispute any cases that were on our list, or argue with our veracity."

As they had done in the past, the delegation held a press conference the next day. "What was interesting was that the investigative committee

pre-empted this by having a press release of their own, announcing that they would institute a five-shelf investigation as a result of their meeting with us.” Ognianova noted that of course, the real measure of success would be the actual prosecution and conviction of the killers.

“But it was the first time during our advocacy efforts that we received this much access, along with a clear indication that at least on some level, the government realized that impunity is not only their problem, but an international issue—journalists are carriers of information and when they are shot down the information dies with them. Then Russia becomes a closed society.”

**Nadezhda Azhgikhina** has been writing as a journalist in Russia since she was a teenager during the Brezhnev stagnation. “The history of Russian media is a history of censorship,” she asserted, explaining that this had been the case since the first official newspaper was published in St. Petersburg. “It was a place for Peter the Great to print his decrees—censorship as an institution was established at the same time as that paper.”

Once they had the freedom to express themselves, Russian journalists had no idea what to do with it. “We were like babies, and because we didn’t know how to use it, we couldn’t figure out how to keep it.” Azhgikhina speculated that the current situation of media repression in Russia is probably the result of “a lack of strategic planning” on the part of Russian journalists. “We had little understanding about what was going on.”

Journalism, like all aspects of Soviet life, had been a part of a “very structured Soviet mechanism.” A mechanism that was not very effective. As a result, journalists who worked in Russia after the collapse were skeptical of public organizations. “We have approximately 300,000 journalists and only one-third of them belong to our journalist union. People don’t trust official forms of organization because during the Soviet Union, official trade unions didn’t protect enough people.” The failure to organize has left Russian journalists vulnerable to attack.

“We are undergoing a deep crisis,” Azhgikhina said, describing her first trip to the United States twenty years ago (it was the first time she had been abroad). She recalled participating in various discussions about Russian culture and journalism, “these discussions were always about crisis—we are in permanent crisis.”

Perestroika resulted in an inflow of amateur reporters. “People with no skills or education were able to publish cheaply.” Nationwide surveys from the year 1992 revealed that at least one new media company appeared in Russia every day that year.

“It was an enormous amount. Of course the majority of them died very quickly, but it was free, and it was like a new adventure to publish—there were many people who began to publish their own literary magazines, or even just porno magazines, which were a sign of freedom for many in Russia during the early ‘90s.”

Azhgikhina noted that there were optimists who hoped that the global financial crisis would clean up the Russian media. “That those people who were not real media actors would leave the market. Unfortunately it never happened.” The Russian media was hit by the financial crisis just like the Western media. “The crisis we have today is part of a global crisis but it has a different face in every country.” For instance, the number of media outlets decreased in the United States, but in Russia, their absolute number did not decline. “This is because we inherited a trend from the Soviet system—the state is the main actor in the media market today.” While many independent media companies went out of business, the state established new media companies. “Mostly these companies were set up by local and regional authorities that wanted to promote their own interests. This was very harmful for journalists.”

As the number of state-owned media companies rose, “independent companies simplified their content. The absolute majority of newspapers cut investigations, which were already very few in Russia, and many people lost their jobs.” These people found it nearly impossible to survive. “To be a freelance journalist in Russia is a very unlucky fate—we don’t have any sort of protection for freelancers, we are trying to establish something but it’s not that easy.”

Azhgikhina described Russia as “a culture with a very weak civil society.” Not only have journalists failed to organize, but there are few civic organizations in general. The Russian public displays little solidarity after attacks on its journalists. Azhgikhina recalled a peace march that she had attended in Italy on the one year anniversary of Politkovskaya’s murder. “I was struck when 30 thousand people decided to have a moment of silence for Politkovskaya. I said a few words, but I was too shy to tell them how many people we had at the memorial in Russia—the number was much smaller.”

In 2005, the Italian journalist Giuliana Sgrena was kidnapped in Iraq. “During the entire month of her kidnapping people stood outside of the President’s palace in Rome. The palace was covered with pictures of her face.” Azhgikhina explained that Sgrena was unpopular in many Italian circles. “She was a communist, a feminist, and still, the entire country supported her during

the kidnapping. We share many things with Italy—corruption, a lack of industrial development, yet they defend their journalists.”

Not only do Russian citizens stay quiet about the harassment of their journalists, but the international community also fails to make noise. “Politkovskaya is the only internationally recognizable symbol of the attacks on Russian journalists,” stated Azhgikhina. There were many who came before Politkovskaya. The first symbol in Russia was the journalist Larisa Yudina, who was murdered in the Republic of Kalmykia in 1998. Yudina had written articles accusing Kyrstan Illyumzhinov, the president of the Republic of Kalmykia, of corruption. She was stabbed to death and, while four people were arrested and convicted in connection to the killing, the person who ordered her murder was never prosecuted. “Every journalist who works in Russia is at risk. Unfortunately impunity is a part of the general picture.”

**Catharine Nepomnyashchy** described Politkovskaya’s murder as “a moment of tremendous emotional resonance” that created an important “force for change.” She lamented that potentially this “force has kept people from seeing the larger picture—the fact that this was not just one dramatic case but a way of life.”

Nepomnyashchy stressed that the media crisis in Russia is part of a global problem. “The crises in Russian journalism intersect with the crises going on in the West (I am using the plural deliberately.) One needs to distinguish the media crisis from the financial crisis—the former precedes the latter but the latter feeds the former.”

Media output is shrinking worldwide. “The number of foreign correspondents is shrinking, the resources allocated to the coverage of foreign news in the US, the number of pages devoted to foreign news in general. And one could argue that the diversity of foreign places to which attention is being directed is also shrinking.”

This decrease in media coverage is happening in the midst of rapid globalization. “We all realize that on a day-to-day basis we’re living in an environment where it is much more important to know what’s going on in the world. As an educator I see a number of very serious problems here—how to keep our students interested in the world at large, to make them follow a region, to keep their attention span in more than one place at a time.”

“We seem to be living in this enormous informational explosion, but how much of it is reliable?” Nepomnyashchy emphasized that “the internet just proves that not all information is created equal.” Certain events receive a

disproportionate amount of attention, while others do not receive enough. Much of the available information is not reliable. “Quality is giving way to quantity.”

Nepomnyashchy asserted that the West is no longer paying attention to Russia. “Let’s face it; Russia is just not fashionable today.” During the Cold War, Western correspondents followed the dissident movement closely. “I think that this was one of the things that allowed dissidents to operate within the USSR.” She wondered to what extent the impunity, and the weakness of the opposition in Russia, is tied to “the lack of interest and resources in the US devoted to what’s going on in Russia today.”

In order to promote communication between Russia and the US, Nepomnyashchy and Azhgikhina started a website called “Dialogue of Trust.” “We embarked on this project directly in response to the Russia-Georgia War in 2008—a very specific moment when there was a complete breakdown in communication.” Nepomnyashchy recalled the burst of contradictory information released by global media that summer. “All of a sudden everyone had an opinion, everyone knew what was going on and nobody was listening to anybody else. Russian officials fell back on a rhetoric that sounded very much like the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was quite striking.”

Nepomnyashchy reasoned that this breakdown was due in part to the “boundaries in communication.” By starting the website she hoped that they would be able to create a safe space in which journalists, and those who are in general interested in Russia and the United States, could interact. “It is a kind of utopian project. A way of bringing people together, allowing them to talk to one another, particularly during moments of tension.”

Nepomnyashchy explained that for the meanwhile, she and Azhgikhina have decided to freeze the project. “It is still very much in the pilot stage. Unfortunately we started it in the beginning of the global financial crisis, and one needs money to finance something like this.” They plan to resume their efforts once more resources are available. “We want to show that the internet can be used to bring people together.”

*Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner*