

Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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In conjunction with a June 23 commission hearing on Russia's human rights record before President Barack Obama's July 2009 trip to Moscow

Chairmen Cardin and Hastings, and Members of the Commission:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony on press freedom in Russia ahead of President Barack Obama's July 6-8 trip to Moscow for a summit with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. My name is Nina Ognianova. I coordinate the Europe and Central Asia program at the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, an international, independently funded organization that defends the rights of journalist to report the news without fear of reprisal.

I will focus my testimony on the issue of impunity in journalist killings under the present Russian leadership. Seventeen journalists have been killed in Russia in relation to their work since 2000, CPJ research shows. In only one case have the killers been convicted. In every case, the masterminds have gone unpunished.

This record has contributed to the spread of self-censorship in the press corps, restricting coverage of sensitive topics such as government corruption, organized crime, human rights violations, and unrest in the North Caucasus region of Russia. The public has suffered as a result, having been kept in the dark about important issues of community, national, and international interest.

The following capsules describe the 17 journalists killed in relation to their work:

- **Vladimir Yatsina**, 51, took a leave from his job with the Russian news agency ITAR-TASS in the summer of 1999, to travel to the North Caucasus on a freelance assignment to photograph Chechen rebel fighters. In July of that year, while in the southern republic of Ingushetia, Magomed Uspayev, an ethnic Chechen who had been hired as Yatsina's fixer, reportedly handed the photographer to a criminal gang notorious for kidnapping people for ransom. Yatsina was shot in the mountains of Chechnya the following February, according

to fellow captives who later gave public statements. Law enforcement officials did not detain or charge Uspayev, who lived freely in Russia for two years after the killing before going to Sweden in 2002. It was not until 2005 that Russian authorities placed Uspayev on Interpol's international wanted list. The Swedish government has refused to extradite him to Russia, citing human rights concerns. Yatsina's killers were never prosecuted.

- **Igor Domnikov**, 42, a reporter and special-projects editor with *Novaya Gazeta*, was bludgeoned with a hammer in the entrance to his Moscow home in May 2000. He slipped into a coma and died on July 16 of that year. Before his death, Domnikov had written several articles criticizing the economic policies of the Lipetsk regional government. Seven years later, five members of a criminal gang were convicted of the murder and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Authorities have yet to file charges against those accused of ordering the killing.
- **Eduard Markevich**, 29, founder and editor of the independent weekly *Novy Reft*, was shot in the courtyard of his apartment building in the Ural Mountains town of Reftinsky on September 19, 2001. Markevich, who had been investigating a public employee's use of government property for private gain, had received threats and had been previously attacked for his work. Authorities made initial progress in the case when they detained a suspect in a vehicle matching the description of the gunman's car. But the case was transferred without explanation to another prosecutor's office, the investigation came to a halt, and the suspect was released. No developments have been reported in the case.
- **Natalya Skryl**, 29, a business reporter for the Rostov-on-Don newspaper *Nashe Vremya*, was walking home from a bus stop in her hometown of Taganrog, an industrial city on the Azov Sea, when at least one assailant struck her a dozen times with a pipe or similar object on March 8, 2002. She died in a hospital the next day. The assailant did not take money or gold jewelry from the journalist; in fact, nothing appeared to have been stolen. Nonetheless, Taganrog investigators classified the case as a robbery and did not explore journalism as a motive. Skryl had written several articles on the struggle for control of a large steel-pipe manufacturer. In the six years since Skryl's killing, the case has been suspended and reopened several times without evident progress.
- **Valery Ivanov**, 32, and **Aleksei Sidorov**, 31, consecutive editors of the independent newspaper *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye* in the car-manufacturing city of Togliatti, had exposed organized crime activities and corruption in the local government. They were slain 18 months apart: Ivanov was gunned down on April 29, 2002, and Sidorov was fatally stabbed on October 9, 2003. Both attacks occurred outside their homes. Investigators asserted that a man who later died of a drug overdose had killed Ivanov, but no evidence has been disclosed to support the accusation. In the Sidorov case, a local welder was falsely accused of killing the editor; that man was acquitted at trial. No further progress has been reported in either case.

- **Yuri Shchekochikhin**, 53, deputy editor of *Novaya Gazeta*, had meticulously investigated a high-level corruption scheme when he was felled by a mysterious illness in June 2003. The sickness caused Shchekochikhin's organs to fail, one after another, and he died within weeks. Questionable steps followed. Hospital authorities declared Shchekochikhin's records a "medical secret" and sealed them from the public, including the journalist's family. A Moscow prosecutor then lost the records, *Novaya Gazeta* reported. It was not until five years later that a team of investigators with the Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal probe into the circumstances of Shchekochikhin's death. That case was suspended on April 6, 2009, after investigators concluded that no foul play was involved. The medical records have yet to resurface.
- **Maksim Maksimov**, 41, a reporter with the St. Petersburg weekly *Gorod*, who was investigating alleged corruption in the local Interior Ministry branch, disappeared after going to meet a source on June 29, 2004. He was declared dead two years later. Witness accounts implicated ministry officers in the disappearance, but St. Petersburg prosecutors have taken no evident action against them. The investigation was suspended in 2008; the family and its lawyer have not been allowed to review the case file.
- **Paul Klebnikov**, 41, the founding editor of *Forbes Russia* magazine, had carried out journalistic investigations on risky topics such as the synergy of Russian business, politics, and organized crime; the "gangster capitalism" of the 1990s; and the 1995 murder of television journalist Vladislav Listyev. At least one gunman shot and killed Klebnikov, a U.S. journalist of Russian descent, as he left his Moscow office on July 9, 2004. Two defendants were acquitted of the murder in May 2006, in a closed trial marred by procedural violations. The Russian Supreme Court overturned the verdict and ordered a re-trial, but the case was indefinitely postponed in March 2007 when one of the defendants vanished. No developments have been reported since. Authorities have yet to report any progress in apprehending the crime's mastermind.
- **Pavel Makeev**, 21, a cameraman for the television station Puls in the town of Azov, was struck and killed by a car while filming illegal drag racing on May 21, 2005. Evidence showed that the car dragged Makeev's body 50 feet, and the driver did not apply the brakes. Authorities classified the case as a traffic accident without questioning witnesses. Makeev's video camera—with footage of the illegal racing—was taken.
- **Magomedzagid Varisov**, 54, and **Telman Alishayev**, 39, worked in the volatile southern republic of Dagestan. Varisov, a political analyst for Dagestan's largest weekly, *Novoye Delo*, was shot and killed near his home in the regional capital, Makhachkala, on June 28, 2005. He had criticized people across the political spectrum—from government officials, to federal troops, to radical organizations. Alishayev, a reporter and host of a religious television program on the

Makhachkala-based Islamic television station TV-Chirkei, covered social issues such as education, drug addiction, and the spread of HIV. He was gunned down near his home, on September 2, 2008. In each case, authorities said they identified suspects who were then killed in armed confrontations with police. No evidence has been disclosed to support those assertions, however, and the victims' families have told CPJ they are deeply skeptical of the findings.

- **Vagif Kochetkov**, 31, a political reporter for the Tula-based *Molodoi Kommunar* newspaper, had written critically of business practices and organized crime in his hometown. An attacker struck him on the head with a heavy object near his home on December 27, 2005. He died 12 days later. Authorities classified the case as a robbery, although Kochetkov's valuables—including a diamond ring—were left intact. A suspect was acquitted at trial. Investigators did not explore Kochetkov's journalism as a possible murder motive and failed to question his colleagues in any depth.
- **Anna Politkovskaya**, 48, a special correspondent for *Novaya Gazeta*, was gunned down in her Moscow apartment building on October 7, 2006. The internationally known journalist had reported extensively on human rights abuses in Chechnya and throughout the conflict-ridden North Caucasus. She had been threatened, poisoned, and forced into exile during her career. Three men accused of being accomplices to the murder were acquitted in February, although a retrial has been ordered. Neither the gunman nor the masterminds have been apprehended. The gunman fled Russia on a fraudulent passport, according to news reports; the masterminds have not been identified.
- **Ivan Safronov**, 51, a prominent military correspondent for the business daily *Kommersant* and a reserve colonel in the Russian Space Force, fell to his death from a staircase window in his Moscow apartment building on March 2, 2007. He had just returned from a business trip to the Middle East, where he had learned of purported sales of Russian defense technology to Iran and Syria. Three days before his death, Safronov told colleagues that he had been warned not to publish portions of the information, *Kommersant* reported. The journalist had also embarrassed defense officials two months earlier by reporting on the third consecutive test failure of the Bulava ballistic missile. Authorities classified the death as a suicide, yet Safronov left no note and, in the hours before his death, had made plans with family and friends and had shopped for groceries.
- **Magomed Yevloyev**, 37, publisher of the independent news Web site *Ingushetiya*, who uncovered official corruption and human rights abuses in Ingushetia, was shot and killed in state custody on August 31, 2008. In an interview with CPJ two months before his killing, Yevloyev said Ingushetia authorities had filed more than a dozen lawsuits seeking to shut down his site. The day of the killing, Yevloyev was detained by an Interior Ministry unit at the airport in Magas, Ingushetia (without a valid arrest warrant, as a court later ruled). He did not resist and was placed in an Interior Ministry vehicle with three

officers, witnesses told CPJ. Along the way, Yevloyev was shot in the head. Authorities claimed an officer's gun went off accidentally. A negligent homicide charge has been filed against the officer—nephew of former Ingushetia Interior Minister Musa Medov—but the officer has left the region and has not returned for court proceedings. The Yevloyev family has called the trial a sham.

- **Anastasiya Baburova**, 25, a freelance reporter for *Novaya Gazeta*, had covered the rise of race-motivated crimes and the activities of neo-Nazi groups in Russia. On January 19, 2009, a gunman shot her and prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov in downtown Moscow, minutes after they emerged from a press conference in which the lawyer criticized the early release of a Russian army colonel convicted of killing a teenage Chechen girl. Five months later, investigators have yet to report progress in the case.

With 50 journalists killed on the job since 1992, Russia is the third-deadliest country in the world for journalists, CPJ research shows. Only the conflict-ridden countries of Iraq and Algeria surpass this number of work-related fatalities during this period. Russia also has one of the highest levels of impunity in journalist murders in the world (ninth worst), according to CPJ's annually updated Impunity Index, which calculates the number of unsolved journalist murders as a percentage of each country's population.

This record contrasts with stated commitments by President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to strengthen the rule of law and protect the safety of all Russian citizens. It also undermines Russia's standing as an international leader. Russia is a member of a number of international institutions, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe, and it has an influential voice in a number of others. Yet membership and influence come with the obligation to adhere to international standards, including the rights to life and free expression. When Russia fails to adhere to these norms, it undermines them for all.

The leaders of the democratic world, including President Obama, must engage their Russian counterparts in a dialogue on the record of impunity, offer assistance in combating the problem, and call for concrete results.