



HELSINKI COMMISSION REPORT

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IN BRIEF

One Year Later: Seeking Justice for Pavel Sheremet

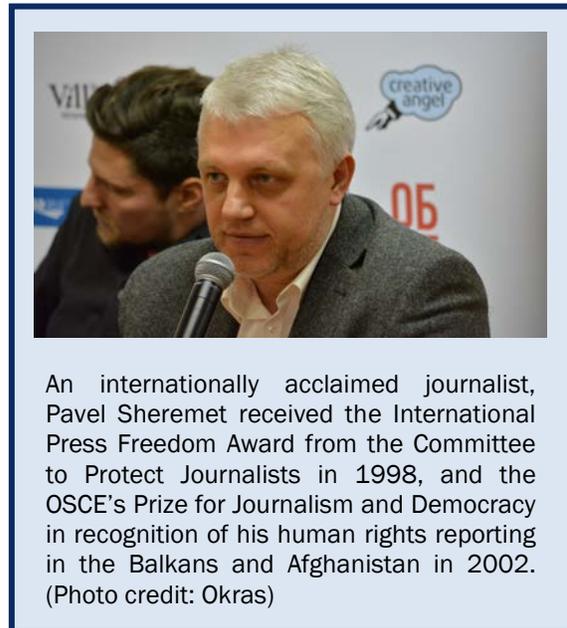
Concerning Trends for Press Freedom in Ukraine

When investigative journalist Pavel Sheremet died in a car explosion in central Kyiv on July 20, 2016, his assassination garnered global media attention. Upon learning the tragic news, then-OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović condemned the murder, saying, “This killing and its circumstances must be swiftly and thoroughly investigated, and the perpetrators brought to justice.”¹

However, one year later, virtually no progress has been made on his case. Furthermore, the escalating harassment and attacks against journalists in Ukraine, coupled with a culture of impunity for perpetrators, is worrisome for Ukraine’s democratic future. To ensure they meet the aspirations of the Ukrainian people, authorities in Kiev must reaffirm their commitment to freedom of the press by ensuring the perpetrators of Sheremet’s murder—and similar cases of killing, assault, and harassment—are brought to justice.

Investigative Journalist and Outspoken Critic

A regular contributor to popular news site *Ukrainska Pravda*, Sheremet was known for challenging the authorities in his home country of Belarus as well as in his adopted homes of Russia and Ukraine. A vocal critic of Belarusian President Lukashenko, he faced increasing pressure from the Belarusian government and moved to Moscow in 1998. In 2008, Sheremet



An internationally acclaimed journalist, Pavel Sheremet received the International Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists in 1998, and the OSCE’s Prize for Journalism and Democracy in recognition of his human rights reporting in the Balkans and Afghanistan in 2002. (Photo credit: Okras)

left Russia—again as a result of mounting hostility from the host regime he criticized—and moved to Kyiv. At the time of his death, Shemeret had lived in Kyiv for five years with *Ukrainska Pravda* editor-in-chief Olena Prytula.

In 2000, Sheremet’s cameraman, Dmitry Zavadsky, disappeared in Minsk after shooting a documentary about the war in Chechnya. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, he was targeted for capturing footage of Belarusian security agents fighting alongside Chechen rebels. Zavadsky was never found, and is pre-

sumed murdered.² Pavel Sheremet was an outspoken advocate for justice for his colleague and friend.

When the bomb that killed Sheremet went off at 7:45AM, he was on his way to work, driving a red Subaru registered in Prytula's name. Though investigators have not ruled out the possibility that Prytula might have been the actual target, they are simultaneously pursuing leads in Russia, in Belarus, and in Ukraine.

Nearly a year after the murder, critics question the Ukrainian government's commitment to bringing the case to justice. No one has been arrested for—much less convicted of—the crime, although Sheremet died in broad daylight in central Kyiv. The two suspects who were caught on security camera footage have not been identified.

During a July 11, 2017 meeting with the Committee to Protect Journalists and Sheremet's family, Ukrainian President Poroshenko publicly called for international investigators to look into the case.³ However, an investigative documentary by Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and its Ukrainian partner, Slidstvo.Info, titled "Killing Pavel," has raised questions about the thoroughness of the official inquiries and questioned the Ukrainian government's commitment to finding justice for Sheremet.⁴ Citing his more recent work and an environment of escalating violence towards journalists in Ukraine, Sheremet's family mem-

bers have said that they suspect Ukrainian involvement with the murder.

A few pieces of evidence corroborate the claim that the Ukrainian government may have had some involvement in Sheremet's murder. First, Sheremet's partner Prytula alleges that she and Sheremet had been under police surveillance for months. Second, the investigative team involved in "Killing Pavel" was able to identify a former Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) agent in security footage by Sheremet's apartment on the night that explosives were planted on his car.

Violence against Journalists: Returning to a Culture of Impunity?

For journalists in Ukraine, Sheremet's death was a grim reminder of the troubling early years of Ukrainian independence, especially in light of other attacks on journalists in 2016. For example, *Ukrainian Forbes* editor Maria Rydvan was stabbed in central Kyiv just a day before Sheremet's murder; five days after Sheremet was killed, the head of business media outlet *Business Censor* Sergei Golovnyova, was also assaulted.⁵

In an interview a week after Sheremet's murder, CNN and VICE reporter Simon Ostrovsky said, "To a lot of journalist[s] in Ukraine it feels like a return to the bad old days of the 1990s when reporters were attacked and murdered and the perpetrators went unpunished."⁶

"The Bad Old Days"

The years leading up to the 2004 Orange Revolution were notoriously bloody for journalists. In April 2000, Prytula founded *Ukrainska Pravda* together with Heorgiy Gongadze, a high-profile investigative journalist, famous for his investigations into high-level corruption in Ukraine.

A few months later, Gongadze was kidnapped and found murdered in a forest 80 miles south of Kyiv. Tapes later emerged of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma asking Interior Minister Yuri Kravchenko to "do something" about Gongadze. Hours before Kravchenko was scheduled to be questioned regarding the case, he supposedly committed suicide by shooting himself twice in the head. These events became popularly known as "Kuchmagate."

In May 2016, Ukrainian Deputy Information Policy Minister Tetyana Popova resigned in protest over the increasing attacks on journalists and the failure of the Ukrainian government to take action following leaks of personal data belonging to more than 4,500 journalists. While Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko officially condemned the leaks, albeit weeks after the incident, Interior Minister Arsen Avakov publically supported them.⁷ As a consequence of the leak, journalists reported an escalation of attacks and harassment.⁸

Katya Gorchinskaya, chief executive officer of the Kyiv-based Hromadske.TV, said, “The government remains silent, and silent endorsement—and sometimes open endorsement—gives society the message that it’s normal to call journalists traitors and threaten them.”⁹

Online Harassment

Oksana Romanyuk, a representative for Reporters Without Borders Ukraine, said that she noticed an increase in online harassment of journalists following the February 2015 creation of a Ukrainian internet troll army.¹⁰ The “i-army” initiative invited civilians to join as “information warriors” and provided volunteers with weekly updates on stories and reporters disagreeing with Kyiv’s official narrative. Reporters working in Eastern Ukraine are especially vulnerable, facing pressure not to report on human rights abuses by the Ukrainian military in the Donbas region.

The initiative, spearheaded by Ukrainian Information Policy Minister Yuriy Stets, was supposedly designed to counter propaganda coming from the Kremlin, fighting fire with fire, but the “i-army” seems to also be targeting Ukrainian

journalists who disagree with the government. Ukrainians call them “Porokhobots”, a neologism of bot and Poroshenko, referring to President Poroshenko’s use of Moscow-style trolling and other disinformation tactics.¹¹

Romanyuk said that the government’s “i-army” initiative has created an opening for more serious violations and attacks against journalists in Ukraine, culminating in the personal data leak that prompted Popova to resign. The Security Service of Ukraine has been accused of facilitating the leaks that contained personal information of reporters and human rights defenders, including passport copies, email addresses, phone numbers, and reporters’ accreditations.

Conclusion

The murder of Sheremet sent shockwaves through the Ukrainian media community. In an interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists, *Ukrainska Pravda*’s editor-in-chief, Sevgil Musayeva-Borovik, told them, “I fear for the safety of my colleagues ever since [Sheremet’s death].”¹²

Watchdogs like Freedom House, Reporters without Borders, and Committee to Protect Journalists have all reported that the continuation of attacks on reporters show a deterioration of freedom of the press in Ukraine.

By its limited response to safeguarding the safety of journalists and the freedom of the press, the Ukrainian government risks undermining confidence in the country’s democratic institutions. Bringing justice to the murder of Pavel Sheremet would be one concrete and meaningful step towards reversing this worrisome trend.

About the Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries. The Commission consists of nine members from the U.S. Senate, nine from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce.

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¹ Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, "OSCE Representative condemns murder of journalist Pavel Sheremet in Ukraine," The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, July 20, 2016, <http://www.osce.org/fom/255226>

² The Committee to Protect Journalists, "Dmitry Zavadsky," The Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/killed/2003/dmitry-zavadsky.php>.

³ Christopher Miller, "Poroshenko Proposes Adding International Investigator To Sheremet Slaying Probe," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 12, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-poroshenko-international-investigator-sheremet-slaying/28611962.html>.

⁴ Killing Pavel, dir. Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Slidstvo.Info, May 10, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liSa5OFckf4>.

⁵ "Journalist Beaten in Kyiv," Ukrayinska Pravda, July 26, 2016, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2016/07/26/7115961/>.

⁶ Melinda Haring, "Ukraine's Deadly Profession: Three Journalists Attacked in July," The Atlantic Council, July 27, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-s-deadly-profession-three-journalists-attacked-in-july>.

⁷ Christopher Miller, "In Ukraine, Attacks On Journalists Chill Media Landscape," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 16, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-attacks-on-journalists-media-landscape-press-freedom/27923284.html>.

⁸ RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, "Ukrainian Official Resigns, Citing 'Attacks on Journalists'," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 3, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-deputy-minister-popova-resigns-media-freedom/27898439.html>.

⁹ Christopher Miller, "In Ukraine, Attacks On Journalists Chill Media Landscape," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 16, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-attacks-on-journalists-media-landscape-press-freedom/27923284.html>.

¹⁰ Christopher Miller, "In Ukraine, Attacks On Journalists Chill Media Landscape," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 16, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-attacks-on-journalists-media-landscape-press-freedom/27923284.html>.

¹¹ Katya Gorchinskaya, "The rise of Kremlin-style trolling in Ukraine must end," The Guardian, July 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/27/kremlin-style-troll-attacks-are-on-the-rise-in-ukraine-hromadske>.

¹² Committee to Protect Journalists, "Justice Denied: Ukraine comes up empty in probe of Pavel Sheremet's murder," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 12, 2017, <https://cpi.org/reports/2017/07/justice-denied-ukraine-pavel-sheremet-murder-probe-journalist-investigation-impunity-murder.php>.