

Politkovskaya wrote about Moscow-appointed Chechen prime minister Ramzan Kadyrov. Most recently, she had been conducting research on torture and abductions in Chechnya allegedly involving Kadyrov's military units - research that may have been fatal.

Russia is among the most dangerous countries for journalists. While reporters who do not convey the image of Russia that the Kremlin desires are not necessarily killed, they do experience hardships and harassment. From official warnings, anonymous telephone calls, and subtle threats by the intelligence service to prosecution in court, the methods of intimidation are manifold.

Translation from the German by Christopher Findlay

Black Mark for Journalists

Grigorii Pasko, Moscow

Grigory Pasko is a former Russian naval captain and military journalist for the newspaper Battle Watch. In 1993 he filmed a Russian navy tanker dumping radioactive waste and ammunition into the Sea of Japan. He also exposed the environmental threat posed by the decaying Pacific Fleet and its nuclear submarines. In 1997, the FSB arrested him and charged him with treason for allegedly intending to pass sensitive information to a foreign journalist. Pasko spent 20 months in jail for pre-trial detention and was then acquitted. But then the prosecution reopened his case, this time charging him with abuse of office. He received four years in a forced labor camp. In 2002, he rejected a presidential pardon because it would have required him to admit guilt. He served two-thirds of his sentence and then was released on parole. All but one of the treason charges were dismissed.

Farce of the “Clowns”

Once, I drew up a project for a publication that would have been something new for Russia: an ecological magazine, in color, with a lot of illustrations, published in large print runs, with a lot of columns that in my opinion would have been interesting to a broad readership... As everyone knows, the publication of a magazine is expensive, which is why, when sounding out possible participants in such a project, I consulted mainly with a member of the State Duma. After he had listened closely to my plans, he said: “This is a good idea. However, if it is going to be realized, your name must not be mentioned anywhere; potential sponsors will be frightened off if the editor of such a publication is someone who is out of favor with the present authorities.”

We left it at that.

Of course, I am upset that at the age of forty-five I have not even earned the right to my own name in present-day Russia. It does not even matter that for some people my name provides cause for cowardice and for others, irritation. (There are, after all, also other people—I hope...)

In Russia journalists have for a long time been divided—into those who are close to the authorities (it is not important of which level—federal, regional or small town), and those who are in opposition to the authorities. Opposition journalists are not liked, and sometimes they are pitied as if they were lepers, although their only “fault” is that their point of view concerning the events happening around them is dif-

ferent from the point of view of the powers-that-be. The authorities do not like journalists who have their own point of view. The authorities like journalists who listen spellbound to them and write favorably about them.

Sometimes, court journalists remember (apparently at a subconscious level) that their mission is to inform their readers. Then, they spill the beans, write the truth, and provide literal quotes of the authorities' statements. Then, everybody sees that both the emperor and his retinue are “naked.”

Answering questions from Russian citizens on October 25, Russian President Vladimir Putin had this to say about such journalists: “They were sent to spy, and they eavesdrop. This is dirty.” The journalist Yevgenia Albats reacted to the president's statement thus: “If the servant was sent to clean golden toilets, then she cannot EAVESDROP on what men of state have to say to each other in between using the urinals. This is dirty. Really dirty.”

The Russian authorities today act as if “The only good journalist is a dead journalist.” Vladimir Vysotskii comes to mind as well: “Along the way there is a dense forest full of witches, and at the end of the way there is a scaffold with axes.”

In one of Anna Politkovskaya's articles, published after her death, there is the following passage: “Almost the entire present generation of Russian journalists and the existing mass media are ‘clowns’. Taken together, they are a farce of ‘clowns’. Their mission is to entertain the public; if they do write about serious

matters, then they only say how great the ‘power vertical’ is in all its manifestations.”

Today, the authorities have defined the role of journalism in Russian society once and for all: to be a servant of the authorities. Everybody who does not agree with playing this role is an enemy of the authorities. It is common knowledge that enemies are sooner or later dealt with. It is unimportant in whose hands the weapon used to mete out punishment turns out to be—as long as the offending journalist is silenced. Anna Politkovskaya was dealt with in a radical way: she was killed. Others are treated differently, and on a daily basis: the well-known journalist and human-rights activist Vasilii Melnichenko was brutally beaten up in Sverdlovsk *oblast* while carrying out public duties and missions; in Vladivostok, the editor of the newspaper *Chestnyi detektiv* Viktor Bulavintsev is being threatened, while the editor of the opposition paper *Arsenyevskie vesti* Irina Grebnyova was locked up [for 15 days] in a vagrants’ shelter; in Perm, the photographer (!) of the only opposition newspaper in town Vladimir Korolyov was jailed on a charge of disclosing state secrets; not long ago, court proceedings began in Moscow in the case of Boris Stomakhin, author of the website “Kavkaz-Tsentr” and editor of the newspaper *Radikalnaya politika...*

We could keep adding examples. There are however other ways of fighting disagreeable journalists: many of them are unemployed, they are not published anywhere or they are forced to publish under pseudonyms. This is freedom of speech *à la* Putin. Thus, people whose profession in developed and civilized countries is important and necessary for democracy are social outcasts in Russia, where their profession almost carries a stigma, a peculiar “black mark”.

The Korolyov Affair

The case of the *Permskii obozrevatel* photographer is in my view very typical of these persecutions. In the opinion of the lawyer Karen Nersisyan, Korolyov was chosen by the militia in order to get at his newspaper, considered to be the sole island of independence in Perm. “They need the paper,” Nersisyan said at a press conference in Perm. “All the security agencies of the *krai* have the aim of destroying the paper at any price, with the tacit consent of the governor’s administration.”

So that the reader has a clearer idea of what is going on in Perm, I will give an example. *Permskii obozrevatel* began collecting signatures calling for the resignation of the current governor of Perm *krai*, Oleg Chirkunov. Chirkunov’s answer to a question by a reporter of the local television station on the so-called Korolyov affair

was almost a Freudian slip: he did not say “Korolyov affair”, but “Grinberg affair”. However, Igor Grinberg, businessman and founder of the *Permskii obozrevatel*, is in no way involved in the Korolyov affair, not even as a witness. Clearly the authorities are interested in stopping Grinberg’s activities.

Officially, Vladimir Korolyov, a former local police officer, is charged with violating rarely used articles of the criminal code: collecting information on citizens’ private lives without their consent and collecting and disclosing state secrets—representatives of the prosecution, police and FSB had found data about local dignitaries on computers confiscated in the newspaper’s offices. A journalist’s dossier thus was presented as information on the private lives of people. Korolyov was jailed. Why Korolyov? Because he is the only employee of the newspaper who at one time, maybe ten years ago, worked as a police man. It was the prosecution’s idea that it would be easier to break him and force him to slander Grinberg.

This is what the lawyer Karen Nersisyan said: “[Korolyov] is being offered a deal, unofficially and illegally: he is supposed to slander Igor Grinberg with the intention of destroying the paper, in return he will be offered freedom and other benefits. The fact that he refused to do this honors my client; he wrote a petition because of this. He understands that one cannot live like this: he has a daughter, he is not only thinking of his future, but also of the future of his children.”

Korolyov has been in jail since September. He is not being interrogated. The papers of the investigation are stamped “top secret”—the foremost indication that the case was fabricated and is, from a legal point of view, rotten.

From articles published by *Permskii obozrevatel*: “... In our articles and comic strips, we criticize our not-always-innocent Perm officials and destroy the inflated “attractive image” of the region, by not showing the far-fetched reality of the supporters of the authorities, but by showing reality as it is, even if this is not always pleasant. The publication of the newspaper hampers the shady commercial deals of the governor, the mayor of Perm and the people surrounding them. The present authorities in our region are tough pragmatists who live according to the laws of wild capitalism. One of their foremost laws reads as follows: ‘In business there are neither friends nor enemies, there are only temporary relationships.’

We have reason to believe that Governor Chirkunov is backing the officials of the security agencies attacking our newspaper.”

From statements by Governor Oleg Chirkunov on local television on October 8, 2006: “Only the Lord

God can say what happens and where. What are the mass media? In my opinion, ... they are a means to freely distribute information... The point of contention is something else. All of them (independent mass media—the *author*) moreover try to shape public opinion. By so doing, they are not mass media anymore, but political instruments.”

From the statements of Vladimir Korolyov addressed to the state prosecutor’s office, FSB and the Main Administration of Interior Affairs of Perm *oblast*, as well as to the penal chamber of the Perm *oblast* court: “... My being held in custody is not justified by the requirements of the investigation, but is an instrument to force me to slander the owner of the newspaper *Permskii obozrevatel* I.A. Grinberg ... The investigators working on my case are trying to persuade me with the methods of ‘stick and carrot’ to make such a statement. The fact of the matter is that *Permskii obozrevatel* is the only independent source of truthful information on the state of affairs in Perm *krai*. This is the real reason for the many absurd criminal charges brought against me ... you know as well that I served loyally in the Interior Ministry for more than a quarter of a century, and attained the rank of major.

I am sure that the investigators working on my case and the prison administration know this as well. My stubborn refusal to slander Grinberg, the news-

paper and myself mean that I, a former official of the Interior Ministry, have been placed in a cell with persons accused of committing common crimes. I spent four days in this cell with underage prisoners. One does not have to be blessed with an exceptional imagination in order to understand what I had to endure...”

Postscript

In my time I had to go to jail because of a case fabricated by the FSB. I also know the arsenal of means employed by the FSB, SIZO and other so-called security agencies to exert pressure on prisoners very well. When the machinery to crush a certain person is set into motion, it acts in the name of the state, with great coordination, and irreversibly. This means that even if you assume the impossible, namely that there is an honest and decent person involved in the case, who would oppose the illegal persecution of an innocent person, the machinery will not stop. The honest person will be replaced by a dishonest one, and the “accusatory juggernaut” will continue to rumble on.

It will be very difficult to get Korolyov out of jail. The main hope is resistance by journalists and support from society.

So far, however, resistance is only gaining momentum.

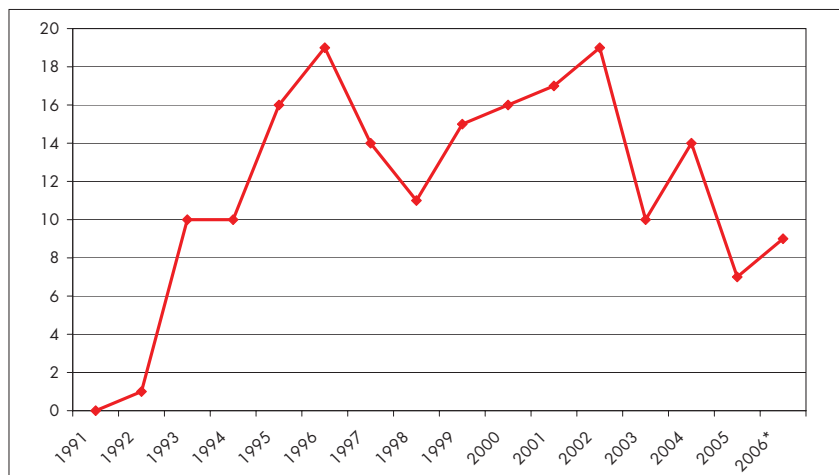
Translation from the Russian by Matthias Neumann

Documentation

Violations of Freedom of the Media in Russia. Statistics of the Glasnost Defense Foundation

Source: <http://www.gdf.ru/monitor/index.shtml>

Number of Journalists Dying of Unnatural Causes 1991 – 2006



* up to 7 October 2006