



Nashe Vremya

Murderers Go Free

Omission, obstruction, secrecy mar investigations into slayings of journalists in Russia.

By **Nina Ognianova**

MOSCOW

It was after 10 o'clock on the night of March 8, 2002, and Natalya Skryl, a reporter with the Rostov newspaper *Nashe Vremya*, was walking from the bus stop on her way home from a party. Skryl, 29, who lived with her parents in the industrial town of Taganrog, covered local business news for the paper, including a struggle for control of the local pipe-making plant.

From behind, a man struck Skryl a dozen times with a pipe or other heavy object. Her screams roused neighbors, who found her lying in a pool of blood. Taken to the town hospital, she died of head injuries the next day, her body so disfigured that her father did not recognize her. The attacker, described by witnesses as a young man with long black hair, did not take the money in Skryl's purse nor did he take her gold jewelry. It seemed clear to all—including police, initially—that he struck to kill.

An investigation by the Committee to Protect Journalists—based on interviews with colleagues and analysts and

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a review of the few publicly available documents—has uncovered a pattern of inconsistencies, omissions, and secrecy in the probe of Natalya Skryl's murder. The Skryl case—along with problem-plagued investigations into the slayings of Eduard Markevich and Dmitry Shvets—illustrates official shortcomings in a series of unsolved murders of journalists in Russia since 2000, CPJ has found.

Natalya Skryl's attention in recent months was focused on Tagmet, a Taganrog metal plant and one of the biggest steel pipe producers in southern Russia. By March 2002, a two-year fight over Tagmet had reached its peak: an alternative board of directors was seeking to oust management; armed guards were deployed around the plant; its director had virtually barricaded himself inside.

It was a turbulent time in Taganrog, an important industrial port on the Azov Sea. "There was big money to be divided among interested parties at the time," said *Nashe Vremya's* top editor, Vera Yuzhanskaya, referring to a wave of privatization in Taganrog. Many prominent people were turning up dead that year. A court official was found shot in his office; a well-known businessman and a police offi-

cial were found dead in what were termed suicides; the mayor was gunned down next to his house.

The day she was attacked, Skryl told a colleague she planned to meet a source for the Tagmet story. "Natalya didn't say who the person was, but she mentioned that he was supposed to pass her more detailed, confidential information about Tagmet," said Irina Hansivarova, an editor who sat nearby in the newsroom. Aleksandr Pestryakov, another colleague, said the young reporter's coverage was increasingly detailed and critical. Skryl, he said, "had her finger on the pulse" of Tagmet.

Officials in the Taganrog prosecutor's office initially ruled out robbery as a motive because Skryl's jewelry and cash were undisturbed. Just five days after the slaying, the Taganrog police chief told a press conference that three suspects were in custody. But the three were soon released and the probe seemed to take an entirely new direction. By July 25, 2002, police announced that robbery was the motive after all, and that the crime had nothing to do with Skryl's work, the Ekho Rostova radio station reported. No explanation of what prompted the shift was offered. Another suspect was arrested four days later, but he was released as well.

By September 2002, investigators decided to wrap things up. Taganrog authorities closed the investigation, saying they did not have suspects, Yuzhanskaya said. The case sat with no evident change for nearly three years before authorities, facing new questions this summer, issued contradictory statements.

In a June 10 letter, the Prosecutor General's office in Moscow—the nation's top prosecutor—told the press freedom organization Glasnost Defense Foundation that investigators in Taganrog had halted the probe and "did not neglect

a single version" of possible events in Skryl's murder. The office gave no further explanation of the decision to shelve the case. Yet a month later, the prosecutor's office issued a different statement in response to CPJ inquiries. A.P. Kizlyk, a senior assistant in the Prosecutor General's office, said in a July 11 letter that the Skryl investigation "continues."

That's news to Skryl's colleagues, said Grigory Bochkaryov. "Nobody has informed or discussed anything with us," said Bochkaryov, who worked with Skryl and now works for the Moscow-based press freedom organization, Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations.

Skryl's colleagues said the authorities' evasiveness compounds suspicions they've long had about the investigation. Bochkaryov said Skryl's colleagues were not questioned in any depth, nor was any composite drawing of the suspect ever released. Hansivarova, the editor who worked near Skryl, said an investigator spoke briefly with her once—for about two minutes, she estimated. She volunteered that Skryl had planned to meet a source for the Tagmet story, but the information generated no follow-up from investigators.

Twelve journalists have been killed in contract-style murders in Russia since 2000. The slayings have occurred all over the country, from Togliatti in the south to Murmansk in the north. Many have gone virtually unnoticed as authorities halted investigations despite open questions. By the Prosecutor General's standard, a case is "solved" once a suspect is identified. But even high-profile slayings such as the 2004 assassination of American Paul Klebnikov have yielded no convictions.

Relatives and colleagues of the slain journalists met in Moscow on July 7 at a conference organized by CPJ. In-

Death Roll

Twelve journalists have been killed in contract-style murders in Russia since 2000. All of the cases are unsolved, according to CPJ's analysis. Here are the victims, their news organizations, and the dates and places of their deaths:

Igor Domnikov,
Novaya Gazeta
July 16, 2000,
Moscow

Sergey Novikov,
Radio Vesna
July 26, 2000,
Smolensk

Iskandar Khatloni,
Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
September 21, 2000,
Moscow

Sergey Ivanov,
Lada-TV
October 3, 2000,
Togliatti

Adam Tepsurgayev,
Reuters
November 21, 2000,
Alkhan-Kala

Eduard Markevich,
Novy Reft
September 18, 2001,
Reftinsky

Aleksei Sidorov,
Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye
October 9, 2003,
Togliatti

Natalya Skryl,
Nashe Vremya
March 9, 2002,
Taganrog

Valery Ivanov,
Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye
April 29, 2002,
Togliatti

Dmitry Shvets,
TV-21 Northwestern Broadcasting
April 18, 2003,
Murmansk

Magomedzagid Varisov,
Novoye Delo
June 28, 2005,
Makhachkala



Eduard Markevich



Dmitry Shvets

Paul Klebnikov,
Forbes Russia
July 9, 2004,
Moscow



Karen Nersisian, who represents relatives of three slain journalists, says prosecutors have compelling reasons to avoid the powerful forces behind the murders.

Tolyattinskoye Obzreniye

stopped a car 25 miles (40 kilometers) outside Reftinsky and detained the driver. After 10 days, the suspect was released without charge, the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations reported.

Sverdlovsk prosecutors vowed publicly to give the case special attention and Markevich's widow, Tatyana, continued publishing *Novy Reft*. But six months after her husband's killing, Tatyana Markevich started getting anonymous phone threats, the Glasnost Defense Foundation said. By October 9, 2002, someone tossed a dumbbell with a threatening note through her apartment window. The next morning, her apartment door had been splattered with varnish, and burnt matches were on the ground. Fearing for her safety, and that of her 3-year-old son, Tatyana Markevich shut *Novy Reft* on October 15, 2002, and fled Reftinsky, the Glasnost group said.

Now, after four years of stops and starts, the investigation into Eduard Markevich's murder has been officially halted. In its July 11 letter to CPJ, the Prosecutor General's office said that, "after checking all possible versions, the investigation is stopped." Possible motives were never explained publicly or to Markevich's relatives, said Maria Istomina, a family friend. "I think prosecutors deliberately ignored journalism as a motive because Eduard Markevich actively criticized local officials," she said.

Even in instances where authorities claim progress, they have withheld information. Such is the case of Dmitry Shvets, the 37-year-old deputy director of the independent television station TV-21, who was gunned down outside the station's offices at around 5 p.m. on April 18, 2003, in the northern city of Murmansk. An assailant fired several times in the presence of many witnesses, then fled in a waiting car.

Shvets was a prominent local figure with many commercial interests, someone active in public relations and politics. Family and colleagues believe he was killed for his hands-on work at TV-21. Svetlana Bokova, news editor at TV-21, said Shvets was investigating a mayoral candidate's alleged links to organized crime in the days before the slaying. The candidate had recently threatened TV-21 staff for broadcasting an unfavorable interview, the station reported. Murmansk police and prosecutors requested copies of Shvets' TV-21 reports over the previous two years.

In early April, prosecutors said they had found Shvets' alleged killer—now dead, they said—but they refused to identify the suspect or provide any other detail. In deflecting questions, authorities cited the confidentiality of the investigation. One of the few things they did say: Investigators now had a clear idea of who ordered the killing.

But the status of the case is not at all clear. In its July 11 letter, the Prosecutor General's office described the Shvets' case as "solved." By mid-August, Murmansk prosecutors told Shvets' widow that investigators had stopped looking for the mastermind—because they had no suspects. Yet the

next month, responding to CPJ inquiries, the Prosecutor General said the hunt for the mastermind was on.

"I do not trust the prosecutor's office," said Inna Shvets, who added that investigators routinely withheld information about her husband's killing. "Nobody talks or meets with me. I only get vague statements in written form, and even those I get after filing at least two written requests."

That is a common refrain from families of the slain journalists, who say authorities have been evasive, sluggish, and unresponsive. This pattern held true when CPJ sought explanation from prosecutors. On June 14, CPJ faxed a

request to Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov, seeking to meet with him in Moscow. CPJ requested a meeting in early July, around the time of its conference with the families.

The response from Ustinov's office was sent by mail, dated July 11, and postmarked July 25. It reached CPJ's New York headquarters on August 5. A meeting was impossible, the letter said, because of the "intense work schedule of the Prosecutor General's office." ■

For updates on the Russian journalist murders, visit www.cpj.org.

Moscow Q&A: David Marash



ABC News correspondent David Marash, a veteran CPJ board member, met with families and colleagues of 12 slain journalists during a mission to Moscow in July. He talked with CPJ's Maya Taal afterward.

Given your long involvement with CPJ, how was this mission different from others you've undertaken?

Usually we meet with a lot of government officials. This time, we hoped to meet with prosecutors and we didn't—we didn't really meet with anyone in the government who was directly involved in these cases. However, the conference accomplished a great deal. It brought these families together to synthesize their protests, and it worked as moral reinforcement. Looking into one another's faces, hearing one another's voices, hearing one another's stories had a very strong, psychologically boosting effect.

What left the strongest impression?

It's the sheer courage necessary to practice professional journalism on a meaningful level in Russia. The threat of some kind of intervention, whether it be legal or fatal, is constant.

Has government indifference in these murder cases affected the families' resolve?

The single defining fact is that all 12 murders are unsolved, and many of them are officially closed "for lack of a suspect." The uniformity of this powerless outcome is a real indictment of the government. Most of the killings seem to be professional, organized hits; in none of the cases have the progenitors of the crime been found. This suggests that the Kremlin and the prosecutor's office don't want very much to find these criminals.

What was common to the families' experiences?

What's most telling is the pattern of details. First off, the journalists knew that they were working in dangerous territory. Secondly, in most cases, the journalists had received open or veiled threats not to persist in their reporting. Third, the hits are almost all professional-style, involving lethal use of a very professionally handled weapon and a pre-planned getaway. The subsequent investigations tend to be under-funded, and they rarely persist. The one notable exception is the murder of American journalist Paul Klebnikov, where at least investigators claim to be proceeding to a real prosecution.

Have they gone further in the Klebnikov case because of international pressure?

There's no question international attention has helped in the Klebnikov case. So has government pressure. President Bush and Condoleeza Rice, as national security advisor and secretary of state, have personally pressed the issue with their Russian counterparts. This obviously has the effect of getting formal action. Whether these formal actions penetrate to the core of the crime remains to be seen.

How do people compare the current press climate to that of the Soviet era?

Families and journalists who had been there from the mid-'80s say that press freedom conditions are approaching the bad old days of the Soviet state and are far worse than during the glasnost era of the late '80s and the perestroika era of the early '90s.

How do journalists and others encourage the Russian government to make progress in these cases?

The best thing we can do is to shine a spotlight on it, to show through our own reporting and our own advocacy that what happens to journalists in Russia matters to journalists and their readers, viewers, and listeners all over the world. ■