



AP/Misha Japaridze

Glasnost and Now

Repression, censorship, and murder: Russia and other former Soviet republics hurtle backward.

By Ann Cooper

Masked, armed police officers raid the offices of the Media-Most holding company in Moscow in May 2000.

TOGLIATTI, Russia

Valery Ivanov and Aleksei Sidorov came of age in a world bursting with possibilities. It was the late 1980s, and a tidal wave of free speech was sweeping away the communist dictators who had ruled their homeland, the Soviet Union, for decades.

For 70 years, the Communist Party held near absolute control over what Soviet citizens could see, hear, and read. The party buried the dark secrets of Josef Stalin's brutal repression. Disgraced leaders such as Nikita Khrushchev were swiftly airbrushed out of history, their very existence denied for decades. The basic factual elements of life, such as death tolls from natural and man-made disasters, were state secrets.

Then came glasnost, Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of limited free speech, which began to erode the party's controls as Ivanov and Sidorov reached adolescence. By the

*CPJ Executive Director **Ann Cooper** covered the final years of the former Soviet Union as Moscow bureau chief for National Public Radio. In June, she led a mission to Togliatti to press for answers in the slayings of two editors.*

time the two bonded in a college friendship and went on to seek their fortunes in the world, the Soviet Union was history, Russia's media propaganda machines were privatizing, and journalism had become an admired, even heroic, profession.

It was the profession chosen by Ivanov, founder and editor of *Tolyatinskoye Obozreniye*, and his friend Sidorov, who became the weekly newspaper's deputy editor. Together they practiced a scrappy investigative journalism previously unknown in one of post-Soviet Russia's most corrupt cities, the auto manufacturing center of Togliatti.

"The newspaper was set up to conduct investigations, to find political, social, and criminal issues and unravel them," recalls Stella Ivanova, Ivanov's sister.

Week after week, the paper illuminated the criminal underworld warring for economic control of Togliatti and its lucrative auto business. Links between criminal gangs and the city's government were exposed; the paper's reporting on local corruption forced one Togliatti mayor from office.

By 2002, its sixth year of operation, the crusading paper had uncov-

ered many crimes and made many enemies. On April 22 of that year, Ivanov was gunned down in a contract-style killing outside his home. He was 32. Sidorov quickly replaced his slain colleague, boasting that the paper would continue to investigate crime and corruption. After all, Sidorov told *The New York Times*, "They can't kill us all."

Eighteen months later, while Sidorov was returning home from work, a man wielding an ice pick stabbed him to death. Sidorov was 31, a victim of a post-Soviet form of media control more brutal and absolute than the Communist Party's censorious Glavlit bureaucracy. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe called it "censorship by killing."

When the Soviet Union collapsed nearly 13 years ago, its 15 republics became independent countries whose leaders at least initially paid lip service to the notion that democracy would replace communism, and that state-controlled propaganda would give way to free and independent media.

But throughout most of the region, tantalizing new freedoms,

such as the launch of privately owned newspapers, have been offset by new repressions. A range of authoritarian tactics—from state control of newsprint and advertising to politicized court rulings and financial pressures—has stifled or silenced journalists and thwarted the development of vibrant, independent media. Broadcasting remains either a state monopoly or subject to heavy-handed government influence in most former Soviet republics. And while privately owned newspapers exist in all but one of the former republics, Turkmenistan, many of these publications face constant government interference.

As a result, most former Soviet states lack the press freedom essential to free and fair elections. These countries have few media outlets willing or able to investigate government corruption aggressively. And they have little of the transparency and accountability necessary to promote strong economic growth.

Research by the Committee to Protect Journalists shows that of the 15 former Soviet republics, only three have established strong press freedom conditions: the tiny European states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia.

At the other extreme is Turkmenistan in central Asia, where a megalomaniacal dictator uses Soviet-era tactics to throttle independent sources of information. The president appoints newspaper editors; censorship is enforced; and publishing houses are under strict state control. Unfiltered news comes only from foreign radio broadcasts, and Turkmen citizens say they listen only in the safety of their own homes—just as they did under Soviet rule.

In between those extremes, the region's media struggle desperately with a broad range of problems. Central governments in Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova are too weak to thwart rogue violence against journalists and too intolerant to countenance criticism. Autocratic

regimes in Azerbaijan, Belarus, and central Asia keep most journalists too frightened to report or write news that conflicts with the official version of events.

In Ukraine, President Leonid Kuchma has been under fire for four years for his alleged role in the murder and beheading of an investigative Internet journalist. Secret recordings made by one of Kuchma's security guards are said to implicate the president, who has resisted persistent international calls for an independent investigation.

Yet nowhere is the press freedom struggle more dramatic than in Russia, named by CPJ this year as one of the 10 worst places in the world to be a journalist. "In the West, it's established that a citizen has a right to know, and to get information, and journalists have a right to have access to important information and to give it to the public," says Rimma Mikhareva, deputy editor of *Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye*. "I don't think this concept exists in Russia."

In the glasnost era of the late 1980s, independent-minded journalism was beginning to flower in Russia, even though the Soviet state and the Communist Party continued to own newspapers, printing houses, and television stations. By August 1991, when a group of hard-line communists tried to overthrow Gorbachev and his reforms, journalists could no longer be counted on as passive propagandists.

Some reporters and editors openly defied the putsch. Editors of 11 papers banned by the coup leaders united to produce an underground newspaper handed out on the streets. Twenty-four-year-old reporter Tatiana Malkina, from a generation that had not

known the fears of its parents, dared to ask the hard-liners on a live TV broadcast: "Could you please say whether or not you understand that last night you carried out a coup d'état?" And as tanks surrounded Soviet television headquarters, reporter Sergei Medvedev and his bosses at state TV risked all to broadcast a forbidden report on resistance to the coup—including the searing image of Boris Yeltsin defiant atop an armored vehicle sent to subdue him.

That one scene helped bring down the three-day coup. A few months later, in December 1991, the Soviet Union was history, and a new era seemed to arrive for the Russian media. "A truly independent press is on its way," Malkina forecast that fall.

Such promises went unfulfilled. Media privatized but faced huge



AP/Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye/Alexei Yablokov

Tolyattinskoye Obozreniye editors Valery Ivanov (left) and Aleksei Sidorov, both of whom were killed for their paper's hard-hitting coverage

financial difficulties. Western investment encouraged new, independent publications but was seldom enough to sustain them. Those that survived were likely to rely on one of several compromising schemes: ownership by oligarchs made rich in shady privatization deals who used their media holdings to promote political agendas; state subsidies that left papers beholden to the very interests they covered; or the sale of news space to corporations via contracts that promised favorable coverage.

Survival has come at the cost of credibility, leaving the Russian public ambivalent about the press—even as criminals attack the few journalists who still dare to probe or question. When American investigative editor Paul Klebnikov was gunned down outside the Moscow office of *Forbes Russia* in July, he became the 11th journalist to be slain in a contract-style murder since President Vladimir Putin took office four years ago. No one has been brought to justice in these murders, and the government's indifference is palpable.

At the same time, the Putin administration has muzzled critical reporting. Kremlin-backed restrictions made it extremely difficult for opposition candidates to be heard during last year's parliamentary and presidential elections. Military restrictions have prevented independent reporting on the conflict in Chechnya. And Russian authorities shuttered *Chechenskoye Obshchestvo*, one of the only independent Chechen newspapers reporting on the conflict, a month before the republic's August elections.

Under Putin, all national television broadcasting has been brought under the direct control or heavy influence of the Kremlin. The removal last summer of independent-minded anchors and public affairs programs, reportedly in response to Kremlin complaints, reinforced the notion that TV news is a state enterprise. And while children died and a middle school burned in a horrific siege in Beslan in September, viewers of state television were given a recitation of the government's 2005 privatization plan.

Even print journalists, who have far smaller audiences, face great risk in criticizing the Kremlin. In September, after the national daily *Izvestia* carried dramatic coverage questioning the government's handling of the Beslan crisis, chief editor Raf Shakirov was swiftly fired, reportedly because of Kremlin pressure. Kremlin interference was also alleged

when two top Russian investigative reporters, Andrei Babitsky and Anna Politkovskaya, were prevented from covering the hostage story. On their way to Beslan, Babitsky was locked up on spurious charges of "hooliganism," and Politkovskaya was felled by a mysterious case of poisoning.

No one expected Russia's post-communist transition to be smooth for the media. But almost 13 years after communism's collapse, press

freedom has been nearly erased, and journalists' lives are endangered. Healthy criticism of the Kremlin has been silenced as a result, and even basic information on a catastrophe such as Beslan is hidden from the public. Politkovskaya, writing in the London-based *Guardian* newspaper, says it all looks sadly familiar. "We are hurtling back into a Soviet abyss," she says, "into an information vacuum." ■

Eleven Murders, No Justice

Eleven journalists have been killed in contract-style murders since Russian President Vladimir Putin took office four years ago, according to reporting by the Committee to Protect Journalists. No one has been brought to justice in any of the slayings. Here are the victims:



Igor Domnikov
Novaya Gazeta
July 16, 2000
Moscow



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



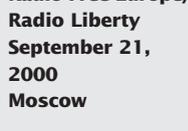
Eduard Markevich
Novy Reft
September 18,
2001
Reftinsky



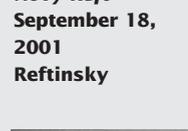
Dmitry Shvets
TV-21 Northwest-
ern Broadcasting
April 18, 2003
Murmansk



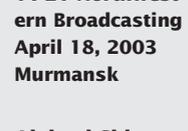
Sergey Novikov
Radio Vesna
July 26, 2000
Smolensk



Sergey Ivanov
Lada-TV
October 3, 2000
Togliatti



Natalya Skryl
Nashe Vremya
March 9, 2002
Taganrog



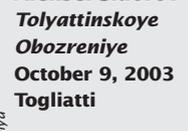
Aleksei Sidorov
Tolyattinskoye
Obozreniye
October 9, 2003
Togliatti



Adam Tepsurgayev
Reuters
November 21,
2000
Alkhan-Kala



Valery Ivanov
Tolyattinskoye
Obozreniye
April 29, 2002
Togliatti



Paul Klebnikov
Forbes Russia
July 9, 2004
Moscow

For updates on journalist slayings in Russia, visit www.cpj.org.