



**Testimony before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the House  
Freedom of the Press Caucus**

**“Systematic Attacks on Journalists in Russia and Other Post-Soviet States”**

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Thank you to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the House Freedom of the Press Caucus, and Co-Chairs of the Caucus, Representative Adam Schiff and Representative Steve Chabot, for holding this briefing to bring attention to attacks on the press in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet bloc. I ask that my full written testimony be admitted into the record. My name is Nina Ognianova and I am the Europe and Central Asia program coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists. CPJ is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending press freedom and the rights of journalists worldwide. It is an honor to speak to you today and I appreciate the opportunity to address the Commission and the Caucus on behalf of CPJ.

In my testimony, I will first address Russia’s press freedom record, focusing on recent cases of attacks on journalists and press freedom outlets, which have largely gone unpunished.

I will then talk about attacks on the press in Ukraine, where impunity in the murder of prominent journalist Pavel Sheremet has chilled media coverage.

Finally, I will mention the records of Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan, two countries where press freedom has continued to worsen.

In all these cases I will reference CPJ’s research over the past nine months, using specific cases to illustrate regional threats.

## INTRODUCTION

Receding media freedom both in established European democracies and in the United States has emboldened authoritarian governments in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union to crack down on independent media and opposition voices using a variety of methods to silence their critics.

In Russia, there is an entrenched culture of impunity: journalists are regularly intimidated, attacked or killed for their work, and their assailants go unpunished.

In Azerbaijan, one of the most censored countries in the world, an autocratic government has continued to go after the press with retaliatory charges, and, disturbingly, has been expanding its censorship abroad.

In Kyrgyzstan, a country once considered a leader of press freedom in Central Asia, the president has lashed out against individual journalists, and brought insult and defamation charges against the press in the lead up to this year's election.

Even in Ukraine, a country where the events of Euromaidan brought new hopes for improvement in press freedom, CPJ has documented a concerning tendency, supported by the government, to equate positive media coverage with patriotism and critical coverage with subversion.

## RUSSIA

According to CPJ's [most recent Impunity Index](#) – a list published each year by CPJ, which calculates the number of unsolved journalist murders as a percentage of a country's population – Russia ranks 10th worldwide. Nine journalists have been killed in the past decade, and nearly all perpetrators have gone free. This number represents only deliberate, work-related murders; cases of journalists killed on dangerous assignments or in combat were not included.

In spite of a few convictions in recent years in a couple of high-profile murders that date back to the early 2000s, such as the sentencing and imprisonment of several men for the murder of *Novaya Gazeta* journalists Anna Politkovskaya and Igor Domnikov, none of the crimes' commissioners have been brought to justice.

This impunity sends a signal to adversaries of press freedom in Russia that they can continue to censor journalists by intimidating, attacking or killing them for their reporting or published opinions.

CPJ has documented at least [13 separate cases over the past eight months](#), in which journalists have been threatened, physically attacked or killed in retaliation for their work. Last month, the well-known journalist and commentator Yulia Latynina, who writes a column for the

independent *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, and hosts a weekly radio show on Ekho Moskvyy radio, was compelled to flee Russia after a series of attacks against her and her family.

In the latest incident on September 3, attackers [set fire](#) to Latynina's car parked near the wooden house she shares with her parents in the Moscow suburbs. This occurred two months after unknown assailants [sprayed a foul-smelling substance](#) through the window of Latynina's home, causing several of the residents, including two children, to get sick. Though Russian authorities launched investigations into both incidents, they have yet to hold those responsible to account.

Last month during her radio show, Latynina, spoke from an undisclosed location, and told listeners she did not intend to return to Russia any time soon.

In a [September 22 op-ed for \*The Moscow Times\*](#), Latynina said she left the country because she felt the Kremlin had renounced control over those who perpetrate violence against its opponents. "It's not that Putin or the Kremlin are directly instigating these kinds of attacks," she said. "They are winking at those who want to organize them. They're empowering 'local talent,' and those people are given a free pass."

Similarly, in April, [Novaya Gazeta's prominent investigative journalist Elena Milashina](#) temporarily left Russia after receiving death threats related to a [story](#) she broke about the detention, torture, and killing of gay men in Chechnya, a Russian republic.

Two days after *Novaya Gazeta* published Milashina's story, Adam Shahidov, an advisor to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, called the paper an enemy "of our faith and motherland," and promised to exact "vengeance" during a gathering of thousands of Chechen men at a large mosque in the regional capital.

After this, *Novaya Gazeta* issued a [statement](#) saying it feared for the safety of its reporters, and that Shahidov's remarks would "encourage religious fanatics to retaliate against our journalists."

On April 19, the paper received an envelope containing an unidentified white powder. The only return address was stated simply as "Grozny"—Chechnya's capital. Police officers and a team from Russia's emergency situations ministry investigated the incident, but the powder has yet to be identified, *Novaya Gazeta* journalists told CPJ.

Chechen lawmakers and religious officials have also threatened journalists from other newsrooms who have reported critically on the North Caucasus republic, and these local public figures have faced no real consequences from Moscow.

A Chechen lawmaker and religious officials [threatened](#) Aleksei Venediktov, editor of the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, after Venediktov expressed solidarity with *Novaya Gazeta's* staff in an April 14 blog post.

The speaker of Chechnya's parliament, Magomed Daudov, threatened [Grigory Shvedov](#), the editor of the independent news website *Kavkazsky Uzel* (Caucasian Knot), one of a handful of

publications in Russia that independently covers the North Caucasus region, including Chechnya.

On January 4, Daudov [posted](#) a photograph of a dog with its tongue tied in a knot to the social media website Instagram, and used crude language to compare Shvedov to a dog in need of discipline. “It is past time to call a veterinarian,” the post said, “to pull out [Shvedov's] wisdom teeth and to cut his tongue to standard size. Then, behold, he might even tell us something good and informative.”

Shvedov filed a claim against Daudov with Russia's Investigative Committee, but to this day it remains unclear if Russian authorities investigated the threat.

Separately, CPJ has documented two new journalism-related murders in Russia this year.

[Nikolai Andrushchenko](#), a veteran journalist who reported on corruption and police brutality, died on April 19, of injuries sustained when unknown assailants severely beat the 73-year-old.

A sharp critic of [Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) known for his investigative reporting that alleged human rights abuses and corruption, Andrushchenko had suffered previous physical attacks, including one in November 2016 when several assailants attacked him at his doorstep.

The journalist's colleagues told CPJ Russian authorities have not brought any of Andrushchenko's attackers to justice.

In a separate case, [Dmitry Popkov](#), chief editor of the independent local newspaper *Ton-M* in Siberia, was murdered on May 24 in Siberia. The journalist's body was found with five bullet wounds in his backyard in the city of Minusinsk, in the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk Krai.

The 42-year-old had helped found *Ton-M* in 2014, and was known for his investigative reports alleging [abuse of power](#) and [corruption](#), as well as his criticism of officials of the ruling United Russia party.

In an August 2016 [editorial](#), Popkov wrote that *Ton-M* was “accustomed to being a pain in the neck for many officials who are trying to [silence us] in every possible way,” through “phone threats, intimidating searches, and interrogations.” He added that the authorities were concerned about the “corruption incidents that we reveal.”

A colleague of Popkov's, Sergei Shishov from the Minusinsk independent news website *Sreda24*, said he believed Popkov was killed for his journalism, particularly for his latest reports about a federal parliamentary audit that revealed corruption in the local administration.

Authorities launched an investigation into the killing in May, but have yet to report progress.

CPJ has documented a case in which Russian security forces [conducted](#) a politically motivated raid on a journalist's home in Moscow. In the city of Svetogorsk, located near the Finnish border, security services detained three journalists who were [trying](#) to report.

At least two other journalists are currently [imprisoned](#) in Russia for their reporting.

In a separate case, Russian authorities continue to hold ethnic Uzbek journalist Khudoberdi Nurmatov, a regular contributor to *Novaya Gazeta*, better known by his pen name Ali Feruz.

Nurmatov faces deportation to Uzbekistan, a country he fled in 2008 after local security services tried to recruit him as an informant. If he returns, he is at risk of imprisonment and torture. Since 2016, Nurmatov has reported on sensitive subjects such as [the plight of Central Asian migrant workers](#) in Russia, and the [December 2016 presidential election in Uzbekistan](#) for *Novaya Gazeta*.

After Nurmatov's arrest on immigration charges in Moscow on August 1, *Novaya Gazeta* [reported](#) that bailiffs beat, insulted, and shocked Nurmatov while bringing him to a detention center for foreign nationals in a Moscow suburb. *Novaya Gazeta* Editor-in-Chief Dmitry Muratov, who visited Nurmatov in the detention center on August 5, [reported](#) that the journalist had bruises on his back, was unable to eat for three days, and suffered from hypertension. CPJ, along with other rights defense organizations, [has called on Russian authorities](#) to release Nurmatov, and grant him legal residency status in the county.

## UKRAINE

Many headlines have been devoted to the conflict between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's east. However, I would like to draw your attention to the deteriorating press freedom situation in Ukraine.

The high-profile murder of prominent Belarus-born journalist and CPJ International Press Freedom Award recipient Pavel Sheremet in downtown Kiev last year brought into relief a number of press freedom problems including the concerning tendency, encouraged by the government, to label media organizations as unpatriotic when they report critically on the government.

CPJ covered this and other press freedom issues in [our recent report](#), "Justice Denied: Ukraine comes up empty in probe of Pavel Sheremet's murder," which found that the journalist's murder had taken place amid a divisive time in Ukraine.

The year Sheremet was killed, [CPJ documented](#) an uptick in attacks and hostility against journalists who covered the government critically or questioned its handling of the conflict in the east. Nationalist groups verbally assaulted or threatened journalists reporting from the conflict region. In some instances, government and security officials, including Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, not only stood by, but cheered on the attackers.

When a CPJ delegation visited Kiev this past July, we met with members of all three branches of government responsible for solving Sheremet's murder: The General Prosecutor's Office, the

National Police, and the country's Security Service (SBU). We also met with President Petro Poroshenko.

Despite stated assurances that Ukraine is committed to solving Sheremet's murder as a matter of honor, authorities reported no progress, no arrests, no prosecutions, and no leading motive for the killing.

Sheremet's colleagues at the independent news website *Ukrainska Pravda* told us that the continued impunity in his murder has made them more cautious in their reporting. "I fear for the safety of my colleagues ever since [Sheremet's death]," *Ukrainska Pravda* editor-in-chief Sevgil Musayeva told CPJ. "After this murder, you want to be careful. I don't know how long this feeling will last."

Separately, Ukrainian authorities have cracked down on journalists and media outlets who, they have said, threaten Ukraine's national interests.

In a [September 18 public letter to President Poroshenko](#), CPJ expressed our deep concern at the SBU's recent actions that have infringed on press freedom in the country. CPJ documented at least seven separate incidents over the previous two months in which the SBU targeted newsrooms, and journalists based on accusations that appeared politically motivated, and in retaliation for critical reporting.

In our [letter](#), we mentioned the SBU's [September 14 visit to Ukrainska Pravda](#) during which they delivered a letter demanding the outlet take down an article critical of Ukrainian government policies. We also detailed three separate cases from August in which [SBU agents expelled international journalists](#), and barred them from Ukraine for three years. In another case, also flagged in the letter, the SBU has detained a [freelance journalist](#) since August 1 who reported critically on Ukrainian politics, and now faces 15 years in prison on anti-state charges.

In the letter we also mention the SBU's August 8 raid on a [pro-Russia news website](#). The security service then searched the homes of two of the site's journalists, and opened an investigation into its editor for alleged disclosure of state secrets.

Lastly, we detailed [the July 14 raid of the Kiev offices of Media Holding Vesti](#), which includes a radio station, a news website, and a newspaper. A military prosecutor and 80 masked and armed security officers searched the Vesti offices allegedly in search of evidence in a fraud investigation.

We called on President Poroshenko to denounce the SBU's recent actions, and to reaffirm his commitment to ensuring journalists' safety to demonstrate his commitment to defending democratic institutions. He has yet to do so.

## **AZERBAIJAN**

In Azerbaijan, the autocratic President Ilham Aliyev has enjoyed wide-ranging powers since he inherited the post from his father in 2003.

During his time in office, Aliyev has consolidated power, and cracked down on independent and pro-opposition media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and opposition activists. His harsh measures have pushed many into exile, while authorities have imprisoned some of Aliyev's most vocal critics.

[This year alone](#), Azerbaijan imprisoned six journalists in addition to the [five it was already holding the year before](#).

Disturbingly, Azerbaijan is now extending its justice code abroad.

Belarussian authorities in February 2016 extradited Russian-Israeli blogger [Aleksandr Lapshin](#) to Azerbaijan for trial at the request of Baku. Azeri authorities then charged the journalist of traveling to, and reporting from the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, and for criticizing Azeri government policies. In July of this year, an Azeri court convicted Lapshin to [three years in jail](#) for illegally crossing the state border.

Though he was eventually pardoned and released, following an international outcry, this is one of several cases in which Azeri authorities have attempted to quiet their critics abroad.

In the [most recent case](#), a French court held a hearing on September 5 in a criminal defamation lawsuit against two French broadcast journalists over an investigative [report](#) they did two years ago.

The report, which aired on a major French broadcaster, France-2, referred to Azerbaijan as a “dictatorship.”

In response, Azerbaijan filed charges against the reports' authors, Elise Lucet and Laurent Richard. Disconcertingly, the French justice ministry has complied, and went ahead with the prosecution. The next hearing in the journalists' case is scheduled for November 7.

Most disturbing is the case of Afgan Mukhtarli, a freelance journalist who contributed to the Berlin-based, independent news outlet, *Meydan TV*, and the London-based Institute of War and Peace Reporting. Mukhtarli fled to Georgia from Azerbaijan in 2014 after receiving threats over his investigative reporting on corruption in Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry.

On May 29 this year, Mukhtarli's wife reported him as missing. The journalist's lawyer Elchin Sadygov in Baku told CPJ that Mukhtarli had been abducted from Tbilisi and forcefully brought to Azerbaijan, CPJ [documented](#) at the time.

Before he disappeared, Mukhtarli had been investigating the assets of Azerbaijan's first family in Georgia, the journalist's colleague Khadija Ismayilova told CPJ.

Azeri authorities charged Mukhtarli with illegally crossing the border, and bringing in contraband, according to Sadygov, who said Mukhtarli told him the police planted €10,000 (\$11,200) in his pocket while he was unconscious.

Georgia's Interior Ministry said in May that it was investigating the incident, [according to media reports](#), but has made no further announcements.

On September 22, Georgia's prosecutor's office offered a personal guard to Mustafayeva, after she said she was being followed in Tbilisi, the regional news website [Kavkazsky Uzel reported](#).

## **KYRGYZSTAN**

On October 15, Kyrgyzstan's voters go to the polls to elect their next president. But the incumbent, Almazbek Atambayev, has created a legacy of restriction and intolerance to criticism from the press.

While Kyrgyzstan was once considered Central Asia's most liberal country, the Kyrgyz authorities have in recent years cracked down on independent journalists, including foreign media, and prosecuted individual reporters and media outlets on retaliatory charges. Despite a UN decision that ordered his release, Kyrgyz authorities have continued to hold a prominent journalist and human rights defender in prison.

This past March alone, on at least three separate occasions, President Atambayev singled out several independent journalists for public rebuke, accused the media of "pouring dirt on him," and accused the Kyrgyz service of the US broadcaster Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty of spreading gossip about him in order to "keep its U.S. government funders happy."

These public statements by Kyrgyzstan's top leader were followed by legal action against some of the journalists and outlets Atambayev chastised. For instance, hours following the president's March 6 speech, during which he criticized RFE/RL, the prosecutor general's office charged the broadcaster's Kyrgyz Service, known locally as Azattyk, with "insulting the president." On March 13, prosecutors filed another suit against Azattyk and a separate lawsuit against Naryn Idinov, co-founder of the independent online news agency *Zanoza*, whom Atambayev had attacked in a public speech. Idinov and his outlet, Zanoza, were also sued for insulting the president.

Despite a years-long campaign by international media rights and human rights defense organizations, [including CPJ](#), to release an ethnic Uzbek journalist from Kyrgyzstan, who was sentenced to life in prison in September 2010 on charges widely recognized as politically motivated, Kyrgyzstan has continued to hold him in prison.

On April 21, 2016, in a [milestone decision](#), the U.N. Human Rights Committee called on Kyrgyzstan to immediately release the journalist, Azimjon Askarov, and quash his conviction after they reviewed a [complaint](#) filed in November 2012 by Askarov's lawyer and a team of experts from the New York-based Open Society Justice Initiative.



Under its international obligations, particularly Article 2 of the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), Kyrgyzstan is obligated to make full reparation to the individual whose rights have been violated, and must take immediate steps to release the individual, and overturn the conviction. Kyrgyzstan is also obligated under [its constitution](#) to respect the U.N.'s findings. Yet, instead, [on January 24, 2017](#), the Chui Regional Court in Bishkek upheld the life sentence against Askarov on patently political charges of complicity in murder and inciting hatred. Askarov continues to sit in prison.

## CONCLUSION

The international community, including leaders in the United States, cannot afford to be indifferent to attacks on the press in Russia and the former Soviet bloc countries. The already embattled press corps in these states continue to look to Washington for solidarity and support. The United States must not abandon them, and must not forgo its role as a moral authority and bastion of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. When independent journalists are threatened, attacked, and silenced in the ways I outlined today, the rest of the world is left under-informed about sensitive issues of international interest such as corruption, human rights abuses, and ongoing conflicts.

CPJ urges the U.S. Helsinki Commission and the House Freedom of the Press Caucus to make press freedom a priority, and take a firm stand against censorship as it is displayed in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and other nations of the former Soviet bloc.

Thank you for providing CPJ with the opportunity to address this pressing matter.