

# Suffocating Media Landscape

By Galina Stolyarova\*

When Russian investigative journalist Maksim Maksimov went missing in 2004, he was a correspondent for the St. Petersburg weekly magazine *Gorod*. The reporter left his apartment to meet with a source, apparently planning to be out for only an hour or two. He never returned. No trace of him has ever been found, and no one has been arrested for abducting or killing him.

Maksimov specialized in probing organized crime and corruption. His colleagues launched their own inquiry and soon learned that he had been probing a local police anti-corruption squad. Maksimov had alleged that instead of solving real crimes, the squad used an agent provocateur to set up phony cases, in order to extract bribes.

“He published an article about their methods, and their methods allegedly were to provoke innocent people into giving bribes,” the reporter’s mother, Rimma Maksimova, recalls.

“They created a dangerous or hopeless situation,” she explained. “For example, they planted drugs in someone’s flat and threatened them with jail, or staged a car accident in which an innocent person would be made to appear responsible. When someone would pay a bribe to one of the unit members or their agents, other police units would turn up and discover it. That’s how they achieved a very high success rate in tackling corruption.”

In Russia, such a strategy is known to be used by police units to target those who they consider their enemies, or people who might make allegations of criminal or improper behavior against them.

Maksimov’s colleagues learned that on the day he disappeared, he had been phoned by a man claiming to offer him freelance work. Maksimov’s colleagues believe he was killed the same day he disappeared, and that his body was then removed from St. Petersburg by car and buried in the woods outside the city.

“Our sources described the place where he was buried to us, but it’s a remote and densely forested area,” said Alexander Gorshkov, the head of the Agency for Journalistic Investigations (*AZhUR- Agentstvo Zhurnalistitskikh Rassledoanii*). “We made several trips there, but have not yet been able to find the grave.”

In an online report, Gorshkov published the name of an alleged police stooge, believed to have posed as accepting bribes, and with whom Maksimov had his last meeting on the day he disappeared. Evidence collected by Gorshkov and his fellow journalists convinced the prosecutor's office that the man is a suspect in the case. However, when prosecutors summoned Gorshkov for questioning, they told him that he should not have revealed the identity of the police agent. By the end of 2010, no arrests or progress had been made in the case.

Over the years since the murder, a number of alternative versions have been discussed yet none of them ever received coherent backing. Seven years on, the Agency for Journalistic Investigations firmly stands by the results of their investigation about what happened to their colleague.

“Nobody has been arrested for Maksim's murder because there is no political will to do so. And we see the same with the murders of other journalists who were killed in connection with their professional activity,” said Yevgeny Vyshenkov, Deputy Head of Agency for Journalistic Investigations. “Still, I very much hope that the corrupt police officers mentioned in the investigative reports about the Maksimov's murder will soon be jailed.”

## Mystery Murders

Maksimov was one of 19 journalists who have been murdered in Russia in the last decade. Many of them reported on corruption for independent media and found themselves in opposition to the Kremlin. These murders were work-related. Only two such murders that occurred since 1995 — the killing of *Novaya Gazeta* reporter Igor Domnikov in Moscow, in July 2000, and the murder of Larisa Yudina, a writer for *Sovietskaya Kalmykia Segodnya* in Elista, in June 1998 — have been solved. Even in those cases, the police failed to establish who ordered the murders, jailing only the actual assassins.

In September 2010, Alexander Bastrykin, the head of the Investigative Committee of the Russian General Prosecutor's Office (*Sledstvennii Komitet pri Generalnoi Prokurature Rossiiskoi Federatsii*), said the state is reopening five cases involving the murders of journalists that had been closed or suspended. He also vowed to speed up the other investigations. However, this promise has yet to yield results.

“The fact that the journalists who were killed were almost exclusively critics of the Kremlin does not on its own make the Kremlin responsible,” said Kirill Kabanov, chairman of the Russian Anti-Corruption Committee (*Natsionalnii Antikorrupsionnii Komitet*), a Moscow-based NGO. “The truth is, however, that the investigations of these murders typically stall, fall apart or end nowhere. Those who mastermind the killings remain unknown,

which means that the state is either too weak to run an uncompromised, transparent and successful investigation, or it has had a hand in the murders.”

The independent media in Russia, where all nationwide television channels and most of the mainstream media are under state control, encounter various forms of pressure and limitations, regardless of the topics they cover. While privately-owned glossy magazines and tabloid newspapers sell well and exist in impressive variety, serious independent media outlets covering news and current affairs are few and far between and enjoy only very modest circulation.

Fear, resulting from growing numbers of journalists murdered for their reporting, has undermined the integrity of the journalistic community in Russia.

Self-censorship has sneaked in again, rolling back decades back to the Soviet years, but this time with many forms of persecution and intimidation to choose from – financial, physical and even judicial.

Former chess champion Garry Kasparov, a leader of opposition coalition The Other Russia, says Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s high approval rating among the public is based on the level of ignorance among Russians about the way their country is governed. He also thinks that media censorship plays a key role in protecting the authorities from public scrutiny.

“One month of honest television debates discussing the true state of corruption in the country and the concentration of financial resources in the hands of the closest relatives of members of the ruling political elite, would probably result in the immediate collapse of Putin’s approval rating,” Kasparov said.

Most readers show little interest in topics such as politics, human rights or the environment, though, and generally view media as a source of entertainment. The very few independent organizations that cover current affairs show courage, determination and high-quality investigative journalism. Yet they struggle to stay afloat financially, and their numbers are decreasing. Overall, they exist in suffocating conditions.

### Suffocating Media Landscape

Pressure to manipulate publications is not uncommon, even in regard to issues that would seem of lesser public interest. For instance, in 2010, a prominent theater critic was denied accreditation for any events at one of the oldest and most important theaters in Russia on the basis of a negative review she had written about one of the shows.

The bewildered critic was told by the theater's representative that her opinions were beyond reasonable, and that a key member of the cast had threatened to quit if the boss did not make sure the source of the bad press was kept away. Within days, three of the four publications that employed the critic informed her that the theater in question would from now on be covered by other journalists.

One editor, Dmitry Morozov, had the courage to remind the theater that newspapers are free to choose their critics, who are then paid to express their expert opinions rather than help build the reputation of a performer or company. He also told the theater to take its advertising business elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, covering government affairs is much harder for journalists who are not complacent. President Dmitry Medvedev made it much easier for bureaucrats to avoid comment with a 2009 decree that orders them not to talk publicly about state business.

The order covers, among others, state organizations, police stations and the audit chamber.

Despite the fact that the Russian Constitution guarantees the right to receive information, the heads of many organizations now hide behind the 2009 ban and refer the media to their press offices. Websites for public organizations contain little or no useful or current information, according to the Institute for the Freedom of Information (*Institut Razvitiya Svobodnykh Informatsii*).

"The state is rapidly losing transparency. Authorities across Russia have long punished newspapers and broadcast outlets by limiting their access to key events. They know that guarding information is the best way to conceal corruption," comments Nikolai Donskov, a journalist with *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper.

Simultaneously, the number of people jailed on corruption-related charges went up from almost 700 in 2007 to more than 900 two years later, according to Russia's Justice Ministry (*Ministerstvo Yustitsii*). However, the statistics show that only one in every 25 bribery cases results in a prison term (there were 23,518 registered bribery cases in 2009, representing a 7 percent increase compared to 2007).

The Corruption Perceptions Index released by Transparency International in October 2010 showed that Russia plummeted from the 146th place to the 154th. It also recorded that only 2 percent of the murders of journalists are solved.

In another 2010 poll conducted by the Levada Center, 70 percent of Russians declared a distrust and fear of the police. In response, in a lengthy article published by the state-sponsored *Rossiiskaya*

*Gazeta*, Interior Minister Rashid Nurgaliev argued that it is journalists who have tainted the image of the police, by reporting only bad news and thus distorting the public's view of law enforcement in Russia.

He did not give any explanations about specific criticisms, such as allegations of torture in detention centers, often mentioned by the media, or if any action is being taken to fight corruption within the police, but he did mention the possibility of giving special training to police officers on how to present themselves in the media in a positive fashion.

Influenced by this climate of fear, more and more journalists are avoiding touching the subject of corruption. Investigative reporting is becoming an extinct species in the country's media landscape and many media bosses have long adopted a friendly tone and tread warily, skirting potentially sensitive subjects and dropping controversial commentators.

Only a tiny fraction of publications manage to maintain full independence from the government, powerful state corporations, or influential tycoons, but media that dare to publish such reports are generally not powerful enough to force authorities to respond.

### Unsympathetic Readers

After the murder of Natalya Estemirova in Grozny, in July 2009, *Novaya Gazeta*, Russia's only national print publication specializing in investigations (with a circulation of 535,000), decided to limit its coverage of Chechnya.

Estemirova investigated kidnapping, corruption, torture and killings of civilians in Chechnya, and was one of Russia's bravest reporters and human rights advocates. The newsroom of this critical newspaper, which has already lost six journalists, has become reminiscent of a funeral home. Perhaps, most distressingly, the journalists do not feel that readers care very much.

In truth, meetings that commemorate the anniversaries of the killing of Russian journalists gather more people in Paris and Berlin than they do in Moscow or St. Petersburg. With so constraining circumstances and with so little evidence of sympathy from the general public, Russian reporters are finding it harder to risk their lives to report the daily news.

*\*Galina Stolyarova has worked at the St. Petersburg Times since 1999, and has been a columnist and Russia correspondent for the award-winning online magazine Transitions Online (Prague) since 2006. She has also worked on a number of BBC Radio documentaries. She has covered issues relating to democracy and*

*open government in the Putin era and investigated human rights abuses and the assassinations of journalists.*