

What freedom of press means in Russia

(Polina Myakinchenko- Jekaterina Kostina)

On April 23rd the International Journalism Festival in Perugia had a panel discussion “A harsh winter in Russian journalism”, where we were talking about the difficulties of being a journalist in Russia. The three keynote speakers were the deputy editor of Novaya Gazeta, Vitaly Yaroshevski, Lidia Yusupova, leader of the organization “World” and a journalist of RAI Regional News and representative of “Annaviva”, Andrea Roscassi. The meeting took place in Hotel Bufani and moderated by Marcello Greco, a journalist from RAI 3 News. The discussion was initiated by “Perugia Radio and TV Journalism School - Alumni Association, AGSP”.

The meeting provoked keen interest of the guests of the Festival: there were not enough headphones, and several guests shared pairs between themselves.

The moderator began with a brief discussion about the deaths and disappearances of over 70 journalists from the year 2000 to present. Within the impunity index of CPJ, (Community to Protect Journalists), Russia is rated at the 8th place (percentage of undisclosed profession-related deaths of journalists during 2000-2009 according to a country's population).

The first question, which interested everybody, was: “Who killed Anna Politkovskaya?”

Vitaly Yaroshevskiy: “Anna Politkovskaya was killed by unknown killers, and we don't know who had ordered this murder. The case has not been closed. She's fallen a victim of politics who make the contemporary regime in Russia. Anna Politkovskaya was writing about the authorities, about the troubles of the country, and about the fact that in such a country the authorities cannot feel comfortable. This is the reason why she was killed. We have more concrete version of this murder. On the day of her death we suspected a Chechen track. But investigators in private conversations, not for recorders, told us that there is a need of political will and they are ready to investigate this till the end. And I think that if we have the political will, they will without any doubt find the killers”.

The death of Anna Politkovskaya has sparked a greater controversy throughout the entire journalistic community; foreign correspondents have been coming to the editorial office as if local correspondents, while most of their Russian colleagues came only on the day after the death and upon its one year anniversary. Foreign journalists could help the investigation of murders of Russian journalists by pressing Russian authorities about human rights in each and every press conference. We hope that Russian citizens will begin to ask the same questions.

Vitaly Yaroshevskiy continues: “But they cannot come to the agreement with journalists. They spent 1,5 milliards dollars on so-called “image of Russia” in the foreign media. Some of the best western PR-specialists do that but they still haven't succeeded, because there are more journalists than them. It's probably impossible to make a deal with journalists, because there is a conflict of interests. So the main problem of our establishment is you, all the other problems have been solved, you should know that. Furthermore they don't like the fact that you're writing the truth about Russia. It spoils their image”.

Our society reacts to national affairs with little interest. Citizens are largely indifferent to the freedom of press. Due to this, there is a lack of mobilization and an incapability of accomplishing anything. They only pay particular interest to the quality of the press when a topic touches on something of personal importance (such as pensions or medical care). So it's something connected to economics, not politics, says Vitaliy Yaroshevskiy. It would be very difficult for the authorities to realize plans with such citizens, whose attitudes they are responsible for. “I think that here is a wall between journalists and society. This wall was built by official propaganda: people were persuaded that nothing depends on them in this country, and if journalists are being killed, it's not by accident”.

Not only do people not care, but no one is questioning why leaders of countries are not concerned with human rights in their countries, explained Andrea Riscassi:

“Mr. Putin told Mrs. Merkel that they would conduct the investigation till the end. I don't

think that Mrs. Merkel, Mr. Berlusconi, Mr. Obama, the rest of them, has ever asked mister Putin, who killed Anna Politkovskaya. I don't think they give a damn".

Students of the school of journalism prepared two films. First telling about Anna Politkovskaya, and the second – about the five other journalists of Novaya Gazeta who were killed during its history.

Lidiya Yusupova told about specifics of work of journalists on North Caucasus:

“As you understand, no journalist could get into Chechnya. Entry was completely forbidden. And even Russian journalists didn't have access there. But some journalists managed to get there: foreign journalists put on skirts and scarves on their head like Chechen women do. There is the same situation in Ingushetia right now, you can hardly enter this place, because there is a filter for the journalists. But anyway – I'm judging by the work of my colleagues from Memorial – there is always possibility to tell about the situation there. But this can be risky for your health and for your life and for the work on the whole”.

Our colleagues were shocked. How is it possible that after the second world war- a war that claimed so many lives – neofascism reemerges in Russia? Well, the problem is in very effective propaganda, which every day tells people that there are enemies all around and you have to get up from your knees. So people, who is not used to think, decides to just throw away all the newcomers. But the problem is that Russian fascism will stay in the country anyway after that, and the authorities have no idea, what to do with them.

The audience was interested, what are young journalists think about working in Russia. Lidia Yusupova explained that they are in a better situation than their predecessors: “I would say it's very difficult: there are young and independent journalists, there is a core inside them, they have beliefs, that elder generation maybe doesn't have. But there are not many such young journalists, because the moral state of society doesn't give them a chance to develop. There are some personalities, but there are not a lot of them”.

Six portraits of killed journalists of “Novaya Gazeta” are hanging on the wall of the hall, where editors plan their new issues, and everybody working for the newspaper understands perfectly well, what risk they are taking by working in such an opposition newspaper. But there are many young journalists there, and more and more are coming every summer during their university studies. Some of them are staying to work. Those young journalists are not there for money or for career, they are there because it's prestigious to work in this newspaper, and it's a real journalism school, because it's very difficult to work there. You are writing on the important topics, and sometimes people's business and lives can be affected by the mistake you make.

But anyway the last completely free place in Russia is internet, and there are 40 million users already. And they are young, they are thinking independently and we could guide them towards the best sources of information to use.

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