

Guns Aimed at Journalists Are Aimed at Us All

By [Nadezhda Azhgikhina](#)

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On Wednesday, just like every year for the past 11 years on Dec. 15, people gathered at the House of Journalists in Moscow to remember their dead colleagues — journalists who have been killed in Russia over the past two decades.

It remains a unique event at which relatives and friends, children and parents, assemble to remember those who were a little more bold or less cautious — or who simply found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. The deceased have left behind their publications, photographs and documentaries. They have left the grief of those who loved them. The event is a tribute to the memory of our fellow journalists. Each year, as we gather in the same hall, the same question is asked: Is it over yet?

I first attended this day of remembrance in 1999. I can still vividly recall my burning shame when I saw how few reporters attended the event. The gifts handed out to the bereft families were provided, for some reason, by a South Korean firm. The president of the Union of

Journalists, Vsevolod Bogdanov, stood on the stage, barely holding back tears, while the audience contained not one government minister or oligarch and not a single director from those publishing houses and broadcasting companies for whom the deceased had worked.

Something dreadful is happening to us. A country that does not value its journalists and does not properly investigate their deaths or publicly lament such misfortune cannot face a normal future. A nation that is indifferent to this calamity is profoundly sick. Ten years ago, this tragic list of names was much shorter.

I also recall the Dec. 15, 2006, march to Pushkin Square and the open-air meeting that followed. Almost 500 people gathered to commemorate the journalists who had been killed in Russia since the early 1990s. There were as many police as protesters. In 2006, we believed that the recent murder of Anna Politkovskaya would be the last such tragedy. The names of all the reporters, photographers and editors who have died violent, premature or unexplained deaths were read aloud for the first time, a recitation that took 40 minutes.

Today, the recorded total exceeds [300](#). International media defense organizations name various figures. At the Union of Journalists, we believe that all those who were killed should be remembered. It is an expression of solidarity and sympathy with their families, friends and colleagues. It is also our duty to hold law enforcement agencies to account. This is one way we can help make the law work for everyone — whether an individual was killed for his work as a journalist or as one more victim of a street attack, a robbery at home or any of the other violent crimes that take away the lives of thousands of our citizens every year.

On Dec. 15, 2009, modest gifts from Samsung were again offered to the families of the bereaved. Once again, not a single Russian billionaire, minister or president of a media company could be seen among the audience. At the same time, though, the 2009 remembrance differed from previous years: President Dmitry Medvedev said it was unacceptable to violate the rights of journalists. Immediately after the murder of Natalya Estemirova in July 2009, Medvedev demanded a rapid investigation and repeated that the work of journalists and human rights activists was extremely important for civil society and the proper functioning of the state. I'd like to think that those in charge of the police, the Prosecutor General's Office and other law enforcement agencies paid close attention to these words.

The Union of Journalists, together with the International Federation of Journalists, the Glasnost Defense Foundation and the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, issued a report titled "Partial Justice" that documented and analyzed the murders of journalists in Russia since 1993. The report was sent to government agencies, inviting them to enter into a dialogue over the issues raised. It called on those attending the remembrance day event in Moscow to help fill the gaps in a new online database of deaths and disappearances of journalists in Russia.

We miss those 300 colleagues. As Pavel Gutiontov, secretary of the Union of Journalist, said: "It is not only family members and work colleagues who have been deprived, the readers and viewers in our enormous country have also lost a voice and perspective that no one else can offer. We miss the articles that Artyom Borovik will never write. We miss the programs that Vladislav Listyev will never make; we miss the web sites that young Vladimir Sukhomlin will

now never create; we miss all that highly experienced editors like Larisa Yudina, and novice reporters like Anastasia Baburova, will now never write and publish.” Today, the country’s newspapers, radio and television would be different if these journalists were still with us, Gutiontov said.

Talk at the House of Journalists was not just of the past or of our grief. We discussed what we must do today to ensure that all crimes against journalists are fully investigated, how we must confront beatings, threats and other common forms of intimidation and pressure. We discussed how to create an atmosphere in which our journalists could safely go about their work.

Our readers and viewers should understand that a gun turned on a journalist is also being pointed at every citizen. They should understand that every beating is a threat to each and every one of us and to the country in which we live. When Russians — and, most important, the country’s top government officials — understand this, perhaps we will finally see thorough investigations and fair trials. Then attacks on journalists in their own towns will become as rare as in Western countries with long-established democratic traditions.

Let’s hope that Russia will one day value journalists and the role they play in creating and maintaining a civil society.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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