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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Reporters Without Borders Calls Putin a Predator and Control Freak

By The Moscow Times

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Two foreign media watchdogs have slammed the Russian government's treatment of the press, with one group calling President Vladimir Putin a "predator" of free press and another naming Russia as one of the top countries that gives impunity to the killers of journalists.

The France-based Reporters Without Borders released an updated list of 39 "Predators of Freedom of Information" for World Press Freedom Day on Friday, lumping Putin together with the likes of new Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Italian Mafia.

"If just one word were needed to describe Vladimir Putin, who was catapulted into the presidency in 2000 after a decade of dilution of authority, it would have to be 'control freak,'" it said in a report.

"Since his return to the presidency in May 2012, Putin's rhetoric has become even more militaristic and Cold War-like. Media critics? Manipulated by the U.S. State Department. Pussy

Riot and their ilk? Anti-Semites who undermine public decency and destroy the country. Human rights NGOs? Foreign agents," it said.

The report noted that Putin has shown public support for media freedom, most recently in an address to the Russian Union of Journalists last month when he said, "The media's active and responsible attitude and a truly independent and courageous journalism are more than ever desired and indispensable for Russia."

But the reality, Reporters Without Borders said, is "indispensable or not, independent journalism is a risky activity in Russia."

The report said at least 29 journalists have been killed in connection with their work since Putin first became president in 2000 and lamented the death of Khimki journalist Mikhail Beketov in April and the fact that the masterminds of attacks on Novaya Gazeta reporter Anna Politkovskaya and Kommersant reporter Oleg Kashin remain unknown.

The report also berated Russia for last year recriminalizing defamation and creating a blacklist of websites that have been banned in the name of protecting minors.

"Since Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in Russia, the authorities have tightened their grip even further in response to unprecedented opposition protests," it said. "The country remains marked by a completely unacceptable level of impunity for those responsible for violence against journalists."

The report also names as predators the leaders of other former Soviet republics, including Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It singles out the presidents of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan for especially stinging criticism.

Five new predators were added to this year's list, including the new Chinese president and members and supporters of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. The report also said criminal organizations like Mexico's Zetas and the Italian Mafia continued to target journalists who they considered too curious or independent.

The Kremlin had no immediate comment on the report, although it has rejected similar findings in the past as biased. Reporters Without Borders also named Putin as a predator last year.

As part of this year's report, the organization raised eyebrows in Paris by pasting large posters of its press predators in subway stations and on building walls. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was depicted shaking his fist, while Putin was shown raising his middle finger.

Also on Friday, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists named Russia as one of the top countries that gives impunity to the killers of journalists but noted that the situation was improving.

The group ranked Russia at No. 9, the same spot as last year, on its Impunity Index of the world's 12 worst countries.

"With 14 unsolved murder cases since 2003, Russia is the ninth worst country on the index," the organization said in the report.

It said journalists in the North Caucuses faced the greatest risk nowadays, noting that the most recent death that it recorded was of Kazbek Gekkiyev, 28, a state television anchor who was shot three times on his way home from work in Nalchik in December.

The report did not mention that law enforcement officers shot dead the chief suspect in Gekkiyev's killing, Zeitun Bozun, 30, when he resisted arrest in Nalchik on Jan. 29.

Russia, which has made the list every year since it was launched in 2008, is ranked this year between Pakistan (8) and Brazil (10), with 0.099 unsolved journalist murders per million inhabitants.

The list is topped by Iraq, with 2.818 unsolved journalist murders per million inhabitants, and followed by Somalia and the Philippines. The three countries kept the same positions as last year.

The CPJ said 34 journalists have been killed in Russia since 1992, and 14 of those cases remained unsolved compared to 16 last year.

But the CPJ did note that conditions were improving in both Russia and Nepal, which was removed from this year's list. "Although both nations remain dangerous for the press, both have seen a general decline in deadly anti-press violence and a handful of partly successful prosecutions in journalist murders," it said, citing as an example the successful prosecution of former police official Dmitry Pavlyuchenkov on conspiracy charges related to the 2006 slaying of Novaya Gazeta investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya.

"The sentencing of Pavlyuchenkov demonstrated progress in one momentous case, but let's not forget that he never identified the masterminds. So, justice is still half-done," said Galina Sidorova, who heads the Foundation for Investigative Journalism in Russia. "The climate of impunity is still here."

The CPJ said Russia's poor record in solving murders prompted the mother of investigative journalist Maxim Maximov, who was last seen in central St. Petersburg on June 29, 2004, and is presumed dead, to say in an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights that "Russia fosters a state pattern of impunity in murders of journalists."

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