

# Journalists Become Walking Targets in Ukraine's Information War

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Russian television sound engineer Anton Voloshin died in Ukraine last month.

As a video of the death of Channel One cameraman Anatoly Klyan went viral ahead of his memorial service on Wednesday, the world got its starkest glimpse yet of the reality faced by journalists on the ground in Ukraine: The 68-year-old veteran war reporter is literally shown bleeding out on camera.

The footage sheds light on a harsh truth in Ukraine, where journalists are being injured and killed in increasingly murky circumstances.

"No one carries responsibility for their [journalists'] suffering or even their death," said Nadezhda Azhgikhina, press secretary of the Russian Union of Journalists, a trade union protecting journalists' rights, and vice president of the European Federation of Journalists.

"Many journalists don't have insurance, special training or protective gear, and that's

crucial," Azhgikhina said, adding that reporting from Ukraine differed drastically from any other kind of war reporting — and was even more dangerous.

"This conflict is markedly different in terms of the role of mass media," she said.

"Journalists are blatantly seen as participants in the conflict."

With such new ground for reporters — whether newbies or veterans like Klyan — the one thing that's clear is that nothing is clear: No one can seem to figure out how much of the responsibility for their safety the reporter should carry, how much the news agency should take on itself, and to what extent the danger is simply par for the course.

## **The Blame Game**

On Tuesday, as another Russian journalist was injured while reporting in Luhansk, both sides in the conflict resorted to frenzied finger-pointing, with Moscow condemning the new leadership in Kiev and pro-Russian rebels calling for international help.

Klyan was the fifth journalist to be killed while covering the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and at least 200 more journalists have been injured in the crisis-torn country since the beginning of the year, according to Reporters Without Borders, an international nonprofit organization promoting freedom of the press.

The cameraman died from a gunshot wound to the stomach late Sunday night after the bus he had been traveling in came under fire while approaching a Ukrainian military base in Donetsk.

The bus was full of other journalists, as well as mothers of soldiers, and had banners in the windows reading: "Sons, come home!"

An investigation into the incident has been opened by both Ukraine's Interior Ministry and Russia's Investigative Committee, but the circumstances remain unclear. Channel One did not respond to a request for comment by the time of publication.

Since the conflict heated up, heads of Russian state-run media companies have appealed to the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and UNESCO to protect journalists in Ukraine, largely placing the blame on Ukrainian troops and urging international groups to take measures against the Kiev government for the "illegal acts" committed against Russian journalists.

In April, Channel One, RT, NTV, REN-TV, VGTPK and other state-owned channels sent an open letter complaining of repeated instances of abuse of Russian journalists working in Ukraine.

On Tuesday, pro-Russian rebels sought to enlist the help of Reporters Without Borders.

Warning about the "horrendous situation shaping up for the press in Ukraine," Alexander Zinchenko, head of the self-proclaimed Novorossia Republic, urged Reporters Without Borders to send monitors to eastern Ukraine.

## **No Experience Necessary**

While appeals by pro-Russian separatists and state-run media have focused on Kiev's responsibility to protect journalists, however, the Russian Union of Journalists has moved to make Russian news agencies liable for the safety of their employees.

Currently, there is no legislation in place to impose mandatory training on journalists being sent to war zones.

The union has prepared amendments to Russia's federal law on mass media to oblige media agencies to provide their employees with comprehensive training and protective gear before sending them to dangerous locations.

The presidential Human Rights Council has already expressed its support for the union's legislation, Azhgikhina said, and the State Duma is currently examining the documents.

For now, policies differ from agency to agency. While ITAR-Tass requires its journalists to take a special course before being sent to a hot spot, "only the big agencies can afford that," said Oleg Shchedrov, training director at Russia's state ITAR-Tass news agency and himself a journalist with experience working in conflict zones.

"There are so many smaller news outlets that simply can't pay to organize such training. And the rules differ depending on the management of each agency," he said.

## **National Recklessness?**

Several reporters on the ground in eastern Ukraine interviewed by The Moscow Times said it was not an uncommon sight to see Russian reporters woefully ill-equipped and inappropriately dressed for work in a war zone.

Shchedrov conceded that Russian reporters had a tendency to be more reckless in dangerous situations, saying it was almost a national mindset to "not place as much value on human life."

A British journalist who spoke on condition of anonymity said "it is noticeable how lots of Russian journalists seemed to be less armored and more reckless" while reporting from Ukraine.

One pair of Russian journalists from a state-run network kept "doing mental things," he said, and they were not wearing the proper armor or helmets for the work they were doing.

"They looked like they were going for a game of tennis," he said, "running back into the battle, places no one else would go. Then they would emerge looking shaken, I think at one point with a wounded hand," he said.

"There was a bunch of Russian journalists at the battle for Donetsk Airport [in late May] with no armor at all," he said.

But all reporters on the ground there are prone to making risky moves, he said, and even bulletproof vests do not necessarily guarantee safety.

"We've all done reckless things and regretted it. Usually nothing happens and we live."

## **Learning Experience**

Graham Phillips, a stringer for the state-run network RT, is perhaps most well-known among his fellow reporters for doing reckless things.

He shot to fame after posting a much-derided video of himself purportedly under fire by Ukrainian soldiers; his detractors criticized him for what they said was a sensationalized report of him simply walking into a trip flare.

Many questioned the wisdom of his decision to walk directly up to armed Ukrainian troops in a field, and Phillips himself described the incident as a "learning experience."

He said RT would have advised him against such a move, and that the agency had provided him with a flak jacket and constantly urged him to wear it.

"My producers kept sending me text messages to make sure I was wearing my vest. I took all my own risks there. Later RT would say that if I'd told them what I was going to do, they'd have been against it," he told The Moscow Times.

## **Walking Into a Trap**

For many journalists in Ukraine, the rapid escalation of the crisis meant that those initially on hand to cover a mere "occupation of a building" found themselves covering a war within a matter of weeks — leaving them just enough time to get a bulletproof vest and a helmet, but not much else.

The Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, founded by the Russian Union of Journalists in February 2000, offers free training courses once a year for those working in or planning to work in "hot spots."

The training, called "Bastion," covers what to do if taken hostage, how to minimize the risks of being injured in a hostile environment, and how to provide first aid to injured colleagues.

But as Shchedrov pointed out, the training is only offered periodically, meaning many of those journalists working in Ukraine may not have the opportunity to complete it.

Even the precautions taken by bigger agencies, such as issuing protective gear and employing advisers to steer their journalists away from risky situations, do not provide a safeguard against tragedies like Klyan's death, Shchedrov said.

"Advisers can really only tell you what roads are dangerous to go down. They can't be there at all times," he said.

"They can't foresee everything, so at a certain point it just becomes impractical," he said.

## **A New Kind of War**

In the aftermath of Klyan's death, many have struggled to make sense of why a veteran war

reporter who had previously worked in Syria and Iraq was not wearing protective gear.

But Ukraine is not like Syria or Iraq; it is not quite open warfare, but still isn't safe, even during agreed cease-fires.

"We've never seen this before," said Azhgikhina of the Union of Russian Journalists.

"In all previous conflicts, journalists were untouched and even protected by both sides. Now they are frequently not let into the country, and in conflict areas they are abducted, beaten and killed," Azhgikhina said.

The things happening today in Ukraine did not even take place during the Cold War, she said, leaving many journalists unprepared for a reality in which they have literally become walking targets, seen as crucial players in a larger information war.

None of the journalists in the vehicle with Klyan expected to be shot at, Azhgikhina said, explaining that the passengers had probably not worn protective clothing because they believed they were safe as a large group — with several soldiers' mothers — during a cease-fire declared between the separatists and the Ukrainian troops.

"They were traveling with women who had no kind of protective gear. How could they let themselves sit next to a bunch of defenseless women if they themselves were wearing vests?" Azhgikhina said.

Shchedrov echoed Azhgikhina's statements, saying the passengers in the bus had not done anything to compromise their security or startle the Ukrainian troops.

And it was not unheard of for journalists to go without protective vests, he said, especially in hot weather.

## **Racing for the Scoop**

The rush to get "exclusive" material may also be to blame, Azhgikhina said, noting that "the management [of news agencies] should be aware that because of their desire to get an exclusive from a conflict zone, journalists may suffer."

Klyan, a cameraman with 40 years' experience in the field who according to Channel One had previously joked that it was his job to film, not to be filmed, tragically ended up as the subject of his own report.

Dedicated to his profession until the very end, the journalist kept filming until he was physically no longer able to, telling his colleagues "I can't hold the camera anymore" before handing it over to them.

**See also:**

[Journalist Says Reporters Set Up After Cameraman Killed in Ukraine](#)

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