

North Caucasus: Journalists Feel the Heat

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Independent press chooses silence in face of threats.

Following the murder in October of independent journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who had written more than anyone about human rights abuses in the Russian North Caucasus, journalists in the region itself have felt increasingly threatened and isolated.

Recently, Politkovskaya had reportedly intensively from the western North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. A week after her death, a local journalist there was warned by the security services, "If they give us the order to rub out journalists, you will be one of the first."

A second journalist was told by a middle-ranking police officer, "We have people who don't like journalists very much. And even those who have sworn to kill you personally."

An editor in the republic was also telephoned by a criminal investigator and asked about contacts with and visits by Politkovskaya. The editor was told this was not an official interrogation, merely "information collection".

Faced with these kinds of threats, journalists in the region are not surprisingly afraid and exercising self-censorship in what they say and write.

An editor in Cherkessk, capital of the neighbouring republic of Karachai-Cherkessia, formerly well known for his outspoken commentary on the local authorities, said he had recently been visited by people close to the president. "I have children, but for these people killing someone is as easy as having breakfast. I can't change anything even if I lay down my life for this. So I will keep silent and do what they say," he said.

Karachai-Cherkessia has a particularly bad record on press freedom. In recent years, journalists Vladimir Panov and Yan Svider have been brutally beaten, as has a camera crew from a local independent television channel. Opposition media editor Keram Semyonov was murdered. The father of journalist Murat Gukhemukhov lost an eye after he was attacked - he had been warned by telephone the day before that he would be "punished" for his son's articles.

Government control of the media is so tight that it sometimes leads to comic situations.

At the beginning of November a park and palace of culture were opened in the regional town of Khabez. The palace of culture had a large amount of money lavished on it and is one of the finest such buildings in the North Caucasus.

The event was covered by all the regional media and even by journalists from Chechnya. However, not a word was said about it on official television in Karachai-Cherkessia. In private, the journalists said they had been banned from reporting on the ceremony because of a local political quarrel.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, journalists are fighting with the local bureaucracy. Radio reporter Murtaz Pachev is

taking his own bosses to court, after the republic's state broadcasting company pulled his programme off the air. The reason was that Pachev read out jokes about the president, Arsen Kanokov, on the air.

The joke consisted of two questions and answers. "Why has the process of forming a government in Kabardino-Balkaria dragged out so long? Because the Kanokov family is too small and there are a lot of posts in the government." And, "How do you assess the situation with corruption in Kabardino-Balkaria? Answer: Corruption is impossible because all the officials are relatives and no one takes bribes from his relatives."

The day after Pachev read out the jokes, broadcasting chief Ruslan Zhanimov shut down his programme and then sacked Pachev himself. Zhanimov said that he was afraid that offended officials might sue the radio station. Yet Zhanimov, a veteran of the previous regime, failed to appreciate that his actions were tarnishing the image of Kanokov, who has strived to present himself as a reformer and democrat.

The incident was widely discussed and written about in the newspapers. Valery Khatazhukov, who runs a human rights centre in Nalchik, held a special press conference to defend the programme and its presenter.

Khatazhukov himself had been harassed as a reporter and public figure under the previous administration of President Valery Kokov. "Pachev's programme was one of the sources of information which fully corresponded to the course chosen by the new president towards openness and transparency of the authorities, to the formation of civic society," he said.

"I am sure that the presidential administration had nothing to do with this illegal act. We appealed to the president in this regard and it turned out that Kanokov did not even know about the programme or about its closure."

"The most terrible legacy that the former regime left us was not the closed factories or dead collective farms but the huge poisonous fear in people's hearts," Pachev told IWPR. "Until we overcome that, no reforms will ever work."

The labour inspectorate to which Pachev appealed upheld his complaint and told the broadcasting company to revoke its order sacking the journalist. But the radio programme has not yet been put back on the air and Pachev's professional position is still unclear.

Dana Tsei is the pseudonym of a journalist working in the North Caucasus.

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