

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

“Systematic Attacks on Journalists in Russia and Other Post-Soviet States”

**House Freedom of the Press Caucus Members Present:
Representative Steve Chabot (R-OH), Co-Chair;
Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), Co-Chair**

**Commission Staff Present:
Jordan Warlick, Staff Associate, Commission for Security and Cooperation in
Europe**

**Participants:
Thomas Kent, President and CEO, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty;
Amanda Bennett, Director, Voice of America;
Nina Ognianova, Europe and Central Asia Program Coordinator, Committee
to Protect Journalists;
Karina Orlova, Washington, D.C. Correspondent, Echo of Moscow**

**The Briefing Was Held From 3:09 p.m. To 4:40 p.m. in Room SVC-208,
Senate Visitors Center, Washington, D.C., Jordan Warlick, Staff Associate,
Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Wednesday, October 4, 2017

*Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com*

CHABOT: Things don't work as well here on the Senate side, so I couldn't get the mic to work. (Laughter.) But good afternoon. On behalf of the House Freedom of the Press Caucus, I want to thank the Helsinki Commission, all of you, for being here. And I want to thank Congressman Schiff as well. He and I restarted, as you may know, the caucus to draw attention to international press freedom because a free and independent press is a key ingredient to any functioning democracy. We must continue to draw attention to this vital freedom around the globe.

Our friends at Voice of America, and as the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the BBG, know well the importance of a free and independent press in Russia, and throughout Eastern Europe for that matter. This is a timely discussion. Congressman Schiff and I strongly agree that a free and independent press in Russia and Eastern Europe is more important now than ever. It's absolutely necessary to counter an increasingly bold Vladimir Putin, who is attempting to undermine the fourth estate.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of the post-Soviet states have embraced democracy. And with that, a free press. It's the job of journalists to speak truth to power and hold governments accountable to democratic ideals. As we all know, Mr. Putin is hellbent on destroying the independent press. Why? Because it is a threat to his very rule. And there's no question that Putin is bound and determined to extend his power and influence to many now-free countries that were once under the yoke of the former Soviet Union.

Looking further than Russia's actions in Ukraine, which demonstrate that Putin will stop at nothing to reconstitute the former Russian empire, destroying the free press is an integral part of his plan. Putin has never really accepted or respected the sovereignty of our ally Ukraine. After unilaterally invading Crimea, Putin held a staged referendum to claim that Crimea wanted to leave Ukraine and become part of Russia. Russian propaganda played a significant role in the annexation, and still continues to do so.

More generally, Putin's propaganda machine provides cover for other Russian sympathizers throughout Eastern Europe. His continued manipulation of the press only leads to increased propaganda that is used to give credibility to his allies throughout the region. And in Russia itself, pro-Moscow voices are often the same voices that rely on corruption and aim to silence dissent. That's why a strong, independent and free press is a natural obstacle to Putin's grand strategy.

We must continue to support efforts by the BBG and VOA, the Voice of America, to provide a balanced and comprehensive platform in the region. By representing American democracy to the very populations Putin aims to control, we are able to provide tools for independent thought. This further cultivates support for independent journalism. I'm pleased to see that programs like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty are being given renewed attention by American policymakers, like myself. They broadcast in 28 languages to countries throughout Eastern Europe, Russia and other distant parts of the globe. They give independent journalists a voice where it's needed most.

These are precisely the kinds of broadcasters Western democracy needs if we are to effectively halt Putin's ambitions. Putin must not be allowed to win the battle of ideas in Eastern Europe. And he should not be allowed to quash dissent at home. That's why I, along with my colleagues in the House, continue to voice our support for a free and independent press, both in Eastern Europe and in Russia.

So we have an excellent panel here today to help us better understand the situation on the ground and the challenges that journalists face in Russia and throughout the former Soviet Union. I hope our panelists can shed further light on this situation and provide some potential solutions. And as I said, it is certainly a distinguished panel here this afternoon. I'm sure that a whole lot will be learned by an awful lot of people. And as I said, this is a very critical matter and it couldn't be more timely. So thank you very much, panel, for being here. And thank you all for being here. (Applause.)

WARLICK: And thank you, Representative Chabot.

To those in attendance, welcome and thank you for coming to this joint briefing of the Helsinki Commission and the House Freedom of the Press Caucus on attacks against journalists in Russia and other post-Soviet states. My name is Jordan Warlick, and I'm responsible for media freedom issues at the Helsinki Commission. As some of you may know, the Helsinki Commission was created to monitor compliance with the principles of democracy and human rights enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.

When authoritarian regimes systematically attack and silence the press, they violate these commitments. These kinds of attacks take many forms – online and verbal harassment, physical assault, politically motivated imprisonment, and even murder. There have been some particularly disturbing cases so far this year. Russian journalist Yulia Latynina fled Moscow after several attacks on her home. Well-known Azerbaijani blogger Mehman Huseynov was jailed and severely beaten in prison. Dmitry Popkov and Nikolai Andrushchenko were tragically murdered for their work as journalists in Russia. However, for the few well-known cases that garner attention, there are many more lesser-known victims.

A free press is an indispensable part of democracy. It keeps citizens informed and holds governments accountable. I look forward to a discussion of the pressures journalists experience in the region, why the situation has deteriorated, and what can be done to reverse these troubling trends. We are grateful to have such distinguished panelists with us here today. And we look forward to your insights on this subject.

First, we'll hear from Tom Kent, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who joins us all the way from RFE/RL's headquarters in Prague. Before RFE/RL Tom had an impressive 40-year career with the Associated Press, where he served in roles including Moscow bureau chief, international editor, world services editor, and standards editor.

Following Tom, we have Amanda Bennett, director at Voice of America. Amanda is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, which experience at a number of publications including, most recently, as executive editor of Bloomberg News and editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer. As

director of VOA and a seasoned journalist herself, Amanda's very well placed to discuss the dangers that confront the media.

Next we'll hear from Nina Ognianova, Europe and Central Asia program coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists. Leading advocacy work and fact-finding missions at CJP for 15 years, Nina has exceptional regional expertise that will be very valuable to our discussion today.

Finally, Karina Orlova will tell us her story. She is the Washington, D.C. correspondent for Echo of Moscow, a regular contributor to the American interest, and has first-hand experience of the dangers journalists face in the region.

We will conclude with a question and answer session. In addition to questions from the audience, we may also be taking questions from Facebook Live. And if you're tweeting at this event, please also use our handle, #HelsinkiCommission and #InternationalPressFreedom.

I'd like to turn now to our first panelist, Tom Kent, who will provide us with an overview of the situation for journalists in Russia and the region, and the particular threats that RFE/RL journalists face.

Tom, when you're ready.

KENT: Thank you, Jordan. Good afternoon, everyone. Certainly, we welcome the reestablishment of the House Freedom of the Press Caucus and the willingness of Representative Schiff and Chabot to serve as co-chairs. And we thank the Helsinki Commission for its participation in today's events.

Fair and representative societies simply cannot exist without independent fact-based journalism. We do our best in difficult circumstances. I am president and CEO of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, a private news corporation funded by Congress. We do local news and investigative reporting in 23 countries. We're based in Prague, right up against the time zones and the nations we serve – the former Soviet Union, the Balkans, and Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. We work in 25 languages on television, radio, the web, and social networks.

The law requires RFE/RL to provide professional, independent news reporting. At the same time, we promote freedom of expression, clean government and tolerance. These are universal values. Even dictatorships acknowledge them, if only on paper. When societies are open and just, when journalism is honest, the world benefits from more understanding and less conflict. It follows that the rights and work of journalists reporting the news must be respected, yet this is far from the case. Perhaps because our reporters focus so much on human rights and the scourges of corruption and extremism, RFE/RL's staff is under pressure every day.

Our staff faces physical attack, threats to themselves and their relatives, detention and imprisonment, and unrelenting assault from government and extremist media. Yet, we continue to provide something our audience obviously wants. In the first half of this year, visits to our websites were up 13 percent from the year before. People watched our videos 380 million times

on YouTube alone, almost twice as many as in 2016. Much of our work is in the Russian-speaking world. Our audiences there want news beyond what comes from Kremlin-controlled media.

We look for viewers who favor clean government, economic freedom, and better relations with the West. To this audience, we offered a dozen different Russian-language news brands. They include the new Current Time television and digital network, an RFE/RL project produced in cooperation with VOA, 24/7 all in Russian. RFE/RL offers separate news services for countries and regions throughout the post-Soviet space not only in Russia, but with the authenticity of local languages like Armenian, Georgian, Tajik and Kyrgyz, to name a few.

Inside Russia, we face severe limitations in TV and radio distribution. This, despite the fact that Russian media distribute freely in the United States. Still, billions of Russians follow our content. Apparently, the authorities recognize our impact. We face growing obstacles to our work. Our correspondents inside Russia have been beaten and harassed. In Russian-controlled Crimea, our contributor Mykola Semena was convicted just week of treason-like charges and banned from public activity for three years. In the Donbas region of Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists are holding our contributor Stanislav Aseyev, accusing him of espionage.

Moscow Television on some days accuses us of being master spies and propagandists, on others of being boring and incompetent. Here's one blast at us from Russian political commentator, Dmitry Kiselyov.

(Video clip in Russian.)

KENT: And yet, despite the pressures, we continue to operate with a bureau in Moscow and correspondents across the country. We have been through hard times before. We trust we will endure even though the latest trough in U.S.-Russian relations. It's important to note that attacks on our work in post-Soviet nations are hardly limited to Russia. In Ukraine, our investigative TV program, called "Schemes," regularly reports on corruption. Last month, security agents attacked "Schemes" reporters covering a lavish wedding celebration, a private event that appeared to make use of government resources. In a clip we'll show you, you can hear our reporter, Mykhailo Tkach, the man with the cellphone, shouting "shcho ty robysh" – "what are you doing" – as one of the agents forces our cameraman, Borys Trotsenko, to the ground.

(A video clip in Ukrainian is shown.)

KENT: Trotsenko got a concussion in that.

Also, in post-Soviet countries our contributor, Saparmamed Nepeskuliev is in his third year of imprisonment in Turkmenistan for his reporting. RFE/RL is suing Azerbaijan in the European Court of Human Rights in a case stemming from the forcible closure of our bureau there in 2014. There are many other abuses of our bureaus and our people.

Despite the many problems we face, we accomplish a lot. In every country across our geographies, our local staff and contributors take substantial risks, covering the news for their

fellow citizens through us. They believe in press and personal freedom. They know their work has impact. I thank you for your support.

WARLICK: Thank you very much, Tom, for your presentation and those powerful videos. We very much admire the work that RFE/RL does in that part of the world.

Amanda.

BENNETT: Thank you, Jordan. And thank you to Representatives Schiff and Chabot and the Freedom of the Press Caucus for convening this briefing along with the Helsinki Commission. I'd like to begin by sharing the experience of VOA journalist Fatima Tlisova, who in 2007 was compelled to leave Russia. She had faced harassment, intimidation and imprisonment while covering terrorist attacks, hostage situations, corruption and abuse of power by the military and police in Chechnya and the Caucasus region.

FATIMA TLISOVA: (From video.) I see my job as a mission. The Russian security attack physically. One of the instances, at 2 a.m. I woke up. I was swelling. I was bigger than my father. And I thought, it's probably poison. I was afraid to go to the local hospital. I woke up my kids and asked the taxi driver to take me to my parents' village. My mom was a doctor. And I knew that if I got to her alive I'm going to survive. So as you see, I'm alive.

BENNETT: So why am I showing you a 10-year-old experience? Because it's happening again. As Jordan mentioned, Fatima's story sounds eerily familiar to the story of Russian journalist Yulia Latynina, who recently wrote in *The Moscow Times* that she was forced to flee Russia because the Kremlin is losing control over the violence. In July, a strange gas was released into her home. The police watched her. Her car was set on fire. And this came a year after an unknown assailant threw feces on her, another common tactic against independent journalists. We are also seeing the Russian government tighten access to reliable information and crack down on internet freedoms. In August, Putin banned online messaging, as well as the VPNs commonly used to circumvent censorship.

It is in this environment that we – the Voice of America – operate. Our mandate from Congress is to bring America's story to the world, to explain U.S. policies, and to foster responsible discussion with accurate, objective, and comprehensive journalism. Like RFE, we are 100 percent funded by Congress and 100 percent independent. Along with RFE/RL and the three other networks, we comprise international media under the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Ours is a mission to promote freedom and democracy. VOA is the largest network for BBG, and it broadcasts in 47 languages around the world, reaching an estimated 234 million people on a weekly basis. In Russia and the post-Soviet space, we broadcast in 11 languages, including Russian and English. This past year, we had the biggest audience increase in our history in radio, TV, web, digital media.

So VOA's Russian Service has been in operation since 1947.

WARLICK: Excuse me, Amanda. Apologies for interrupting. I'd like to take a moment to welcome Representative Schiff to the briefing and give him the floor to make some remarks.

SCHIFF: Thank you very much. Appreciate the opportunity to join you today. And I want to thank you – I want to say thank you to the Helsinki Commission for partnering with the Press Freedom Caucus to host this important event on threats to press freedom to Russia and post-Soviet states. I'll be very brief, so that we can get back to hearing from our distinguished panel. But I'd just like to say a few words on why I think this topic is so timely and important.

Every day journalists risk their lives to bring news and information to people around the world. They're often the first to report at the frontlines of conflict zones, the first to uncover corruption, and the first to suffer the backlash when powerful forces would rather keep something hidden. They often take great risk to do their jobs, facing imprisonment, intimidation or worse from regimes and other powerful forces that do not want their stories told.

When I founded the International Press Freedom Caucus, along with my colleague Mike Pence, in 2006, one of our first actions was writing to Vladimir Putin in response to the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian journalist who reported on the war in Chechnya at great personal risk, and who was ultimately murdered in her apartment building. At the time, we noted that she was only the latest Russian journalist to meet a violent end, and to ask that the Russian government investigate her murder and punish those responsible.

It will come as no surprise to any of you that few observers believe her case was truly investigated and those who ordered or acceded her assassination were held to account. And as only one of six journalists working for the independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta murdered in recent years. This is the same newspaper which earlier this year broke the story of Chechnya's anti-gay campaign, in which gay men were detained and tortured to death. As our panelists have described, the environment for free media in Russia has only degraded since Mr. Pence and I formed this caucus.

Television consists largely of state-run propaganda outlets, while independent media and investigative reporting is systematically suppressed. For instance, when RBC Media Group published articles based on the Panama Papers leaks, which detailed aspects of the finances of powerful figures close to Putin, top editors were dismissed and replaced by individuals from state-run outlets. This is the norm in Putin's Russia, and, regrettably, the same approach to press freedom is common in many other post-Soviet states.

I have repeatedly highlight the case of Saparmamed Nepeskuliev, a journalist in Turkmenistan, who remains imprisoned because of his courage reporting from that country, one of the worst in the world for press freedom. I'm proud that the Press Freedom Caucus continues its bipartisan work with Congressman Steve Chabot of Ohio serving with me as co-chair. Unfortunately, there are – remain far too many nations in which press freedom and the safety and well-being of journalists is under daily threat. Too many journalists are jailed for reporting the truth or telling stories that the powerful or violent would rather keep in the shadows.

And I want to thank, again, you all for being here, and the wonderful panel that's been assembled to share their important work and research. And I thank you. (Applause.)

WARLICK: Thank you, Representative Schiff for your remarks, and for your work in reviving the House Freedom of the Press Caucus.

Amanda, please go ahead and continue.

BENNETT: Thank you, Congressman Schiff.

VOA's Russian Service has been in operation since 1947. So threats and intimidation are nothing new for us. But in recent years we have seen increased harassment by Russian authorities, unexplained bureaucratic delays, and increasingly negative public rhetoric about VOA's journalism. For example, in January Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov publicly berated a VOA stringer in Moscow, accusing him of lying about Russia's reaction to a U.S. intelligence report. Watch Mr. Lavrov here accuse our VOA stringer of promoting lies and junk.

(A video clip in Russian is shown.)

BENNETT: So, in this clip, which went out nationally, he accused our stringer of lying. The problem was, Mr. Lavrov was wrong. He was reading the wrong story. And the error was so egregious that later the foreign ministry spokeswoman posted on the stringer's Facebook page an acknowledgement that they had misrepresented the facts. And it's the first sort-of apology that any of us can remember.

There's also financial intimidation. In August this year, two VOA stringers in Azerbaijan were summoned to the tax ministry, and both were interrogated for about two hours. One of the journalists told VOA that she felt threatened by the tone of two investigators when the interrogation veered off into questions about her ties to VOA, her salary, and her bank account. Her legal representative was not allowed into the meeting, and she said she was afraid for herself and her family, and asked VOA not to leave her alone against the Azeri authorities. If history is any guide, once officials start making public accusations against journalists, then threats and intimidation and sometimes physical violence follow.

Public pressure is also placed on the stations that carry our content. Take a look at this investigative story that ran on Russia's Channel One that pieces together public information – including the BBG annual report and an inspector general report – to come to the conclusion that VOA had made secret payments to one of our affiliate stations.

(A video clip in Russian is shown.)

BENNETT: The truth is, the station couldn't find a record of payments because there was none. We make our content freely available around the world, yet pressure like this caused this station to drop VOA.

This type of intimidation and pressure isn't limited to Russia and the Russian periphery. I've just returned from a trip from the Balkans, where I heard local journalists speak of their widespread fear about pressure from media or business interests aligned with the Kremlin. Russian capital has undoubtedly penetrated Serbia's media market. In addition to Russian

international media such as Sputnik, Russian money is funding so-called patriotic orthodox Christian religious web portals and other information sites. Russian money I apparently in the TV market as well, with TV Nova, a national cable network, rumored to have connections with Konstantin Malofeev, a supporter of Putin.

Although the Russian government may deny directing harassment and intimidation of journalists, it is complicit. Independent Russian journalists say the government is, in effect, winking at the instigators and empowering local actors. Increasing pressure by governments, whether overt or subtle, is closing the space for independent journalism, honest dialogue, and the free flow of information. VOA journalists are incredibly committed to what they do, which is to tell America's story and explain U.S. policy. But we're always mindful of our obligation for their safety. Anytime a journalist is attacked, threatened, or abused it has a dampening effect on the freedom of the press.

Voice of America provides a much-needed alternative fact-based narrative in areas such as the Russian periphery where these networks are trying to gain influence, as well as in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Latin America. But it is a mistake to think that if we are shut down that the result is only silence. There are others waiting behind us to fill the gap. News directors from VOA partners with some of the biggest independent television stations across Latin America, including in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, pleaded with VOA not to abandon them. They told us that if we left RT, as well as the Iranian state broadcaster and China's global television – which are all funded anywhere from twice to many times the – VOA's \$234 million annual budget – would move in immediately and pay good money to take our place.

Our presence can protect other journalists, fostering independent voices. And this is a critical byproduct of our activities. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

WARLICK: And thank you, Amanda, for your presentation. VOA does such great work and we hope that they're able to operate without challenge in the region.

Nina.

OGNIANOVA: Thank you, Jordan. And thank you to the Commission on Security and Cooperation Europe and the House Freedom of the Press Caucus, and co-chairs of the caucus, Representatives Adam Schiff and Representative Steve Chabot for holding this briefing and bringing the attention to attacks on the press in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet bloc. I ask that my full written testimony here be admitted into the record.

My name is Nina Ognianova. And I'm the Europe and Central Asia program coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists. We are an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending press freedom and the rights of journalists worldwide. And it's an honor to speak to you today. And I appreciate the opportunity to address the Commission and the caucus on behalf of CPJ.

In this talk, I will first address Russia's press freedom record, focusing on some of the recent attacks we have documented on journalists and press outlets. All of these attacks have gone unpunished. And I will then talk about attacks on the press in Ukraine, where impunity in the murder of prominent journalist Pavel Sheremet has chilled media coverage. Finally, I will mention the records of Azerbaijan and of Kyrgyzstan, which are two of the countries where press freedom has continued to worsen this year. And in all of these cases, I will reference CPJ's own research over the past nine months using specific cases to illustrate regional threats.

As we heard here, the freedom of the media in the region is receding, but it's not just receding in this region. Deteriorating freedom of the press in established European democracy and in the United States as well as emboldened authoritarian governments in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union to crack down even further on independent media and opposition voices by using a variety of methods to silence their critics. In Russia there is an entrenched culture of impunity, and journalists are regularly intimidated, attacked, or killed for their work, and their assailants go unpunished. In Azerbaijan, which is one of the countries – one of the most censored countries of the world – an autocratic government has continued to go after the press with retaliatory charges and, disturbingly, has started to expand its censorship efforts abroad.

In Kyrgyzstan, a country where once there was liberty for press freedom – or, a degree of liberty for press freedom of the countries of Central Asia, the president has now lashed out against individual journalists and has brought insult and defamation charges against the press in the lead-up to this year's elections. And even in Ukraine, a country where the events of Euromaidan brought new hopes for improvement in press freedom, CPJ has documented a concerning tendency to equate positive media coverage with patriotism and critical coverage with subversion.

In Russia, according to our most recent impunity index – which is a list published each year which calculates the number of unsolved journalists murders as a percentage of the country's population – Russia ranks 10th worldwide. Nine journalists have been killed in the past decade. And the perpetrators have gone free. This number represents only deliberate work-related murders. Cases where journalists have been killed on dangerous assignments or in combat were not included in this index.

This impunity sends a signal to adversaries of the press in Russia that they can continue to censor journalists by intimidating, attacking or killing them for reporting or for published opinions. CPJ has documented at least 13 separate cases over the past nine months in which journalists have been threatened, physically attacked, or killed in retaliation for their work. We already heard the story of journalist and commentator Yulia Latynina, who wrote – writes a column for Novaya Gazeta and hosts a weekly radio show on Ekho Moskvyy and how she was compelled to flee Russia after a series of attacks against her and her family.

But this is in no way the only case that we have registered. Last month – actually, in September Latynina spoke very eloquently in a Moscow Times opinion editorial, where she said it's not that Putin or the Kremlin are directly instigating these kinds of attacks. They are winking at those who want to organize them. They are empowering local talent. And those people are

given a free pass – a free pass to retaliate. Similarly to Yulia Latynina, Elena Milashina, who is one of our former correspondents, in fact – a Moscow correspondent for CPJ – temporarily left Russia after receiving death threats related to a story she broke about the detention, torture and killing of gay men in Chechnya. Two days after Novaya Gazeta published Milashina’s story, Shahidov, an advisor to Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, called the paper an enemy of our faith and the motherland, and promised to exact vengeance, during a gathering of thousands of Chechen men at a large mosque in the regional capital.

After this, Novaya Gazeta issued a statement saying it feared for the safety of its journalists, and that Shahidov’s remarks would encourage religious fanatics to retaliate against our journalists. On April 19, sure enough, the paper received an envelope containing an unidentified white powder. The only return address was stated simply as “Grozny” – Chechnya’s capital. Police officers and a team from Russia’s emergency situation ministry investigated the incident, but the powder has yet to be identified. Chechen lawmakers and religious officials have also threatened journalists from other outlets, who have reported critically on the North Caucasus republic. And these local public figures have faced no real consequences from Moscow.

For instance, in January the speaker of Chechnya’s parliament threatened Grigory Shvedov, an editor of the independent news website Kavkazsky Uzel, one of the handful of publications in Russia that independently covers the North Caucasus, including Chechnya. The speaker posted a photograph of a dog with its tongue tied in a knot to the social media website Instagram, and used crude language to compare Shvedov to a dog in need of discipline. I’m quoting, “It is past time to call a veterinarian,” the post said, “to pull out Shvedov’s wisdom teeth and to cut his tongue to size. Then, behold, he might even tell us something good and informative.” Shvedov filed a claim against the official with Russia Investigative Committee, but to this day it remains unclear whether the Russian authorities even have investigated the threat.

Separately, CPJ has documented two new journalism-related murders in Russia this year. Nikolai Andrushchenko, a veteran journalist who reported on corruption and police brutality, died on April 19th of injuries sustained when unknown assailants severely beat him. He was known for his investigative journalism that alleged – that covered alleged human rights abuses and corruption. And he suffered previous physical attacks, including one in November the previous year, when several assailants attacked him at his doorstep.

In a separate case, Dmitry Popkov, who as a chief editor of the independent local newspaper Ton-M in Siberia, was murdered on May 24th. The journalist’s body was found with five bullet wounds in his backyard in the city of Minusinsk. He was known for his investigative journalism alleging abuse of power and corruption, as well as his criticism of officials of the ruling United Russian party. Authorities launched an investigation into the killing in May, but have yet to report any progress.

In a separate case, authorities continue to hold ethnic Uzbek journalist Khudoberdi Nurmatov, who is a contributor to Novaya Gazeta, better known by his pen name Ali Feruz. Nurmatov faces deportation to Uzbekistan, which he fled in 2008 after local security services

tried to recruit him as an informant. If he returns to Uzbekistan, he is at risk of imprisonment and torture. Since 2016, Nurmatov has reported on sensitive subjects such as the plight of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia, and the December 2016 presidential election in Uzbekistan for Novaya Gazeta.

After Nurmatov's arrest on immigration charges in Moscow on August 1st, Novaya Gazeta reported that bailiffs beat, insulted, and shocked him while bringing him to a detention center for foreign nationals in a Moscow suburb. Novaya Gazeta's Editor-in-Chief Dmitry Muratov, who visited Nurmatov in the detention center several days after this incident, reported that the journalist had bruises on his back, was unable to eat for several days, and suffered from hypertension. CPJ, along with other rights defense organizations, has called on Russian authorities to release Nurmatov and to grant him legal residency status in the country. And separately, there is a case before the European Court of Human Rights to have Nurmatov released and, again, to grant him legal residency in Russia. But he's still in detention.

Now I'm going to talk about Ukraine, which, of course, has grabbed many headlines because of the conflict between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's east. However, I would like to draw attention to the deteriorating press freedom situation in Ukraine.

The high-profile murder of prominent Belarus-born journalist and CPJ International Press Freedom Award recipient Pavel Sheremet in downtown Kiev last year brought into sharp relief a number of press freedom issues, including the concerning tendency, which is encouraged by the government, to label journalists and media organizations as unpatriotic when they report critically on the government. CPJ covered this and other press freedom issues in our recent report, "Justice Denied: Ukraine comes up empty in probe of Pavel Sheremet's murder," which found that Sheremet's murder had taken place amid a divisive time in Ukraine.

The year he was killed, CPJ documented an uptick in attacks and hostility against journalists who covered the government critically or who questioned its handling of the conflict in the east. Nationalist groups verbally assaulted or threatened journalists reporting from the conflict region. In some instances, government and security officials, including Interior Minister Arsen Avakov, not only stood by, but cheered on the attackers. When a CPJ delegation visited Kiev this past July, we met with all three branches of law enforcement responsible for solving Sheremet's murder – the General Prosecutor's Office, the National Police, and the country's Security Service, the SBU. We also met with President Poroshenko.

Despite stated assurances that Ukraine is committed to solving this terrible murder as a matter of honor, authorities have reported no progress, no arrests, no prosecutions, and no leading motive for the killing. Sheremet's colleagues at the independent news website Ukrainska Pravda told us that the continued impunity in his murder has made them more cautious in their reporting. "I fear for the safety of my colleagues ever since Sheremet's death," Ukrainska Pravda editor-in-chief Sevgil Musayeva told CPJ. "After this murder, you want to be more careful. And I don't know how long this feeling will last."

Separately, Ukrainian authorities have cracked down on journalists and media outlets who, they have said, threaten Ukraine's national interests. In a September 18th public letter to President Poroshenko, CPJ expressed our deep concern at the SBU's recent actions that have infringed on press freedom in the country. CPJ has documented at least seven separate incidents over the previous two months in which the security forces targeted newsrooms and journalists based on accusations that appeared politically motivated, and in retaliation for their critical reporting.

In our letter, we mentioned the SBU's September 14th visit to Ukrainska Pravda during which a representative of the SBU delivered a letter demanding the outlet take down an article critical of the Ukrainian defense capabilities. We also detailed three separate cases from August in which SBU agents expelled international journalists, and barred them from Ukraine for three years. And in another case, also flagged in the letter, the SBU has detained since August 1st a freelance journalist who reported critically on Ukrainian politics. And now faces 15 years in prison on anti-state charges.

We also detailed the July 14th raid of the Kiev offices of Media Holding Vesti, which includes a radio station, a news website, and a newspaper. A military prosecutor along with 80 masked and armed security officers searched the Vesti offices, allegedly seeking evidence in a fraud investigation. We called on President Poroshenko to denounce the SBU's recent actions, and to reaffirm his commitment to ensuring journalists' safety, to demonstrate his commitment to defending democratic institutions. And he has yet to do so.

In Azerbaijan, which is a well-known autocratic country, President Ilham Aliyev has enjoyed wide-ranging powers that he inherited, practically, when he got the post from his father in 2003. During his time in office, Aliyev has cracked down on independent and pro-opposition outlets, non-governmental institutions and opposition activists. His harsh measures have pushed many into exile, while authorities have imprisoned some of Aliyev's most vocal critics. This year alone, Azerbaijan imprisoned six journalists in addition to the five it was already holding since the year before. Disturbingly, Azerbaijan is now extending its justice code abroad.

Belarussian authorities in February 2016 extradited Russian-Israeli blogger Aleksandr Lapshin to Azerbaijan for trial at the request of Baku. Azeri authorities then charged the journalist of traveling to, and reporting from, the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, and for criticizing Azeri government policies. In July of this year, an Azeri court convicted Lapshin to three years in jail for illegally crossing the state border. And though he was eventually pardoned and released following an international outcry, this is one of several cases in which Azeri authorities have attempted to quiet their critics abroad.

In the most recent case, a French court held a hearing on September 5th in a criminal defamation lawsuit against two French broadcast journalists over an investigative report they did two years ago. The report, which aired on a major French broadcaster, referred to Azerbaijan as a dictatorship. In response, Azerbaijan filed charges against the report's authors, Elise Lucet and Laurent Richard. And, disconcertingly, the French justice ministry has complied, and has gone ahead with the prosecution. The next hearing in the case is scheduled for November 7th in France.

Most disturbing is the case of Afgan Mukhtarli, who is a freelance journalist who contributed to the Berlin-based, independent news outlet, Meydan TV, and the London-based Institute of War and Peace Reporting. Mukhtarli fled to Georgia from Azerbaijan in 2014 after he received threats over his investigative reporting on corruption in Azerbaijan's Defense Ministry. On May 29th of this year, Mukhtarli's wife reported him missing. The journalist's lawyer in Baku told CPJ that Mukhtarli had been abducted from Tbilisi and forcefully brought back to Azerbaijan.

Before he disappeared, he had been investigating the assets of Azerbaijan's first family in Georgia. And Azeri authorities, after he somehow ended up across the border, charged Mukhtarli with illegally crossing the border, and bringing in contraband, according to his lawyer, who said Mukhtarli told him the police has planted €10,000 in his pocket while he was knocked unconscious. Georgia's Interior Ministry said in May that it was investigating the incident, but has yet to make any public announcement as to any progress in the case.

In Kyrgyzstan, on October 15th, voters will go to the polls to elect their next president. But the incumbent, Almazbek Atambayev, has created a legacy of restriction and intolerance for criticism from the press. This March alone, on at least three separate occasions, President Atambayev singled out several independent journalists for public rebuke, accused the media of pouring dirt on him, and accused the Kyrgyz Service of the U.S. broadcaster RFE/RL of spreading gossip about him in order to keep its U.S. government funders happy.

These public statements by Kyrgyzstan's top leader were followed by legal actions against some of the journalists and outlets Atambayev chastised. For instance, hours following the president's March 6 speech, during which he criticized RFE/RL, the prosecutor general's office charged the broadcaster's Kyrgyz Service, known locally as Azattyk, with insulting the president. On March 13th, prosecutors filed another lawsuit against Azattyk and a separate lawsuit against Naryn Idinov, a co-founder of the independent online news agency Zanoza, whom Atambayev had attacked in a different public speech. Idinov and his outlet, Zanoza, were also sued for insulting the president.

Despite a years-long campaign by international media rights groups, including CPJ, to release an ethnic Uzbek journalist from Kyrgyzstan, who was sentenced to life in prison in September of 2010 on charges widely recognized as politically motivated, Kyrgyzstan has continued to defy its international commitments and has continued to hold the journalist in prison. On April 21st, 2016, in a milestone decision, the U.N. Human Rights Committee called on Kyrgyzstan to immediately release the journalist, Azimjon Askarov, and quash his conviction after they reviewed a complaint filed by Askarov's lawyers and team of experts from the New York-based Open Society Justice Initiative. Under its international obligations, Kyrgyzstan is obligated to respect the U.N.'s findings. And yet, on 24th of January this year, a Bishkek court upheld the life sentence against Askarov, and he continues to languish in jail.

The international community, including leaders in the United States, cannot afford to be indifferent to attacks on the press in Russia and the former Soviet bloc. The already embattled press corps in these countries continue to look up to Washington for solidarity and support. The

United States must not abandon them, and must not forgo its role as a moral authority and bastion of freedom of the press. When independent journalists are threatened, attacked, and silenced in the ways that we have all talked about here today, the rest of the world is left underinformed about sensitive issues of international interest such as corruption, human rights abuses, and ongoing conflicts.

CPJ urges the U.S. Helsinki Commission and the House Freedom of the Press Caucus to make press freedom a priority, and to take a firm stand against censorship as it is displayed in Russia, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, elsewhere in the former Soviet bloc. Thank you for providing CPJ with the opportunity to address this pressing matter.

WARLICK: And thank you very much, Nina, for that great summary of the situations in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan.

Karina.

ORLOVA: Good afternoon. My name is Karina Orlova. And I'm a correspondent for Radio Echo of Moscow. I've been in the United States since April of 2015. And that is when I had to flee Russia because of persecution of state-backed Chechen radicals, which you've heard about.

It all started right after the terror attack at Charlie Hebdo Magazine office in Paris in January of 2015, after the magazine had published caricatures on Mohammad. The attack led to a million-people march in Paris of those who support freedom of press and condemn terrorism. In Russia, though, the only million-people march took place in Chechnya's capital, Grozny. And those people condemned the murdered journalists and caricatures of Mohammad. At Echo, on Echo, all the radio hosts – and I was one of them – wore t-shirts with Charlie Hebdo logo the day after the attack in support for the murdered journalists and the magazine.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechnya dictator who is now well-known for persecuting and torturing gay people in Chechnya, took a stance too. On his Instagram account, where he is very active, Kadyrov threatened a former Russian oil tycoon and prisoner Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who at that time lived in Switzerland, after Khodorkovsky called reprinting caricatures in support of freedom of press. My guest speaker at the talk show I hosted was a member of the presidential council for human rights. And of course, I made him speak about Kadyrov's public threats. And I insisted questioning the speaker on whether he should have immediately delivered the issue to the council and whether Kadyrov should have been stopped by law enforcement.

Of course, no one stopped Ramzan Kadyrov, and two days later he publicly threatened all the journalists at Echo at personally its chief editor Alexey Venediktov. Right after the show, I started receiving death threats from people who called them – identified themselves – who called me the enemy of Islam and Kadyrov and who identified, I'm sorry, themselves as Chechens. They were not hiding their personalities. I received those threats continuously. And after Boris Nemtsov had been murdered in the center of Moscow in February of 2015, and I was still receiving threats, I made a decision to leave the country. I realized that if they could murder Boris Nemtsov, such a big, prominent public figure, then no one and nothing could protect me.

Ramzan Kadyrov is a real danger to people. But as shocking as it may sound, in Russia we all kind of got used to it. There is nothing that can be done about Kadyrov, because he is Putin's guarantee of peace in Chechnya. And Putin would pay for this peace with lives of others, like human rights activist Natalya Estemirova and journalist Anna Politkovskaya, both murdered by Kadyrov's people. And yet, I'm not talking about ordinary Chechens who suffer from Kadyrov on daily basis. And also, other – citizens of other regions of Russia are now suffering from Kadyrov too.

But a much worse thing here I discovered was that the police – the federal police is not – are not in charge when it comes to Kadyrov or his people. I filed a report on the threat to Moscow police and they didn't do anything about it, literally. For a week, they wasn't even opening a case. And only after Echo's chief editor made a call to Russia's interior minister office the police did open the criminal case. But this was a total – (inaudible). The investigator who questioned me told me openly that my problem could have been easily solved if I had stopped doing my job, and that my job was the problem that caused the threats. To cut a long story short, they – the police never did anything and closed the case without investigating it four months later.

So independent journalists in Russia are seen as the enemy of the state and the government. And law enforcement do not protect them at all. In small Russian cities and towns, the situation is even worse because when a journalist from a well-known media outlet is persecuted, it draws attention of other big media outlets. But when it happens in a small city, journalists are often left one-on-one with local bureaucracy and authorities. And I'd say that governors are the worst threat – the biggest threat to journalists in Russian regions, physical threat.

The most well-known example is the town of Pskov governor who ordered an assault on Oleg Kashin, a prominent Russian journalist. Kashin was severely beaten with a metal reinforcement and survived by a miracle, literally. The actors of the assault, they were caught and they testified against the governor of town, Andrei Turchak, but he was never charged of anything, and he still is a governor. Or, another famous story, when the investigative committee head, Alexander Bastrykin, took a Novaya Gazeta journalist to the woods and threatened him there. Bastrykin is still in the office. He's fine.

Among other means of containing journalists in Russia is, of course, censorship. For instance, it's a really simple example. Calling annexation of Crimea an annexation will lead to either criminal charges for calling for separatism, or a warning from the federal media watchdog. Two warnings within a year lead to media license suspension. So I'd say it is 100 percent safe to call things what they are only being out of Russian jurisdiction.

I have no idea what to do about physical threat to journalists. But as to censorship, well, one can suspend license from media outlets, but it cannot be done with social media. Social media is a weapon Russians used against democracy in the U.S. in 2016. But this same weapon, I think, may and should be successfully used against Putin's regime.

Also, I would – unfortunately Congressman Schiff has left us, but I would call for American intelligence service or – I don't know – authorities to leak as much as possible on Putin, because for sure they know they got information on Putin's money and Putin and his cronies' money. And it should be – it should be out there. It should be leaked to the press, I guess, so that we have more cases like the Panama Papers story. It was good.

I mean, so if we want to protect journalists from physical assault, we should destroy Putin's regime. Yeah. Thank you.

WARLICK: Well, thank you, Karina, for sharing your personal story and experiences with us here today. And thank you to all of you for your remarks.

Before opening up to audience Q&A, I'd like to ask a few questions of my own. I'll start off – so the subjects that journalists are typically targeted for reporting on include corruption, human-rights abuses, criticism of authoritarian regimes and other sensitive subjects. It's also incredibly important that journalists continue to bring attention to these issues.

Are you concerned that if risks become more severe in the region that journalists will self-censor rather than risk political backlash? And how do we negate that?

Tom or Amanda, maybe you could speak to this first since journalists at RFE and VOA really tackle these tough subjects.

BENNETT: Well, you know, I certainly hope we don't have that issue at RFE or VOA. But certainly, when I came through the Balkans, the journalists were openly complaining about the need to self-censor, because the owners of their papers were putting pressure on them as well. So this was an open topic of conversation that they wished they could do something different. And in some ways they saw us as a protection for times when they were able to do things.

WARLICK: Anything to add to that, Tom?

KENT: Self-censorship is always – is always a problem. But with the kind of regimes we sometimes deal with, anything – a report can be considered outrageous. So you don't have to hold back very much. You almost always will manage to get some kind of material out that will show some dimension of the regime which is not widely known and will bring you some blowback for sure.

WARLICK: Nina or Karina, do you have anything to add?

OGNIANOVA: It's not that I fear that journalists will start – will risk self-censorship. They already are doing it. In many of the countries that we cover, we have seen that independent pro-opposition outlets have either had to leave the countries where they've operated and had to – and have been forced into exile, which, of course, creates all kinds of difficulty to have a network of journalists and correspondents in the countries that they cover. And those independent – individual journalists left on the ground are left even more vulnerable without the

protection of a newsroom and an organization behind them. So, of course, they have to think about which topics they go into and which they don't. And they do so at incredible peril.

I mean, just look at Khadija Ismayilova in Azerbaijan, who had really – is one of the bravest reporters out there, who has tackled corruption like really very few others and has made it her personal mission to continue to fight this regime. She has taken this as her, you know, mission in life to continue doing this job. But they don't do – journalists have to be faced with this dilemma in many countries of the former Soviet bloc, they are faced with this dilemma. And they have two choices – either to remain and make some compromises with their coverage and tone down or to leave their countries in order to get into safe and to get their families into safety. It's really an impossible choice.

ORLOVA: Well, yes, I agree with Nina. Journalists are doing it, are implying self-censorship. I've never done this, so maybe that is why I'm here now. But in defense to my colleagues, who really – they avoid saying annexation. It's so simple, I mean, but they really do avoid it. And they prefer saying – but in Russia they call it, like, joining Crimea or returning Crimea. And they always say, like, ha, ha, ha, joining Crimea, ha, ha, ha.

Well, this ha, ha, ha means, like, we all know it was illegal. It was annexation. But we will pretend. I mean, but, again, I think that they also protect the media outlets they work for, because no one wants to be shut down.

WARLICK: Yeah. Thank you all.

So in terms of who is responsible for many of these attacks on journalists, Karina, you spoke a little bit about that. But we've seen cases where there are pretty direct ties to even the highest echelons of the government. In Russia and other countries that we're discussing today, how much of the threat comes from the top versus on more of a local level? And to expand on that, how do we know when these attacks are instigated by criminal organizations or terrorists or ultranationalists versus orchestrated from government officials?

Maybe, Nina, you could kick us off due to your experience monitoring so many of these cases so closely at CPJ.

OGNIANOVA: Well, it's very difficult to determine who's responsible when there is no or there is little independent thorough investigation into those cases. One can suspect who the actors are and who the responsible commissioners are. But, you know, some of this killing – some of these attacks are very professionally done. So unless there is a concerted effort from local law enforcement with the, you know, positive pressure of the international community to do those investigations and do them right, there is really no way of saying who's responsible. We can speculate, but we cannot say.

In most of the high-profile murders, of course, there is an element of suspicion that a crime has been either commissioned or approved by the high ups. But, again, we're not prosecutors. We're not investigators. We cannot say that for sure. It's for the responsible

authorities to do their job. And it's our responsibility to push those responsible authorities to do their job and do it well.

In many cases where there is – you know, CPJ has a long record of tracking these cases. And we have the Impunity Index, where, you know, for example, Russia has always been one of the leading, most infamous countries on this list. And it's – and in 90 percent of these cases the perpetrators are not even identified, let alone prosecuted and punished for their actions.

So it's very difficult to pinpoint. But what we can say for sure is that these governments, where the attacks on the press happen with impunity, have the – are responsible for creating the climate and the atmosphere in which these crimes are being committed. They are responsible for allowing this atmosphere of impunity, to say the least. And, you know, as, again, Yulia Latynina very eloquently put it, they have either lost control of the violence or have voluntarily relinquished this control. We don't know which one. But the truth of the matter is that journalists are being attacked with disconcerting frequencies – frequency – in Russia and other countries of the Soviet bloc. And the perpetrators are almost never brought to justice.

WARLICK: Anyone else like to respond to this?

KENT: I think that's just the point, that it all depends on the tone set at the top. In many cases you'll have no idea who really gave the order for something or whether some local official or policeman just felt, well, hey, it seems – it seems like open season on journalists, so I'm going to do my part.

It all depends on what tone comes from the leadership. And that's where I think that governments can be expected to show some respect for international human rights and also for their own constitutions.

WARLICK: OK. Well, we are running a little bit low on time. So I would like to open it up to the audience. If you could, please volunteer and introduce yourself when you pose a question.

Q: Albert from Congressman Schiff's office.

I was just wondering if you could speak to the impact of new media in empowering the voices of dissenters, I suppose. So I know, like, Alexei Navalny. I think he has a YouTube channel where he posts videos. I don't know if others have taken that route. It seems to me that censorship is harder on that end.

WARLICK: New media.

ORLOVA: I'm not a big expert on new media. But it's – yeah, I think that I appreciate Radio Free Europe job, and especially I'd like to thank – you have a program on Current Time called Unknown Russia. It's a fantastic job; my favorite one.

But I think that Americans should be one step ahead. And new media is one step ahead, or maybe not even ahead, but, you know, in the line. But some – I mean, with traditional media, it's always one step behind, because – so, yeah, I agree with you completely. And censorship – yeah, what can you do about social media? Like, we have a Russian Facebook. Well, they have Facebook, actual Facebook, and they have Russian version of Facebook, VKontakte, with 60 million users, I guess on VKontakte. So it's a great place to spread news from American media outlets, I guess.

KENT: Yeah, I think that social media is the key. It's opened up an entirely new opportunity for people to make comments on their own. And I think that governments really in many cases just don't know how to deal with it. In China, you know, you hear there are enormous numbers of people who spend all their time censoring the internet. And whether other countries can make that kind of commitment, who knows? It's very, very difficult. It is the – it's sort of the magic bullet for people to be able to speak out about their own countries.

Just ourselves, we're in the post-Soviet space. We're getting about – well, in August we had, like, 13 million people or 13 million engagements on our Facebook pages, people who shared something or made a comment. And we're not special. I mean, that – many, many popular figures, news organizations and so forth, get that kind of engagement. So it's something that I think the regimes are going to have a lot of trouble in controlling.

OGNIAKOVA: If I can add, yeah, absolutely, social media is the new frontier. It's the – it's the platform that a lot of journalists go to in the absence – in the contraction of the space in traditional outlets. And Russians have used – produced successfully their social-media networks. But, of course, the governments are following what's happening, and they are also trying to crack down and to regulate some of these developments.

In Russia, for example, now there is a law that requires bloggers with 10,000 or more followers to register as media outlets. And that makes those blogs and those bloggers susceptible to the restrictions of the media laws in Russia, which already have a set of tools that can regulate and restrict freedom of expression.

Bloggers – we have been documenting more and more cases where bloggers have been attacked for their opinion and their journalistic activity through their personal blogs. If you go on our website, www.CPJ.org, we have statistics on imprisoned journalists. And a big percentage of those are online journalists, including bloggers and social-media users, who have crossed into the definition of journalistic activity. We have a pretty broad definition of who we consider a journalist, and that includes personal bloggers. And you will see that the tendency to crack down on those kinds of activities has gone up in recent years.

WARLICK: OK. All right. Right here.

Q: Thank you very much. My name is Alex and I'm from Azerbaijan. I thank you all for a very compelling presentation, particularly on Azerbaijan.

When Russia attacked Azerbaijan in 1990s, our country found itself in a very interesting situation. There was no second source to get information about what exactly was going on – until a few journalists got together and they decided to change that reality, and they established a news agency, which actually happened to be the first news agency, independent news agency, in the post-Soviet region.

And now, as we see a different station, the government is, you know, after – going after international media outlets. They decided to bring their own independent media also (in their needs ?), and then you have different reality. You have Russian media being – like Sputnik and others that are being able to operate in Azerbaijan.

So what does it tell us, from maybe U.S. and also those countries' national-security perspective? I mean, what kind of possible outcomes can you provide us when you have that reality, that Western and independent media organizations cannot operate but you have Russian media is being operated in those countries?

WARLICK: Does anyone want to tackle that?

BENNETT: I'm afraid that's beyond our capabilities.

KENT: I don't think we can make political prognostications about that.

WARLICK: Would you like to rephrase your question at all for the panel, maybe?

Q: Yeah. Is there any way to make a national-security case from this attack against press freedom, particularly not only local media and international, independent and Western media organizations in those countries? On one hand you have Russia media organizations are greenlighted, and then you don't have any other media outlets. What does it tell us from a national-security perspective?

WARLICK: (Laughs.) Our panel looks stumped. (Laughs.)

BENNETT: I don't think any of us are really national-security experts. I think we could make a national-security case for the value of a free press around the world. But beyond that, I'm not sure –

ORLOVA: Yes, I agree.

WARLICK: That's actually, you know, one of the questions I was also hoping to ask was, you know, when – at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw, we had the opportunity to meet with the Representative on Freedom of the Media, Harlem Desir. And he mentioned that one of his priorities is reconciling national security and press freedom. But we know that journalists are targeted often on the basis of national-security concerns, sometimes even framed as an internal enemy.

Is there a way or what is the best way to convince countries, both government officials and the public, that a free press is in their national interest?

BENNETT: Well, I mean, I think that we all operate under the assumption and the historical assumption that a free press is the basis, one of the fundamental bases, for a free and democratic society. So if you're hoping to operate a free and democratic society, then you obviously need a free press to do that. So that's where – these two things go together in our mind.

OGNIANOVA: I agree. I think that what we can say is that it is in the national security of any government to allow an independent press to operate freely, because those governments too need free and independent and truthful information. And if all information is controlled and filtered, then the government itself loses its connection with reality and what's going on, not only inside the country but the rest of the world, if the country continues to contract the free space and therefore isolate itself from the rest of the – from the rest of the international community.

WARLICK: All right, next question.

Q: Hi. I'm Jordan from Congressman Josh Gottheimer's office.

I was wondering if you think that tools of international diplomacy – for example, like economic sanctions – might be an effective way of pressuring the Putin regime into alleviating restrictions on the press, or if you think we might have perhaps more success working with local governments to change the culture from the bottom up. Thanks.

WARLICK: Sanctions. Yeah.

ORLOVA: Oh, yes. Actually, sanctions do work, especially financial sanctions. Although the Russian government pretends they do not, it's not true, because we know, for instance, in 2015 the head of VTB Bank, Andrey Kostin, was here running around Capitol Hill begging for financing for his banks, saying, well, I'm – like, I don't have anything to do with the Kremlin agenda. I'm – we're, like, independent. And for the sake of Ukraine, because we operate in Ukraine, just, like, give us some money, something like that.

So sanctions do work, yeah, financial sanctions. I'm not so sure about whether – well, I'm against RT and Sputnik, but it's not so simple, because if RT is prohibited here in the States, then all other media, like American media outlets, will be prohibited, I guess, in Russia. So I'm not sure if it's worth it, because, despite the fact that RT has a huge budget, it's totally corrupted as anything in Russia. So a big part of this budget goes to Margarita Simonyan, her – you know, she lives large and so on, and all that stuff.

So they really don't spend that much, because they're not ideological. They're really – they don't care about – you know, they're not Soviets, you know. At least Soviets have their agenda, real ideology, as crooked as it was. But they did. Those guys, no, they're just – their only ideology is money. So, yeah, I'm not sure. But financial sanctions, yes. Putin – I think that the United States should keep pressing Kremlin with financial sanctions as much as possible.

WARLICK: Yeah, right here. And I think this will be the final question, for the sake of time.

MASSARO: I'm Paul Massaro and I'm the anticorruption advisor at the Helsinki Commission. Really excited to have you all here.

I'm very interested in this nexus between corruption and press freedom. And I was hoping you could make some comments on to what extent are these attacks largely caused by investigations into corrupt dealings among politicians and others? And to what extent is press freedom a necessary or useful aspect to combat corruption in these countries?

KENT: I think corruption is always the hot-button issue. In many of the countries that we deal with, it is possible to write a story in a newspaper website saying even that the president's foreign policy is misguided and so forth. This passes as acceptable speech sometimes. But, boy, you get into certain financial stuff and mentioning certain people and certain banks and so forth, it's a really different story. So I think you're right that it's – it opens the way to lots of problems, the way some other reporting doesn't.

BENNETT: I would completely agree with that. And also, ironically – maybe not ironically – it's also the subject you find that their reporters, the journalists themselves, are most drawn to wanting to do. I think it's partly because it's so present. It's so present. And it seems so wrong to them that they want to do investigative work on it.

OGNIANOVA: Yeah. I mean, corruption is also probably the most dangerous assignment for journalists. If you look at the statistics of killed journalists across most of the Eurasia region, the majority covered corruption. And they were most – most of them were attacked or threatened before the violences against them escalated, because they did some hard-hitting piece on corruption.

It is absolutely amazing that those journalists continue to do the kind of work that they do, because the dangers to them is immense. And we – every year we document the Global Impunity Index. We come up with the documentation to show that it is those journalists who, like lone warriors, go into this environment and tackle this subject. It's mostly – it's mostly corruption and human-rights abuses that get to – to have them targeted.

WARLICK: OK. Well, to wrap up, I'd like to give you the opportunity to say any final words that you'd like to, and maybe even provide us with some concrete recommendations for U.S. government, U.S. Congress, the OSCE, and again, whatever final words you'd like to leave us with.

ORLOVA: Well, again, I would recommend looking as much as possible on Putin and his – on his money, on what – on him, because I'm sure they do, because there is no way Putin can be friends with the United States again. So, yeah. And what else? Yeah, and supporting journalism, like true journalism and spreading it on social media is a good way to reach out to Russian people, I guess.

OGNIANOVA: Well, I would like to see more of this kind of briefings, an event here. Again, thank you to the Commission and to the Press Caucus, Freedom of the Press Caucus, for convening this, because I think that even though the advocacy opportunities with some of those governments that we talked about may be very limited at the moment, it is – it remains very important for the public, including – and leadership in the U.S. to be informed about press-freedom issues in the region and to continue its support for the embattled press corps. They do look to Washington for both moral support and tangible support. They continue to do that. And Washington and the U.S. should not forgo that role.

BENNETT: So I would like to say that it appears to me that we are in a moment that is as dangerous and as threatening for a free press around the world as any we've ever been in our lifetimes, certainly. And, you know, I would not underestimate by any – by any measure the impact that U.S. international media, us, the BBG, has around the world in a number of different ways.

There's the material that we put out there that provides an alternative narrative. There is the fact that not just the immediate media but all the surrounding media is also corrupt and held down. And so it provides, like, a wire service to put actual other material out into the local press. So it gives them some alternative thing to put in there.

We also provide protection for local journalists to do the kind of work that they want to do by partnering with them, giving them an outlet to put things on. And, in fact, I was amazed to discover the number of media people who said simply by having us appear on their programs would have a protective effect for them for a long time.

So we have a huge impact in these regions. And I think that, you know, for us to continue to do our work in as robust a way as possible is certainly one way of combating this, because I don't think any of us here should underestimate what's going on in the world.

KENT: I certainly endorse everything Amanda says. And let me – let me just add one thing on sort of an optimistic note, a little more big picture, and that is that information gets out. The truth gets out. Reporters go through horrible experiences. Sometimes they're attacked, beaten and so forth; self-censorship; huge propaganda operations arrayed against the truth. Yet I don't think we have any doubt about the nature of the regimes in the world. I don't think ultimately the citizens of those regimes have any doubt about what goes on in those countries.

The truth is very, very hard to suppress, even more so now with social networks and the abilities of people to communicate with each other. So this is a terribly difficult job we do. We're under terrible pressures. We try to defend our people as best we can. But we know that ultimately information wants to get out. It wants to be free. And it always ultimately wins.

WARLICK: Thank you very much, and to all of you for your remarks today and for being here.

Thanks too to the House Freedom of the Press Caucus for working with the Helsinki Commission on this event.

And thank you all for being here today. (Applause.)

[Whereupon, at 4:40 p.m., the briefing ended.]