

Alexei Simonov

Stephanie Patton

From working as a woodcutter in Siberia to serving as a member of President Putin's council on human rights, Alexey Simonov seems to have done it all.

On April 2 and 3, Simonov added Miami University's conference, "Russian Journalism Under Fire," to his list of experiences.

Simonov is the president of the Glasnost Defense Foundation, an organization promoting freedom of speech, freedom of press, and the rights of journalists in Russia.

"I think the whole world deserves to have free press," Simonov said. "But more than that, the world society deserves to have its press free."

Simonov was born in Moscow in 1939, and despite the frequent traveling involved in his current occupation, he prefers to be in his native city with his family and his work.

His first job was as a woodcutter in Siberia, and then he spent some time as an interpreter.

In 1964 he graduated from Moscow State University, and he earned a graduate degree in cinematography in 1970.

In the mid '70s and '80s he directed musical and documentary films, and in the early '90s he worked as a dean and professor at the Institute of Cinematography.

Since 1991, he has been the chairman of the board and president of the Glasnost Defense Foundation.

As president, he said, he has watched the conditions of journalists in Russia improve in general over the past 15 years with more job opportunities, but regress in the past five or six years with renewed self-censorship.

Simonov is a member of the Moscow Helsinki Group, which monitors the government's compliance with human rights agreements.

He is the author of many articles on issues relating to the freedom the press, and has won awards for his work and contribution to human rights.

Miami students had the opportunity to experience not only Simonov's broad knowledge base, but also his strong opinions, especially on Russian President Vladimir Putin's control of the media.

Simonov blames Putin and his administration for many of the problems the Glasnost Defense Foundation works to fix.

"I've heard from his own mouth that he will retire in 2008 ... He wants to sit in his garden and grow flowers," Simonov said of Putin. "I am afraid for the flowers."

The Putin administration's control of the media has led to an increase in self-censorship by journalists.

Simonov said journalists don't have to worry about what they write, as long as they know what topics are safe.

Simonov said many news organizations have their own list of terms and names that cannot be used in news coverage and a list of "truths and facts" that should be reported to the public.

As a result of self-censorship and tightly controlled information the Russian public has lost faith in the media.

Simonov said in 1990 the public believed 80 percent of what the media reported. Today they believe less than 15 percent.

He said the general public does not try to understand why the media coverage is poor or that state control is leading to self-censorship. Audiences just stop trusting the media.

“Some of the audience deserves what it has. They are interested in yellow, below the waist press and they get it,” said Simonov.

In 2006 the Glasnost Defense Foundation studied the 86 regions of Russia. to determine how many media agencies were free.

The regions could be voted free, relatively free, relatively unfree or unfree.

“Not a single regional could be named free,” Simonov said.

Each region’s media coverage is different, based on local authorities.

“Competence is one of the main problems in Russia, including the government and the press,” Simonov said. “If a governor is competent he won’t be afraid of criticism.”

Simonov said a good governor will realize criticism can help show different angles and solutions.

“But most people aren’t professionals. They are just friends of Putin,” he said.

He believes Putin and other top-level officials are likewise victims of censorship. He said if these officials do not hear about problems in the country from the media they likely will not hear about them at all because their staff will not want to break the bad news.

Simonov hopes when Putin’s term expires in 2008, Russia’s new administration will have a different outlook on media coverage.

But he still thinks there are problems to be conquered within the media itself.

“The first difficulty to me the is problem of authorities. They don’t have authorities,” Simonov said.

Young Russian journalists need positive examples of reliable and reputable journalists. He believes there are a few but not enough.

He said free press is important, but it needs to be put into context. He believes in free access to and delivery of information, but within the framework of ethical rules of journalism.

Russia’s media still needs a unified set of rules, and positive examples to carry out good journalism.

Although the system will not change soon, some journalists are getting fed up with the system and will unite to recover their own dignity, Simonov said.

Having positive, reliable examples of journalists visible in the public will help, he added.

“There is practically no such important thing as reputation. When this institution (of reputation) returns thing will be better, but who will fix it?”