

Nina Ognianova
Katie Finch

To hear Nina Ognianova tell it, her career in journalism was almost inescapable. She came from a family of writers, including her father and older sister, and was interested in journalism from an early age. What really attracted her to the field though is what she calls an “opportunity to keep learning and an ability to reflect life as it is.” However, for many journalists from her native Bulgaria and neighboring Russia, this reflection does not yield such a rosy picture.

Ognianova was born in Bulgaria in 1976. She attended the American University of Bulgaria, a private liberal arts college in Blagoevgrad where she received her bachelor’s degree in journalism and mass communications.

After her graduation, she worked for an independent radio station before coming to the United States to complete her master’s degree at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, the nation’s first school of journalism founded in 1908. Ognianova choose to leave Bulgaria and come to the United States because of its dedication to a liberal arts education and its commitment to freedom of the press.

While in Missouri, Ognianova was a member of the editorial staff of the International Press Institute’s Magazine, *The Global Journalist*. Next, she was hired by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) to produce articles for the company’s Web site, the International Journalists’ Network. While at IFCJ, she reported on working conditions for journalists in the countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

During her time at IFCJ, she also reported on opportunities for journalists in those countries to participate in investigative reporting training seminars. One such seminar, which Ognianova coordinated herself, was a seminar held in her native Bulgaria that covered the pervasiveness of human drug trafficking in the country and how journalists could expose the problem.

Today, Ognianova works for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in New York City. She was promoted to senior research associate and program coordinator in 2006.

Her work there involves reporting on press freedom in Europe and Central Asia, or lack thereof. When she finds instances of journalists being persecuted for their work, she publishes her findings. She then lobbies members of the European Union (EU) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to pressure the country in question to release the persecuted journalists.

Often, Ognianova says, this is enough to bring about a change. However, if needed, she will step up the pressure by contacting the Washington, D.C., embassy of the country of the persecuted journalist. If this still doesn’t work, she will then form a delegation of board members, mostly prominent American journalists, to meet with the country’s officials to discuss the case.

Ognianova’s job coincides with her mantra. “No journalist should be put in jail for their work,” she says. She finds it appalling that 44 journalists have been killed in Russia during the past 15 years. She finds it even more appalling that their murder cases remain unsolved.

“The Russian government needs to stop creating conditions in which murder is an effective way to deal with media messages they don’t like,” Ognianova says. To do this,

she believes the country needs to investigate to murders and successfully prosecute the suspects and the “masterminds,” as Ognianova refers to them, behind the crimes.

But the buck doesn’t stop there for Ognianova. “Journalists need to care more about the plight of their colleagues,” she says. “Right now, there is not enough solidarity. Journalists need to mobilize and demand justice if the problem is to be fixed.”