

Session 1: Russian Journalism Under Fire

By Emma Barba

Six panelists discussed the dangers and challenges facing journalists in Russia during the first of five sessions of the “Russian Journalism Under Fire” conference on Monday afternoon.

The conference was sponsored by the Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies, The Provost’s Office, the Dean’s Office of the College of Arts & Science, the Miami chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Journalism program.

The session, also entitled “Russian Journalism Under Fire,” asked the visiting panelists, three journalists and three leaders in organizations fighting to protect journalists, to comment on the current climate of danger that exists in Russia.

While all panelists agreed that journalists in Russia are currently facing perilous conditions, they differed on the urgency of the issue and on the true magnitude of the problem.

Thirteen is the most commonly quoted number of journalists killed since Russian President Vladimir Putin took office. However, as the first speaker, Nina Ognianova, pointed out this is a low estimate and most groups identify a much higher number. Ognianova is the program coordinator for the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Ognianova stated that CPJ has been compiling a list of journalists it believes were killed as a direct result of their work since 1992, and that the number they recognized is 44 journalists.

Ognianova stressed the problem of a lack of investigation into these crimes. According to Ognianova, the last time someone was convicted for the murder of a journalist was 1998. Most of these cases, Ognianova explained, are dismissed for a “lack of evidence,” and said that institutional secrecy in Russia causes cases to be purposely under-investigated.

“Those brave journalists who report on those topics have to assess the risks and the numbers willing to do so are thinning,” said Ognianova.

Alexey Simonov, president of the Glasnost Defense Foundation in Russia, saw the problem as even greater than what Ognianova reported.

“We consider the person to be executed in the course of his duty unless otherwise is proved,” said Simonov.

This standard has led the Glasnost Defense Foundation to report the work related deaths of 211 journalists since 1992, a number nearly five times that reported by CPJ.

Director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES), Oleg Panfilov, added that other types of abuses to journalists shouldn’t be overlooked.

“Journalism is a dangerous profession by definition,” said Panfilov.

While journalism may not be perceived as a dangerous profession in the United States, its dangers seem to be more obvious in Russia.

Panfilov claimed that 11 journalists have disappeared since 1994, approximately 50 criminal cases are brought against journalists each year and that seven journalists have been imprisoned since 2005, two of who remain in prison. He also claimed that there are between 60 and 80 attacks on journalists per year in Russia.

The comments of Ognianova, Simonov and Panfilov paint a grim picture of journalism in Russia, highlighting the constant risks of the profession. However, the

journalists on the panel seemed to take a less alarmist view of the trend of violence against journalists in Russia.

“Journalists face dangers, challenges and risks in every society,” said Igor Zevelev, Washington Bureau Chief of RIA Novosti, Russian News and Information Agency.

According to Zevelev, risks exist everywhere, although the risks of journalism in Russia are much different and many would argue much higher.

The dangers arise from three key issues, said Zevelev: the government’s attempt to control the media, the power of money and from a lack of ethics and professionalism among some members the journalism community in Russia.

Especially disturbing to Zevelev is the problem of journalists accepting money to publish articles favorable of those willing to bribe. “It’s corruption, let’s name it,” he said.

Andrei A. Zolotov Jr., editor of *Russia Profile*, was also quick to address the responsibilities of journalists. Zolotov acknowledged the dangers to journalists but asserted that it is a matter of choice.

“We are self-elected representatives of the people,” said Zolotov.

Zolotov believes the murder of journalists is used as an attention grabber and that Putin is not entirely to blame. Zolotov, sees it as a matter of choice and calculated risk, seemingly quite willing to accept the risks.

The conference’s final guest, Fred Weir of the *Christian Science Monitor*, offered a slightly different perspective on practicing journalism in Russia as a Canadian-born foreign correspondent. Weir, who has lived and worked in Russia for the past 20 years, operates within a different framework than his Russian colleagues.

Weir sees his position as a foreign correspondent as privileged, as he lives and works free of threats and fear. However, he is not oblivious to the problem.

“It seems to me that there is a changing climate in which Russian journalists do fear their state,” said Weir.

He also pointed to the trend of limited access to information and increasing prevalence of obstacles created by the government.