

Session 2: A History of Struggle

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For years, Russian journalists have struggled to gain the freedom of speech journalists in America take for granted. Alexey Simonov, president of the Glasnost Defense Fund, and Andrei Zolotov Jr., editor of *Russia Profile* magazine, spoke about the history and the challenges Russian journalists have faced in the past.

Both men spoke at the Marcum Center at Miami University as part of the *Russian Journalism Under Fire* conference at Miami. The Simonov and Zolotov focused on how exactly Russia has evolved over the last 20 years in terms of how journalists work in the Communist country.

In the Stalin years, Russia's newspapers were used strictly as a propaganda tool by the government.

"In every classroom at the university where I taught, there was a poster on the wall with a quote from Stalin," Zolotov said.

Both men talked about the drastic changes that occurred in the country and the field of journalism, from the Gorbachev years all the way up to the beginning of Putin's reign, which began in 1999.

Journalists in Russia had a "golden age" during the Gorbachev years.

"It was an ideal time for journalists," Zolotov said. "It was you pushing the boundary of what was allowed."

However, journalistic freedoms started to contract with the election of Boris Yeltsin and have been further diminished since 1999 when Vladimir Putin came into power.

"The less you reached the greater your chance for success was," Zolotov said about the Putin era.

During this time, the owners of Russian newspapers who had bought them during Russia's "golden years" quickly began to sell them. The same newspapers which had once brought the owners influence and respect in the country now brought head aches and other little annoyances which weren't worth the hassle anymore.

"The best samples of journalism were written in the Soviet era," Simonov said.

Simonov went on to discuss how journalists are protected from what they say in their articles from the government.

There is right now just one law which protects the media's rights, although the government is always trying to toy with it.

"The printed press is much more protected than electronic media," he said. "It's more protected because of the way the law is set up."

Every year, the law which protects writers and their articles is discussed on Dec. 25.

The law is not very descriptive and mainly describes small freedoms which journalists even in Russia are allowed to have. Specifically it talks about what the journalists can and cannot cover or write about.

The group that discusses the law is made up of journalists and scholars; the group meets usually at a university to talk about what parts of the law are still in effect and which parts are no longer followed by the government.

Another task they must deal with is making sure that certain amendments that the government tries to put through on the law don't happen.

"Our job is to protect the law from the amendments," Simonov said. "In the 15 years the law has been in effect we've only allowed three to four amendments and that's not bad at all."

According to Simonov and Zolotov, freedom of speech will never fully occur in Russia. Journalists will always have to deal with the leaders of Russia and learn how to handle the pressures that come with covering an emerging democratic regime.

"Freedom of speech in Russia is like the horizon," Simonov said. "You won't ever be able to reach it."