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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation in special consultative status) about press freedom in RUSSIA**

**Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation**

The installation of a new president at the head of the Russian Federation has not brought any change in the press freedom situation. The authorities continue to use red-tape to prevent the independent media from doing their work. Journalists often fall victim to the prevailing climate of violence, with the perpetrators rarely being punished. The situation is especially disturbing in the Russian Caucasus.

Magomed Yevloyev, the owner of the news website *Ingushetiya.ru* (the only opposition news media in Ingushetia, a Russian republic in the North Caucasus), was shot in the head on 31 August shortly after being detained by interior ministry officials who were waiting for him as he disembarked from a plane in the capital, Magas. He died a few hours later in hospital. The authorities claim that it was accident, but everything suggests that he was eliminated because of his work as a journalist. The website was the only news outlet to publish reports about the kidnappings and executions of civilians in the region, and the Ingush authorities had, with Kremlin backing, been targeting it for nearly a year. Ingush ISPs had been ordered to block access to the site since April because of its alleged “extremism.” The site’s editor, Roza Malsagova, fled the country with her three children and sought refugee in France a few weeks before Yevloyev’s murder.

Press freedom violations are common in the Caucasus, and are often of a violent nature. Three *Ren TV* journalists and a member of the human rights group Memorial were kidnapped by members of the Ingush security forces in November 2007. They were stripped of their clothes and equipment, beaten and subjected to a simulated execution before being released. Two journalists who specialised in the region were murdered within the space of two days in March. Even if their murders were not directly linked to their journalistic activities, they are evidence of the climate of violence and impunity in the Caucasus.

The homes of several journalists working for *Chernovik*, an independent weekly based in Dagestan, were searched at the end of August, a few weeks after its editor was charged with “inciting hatred” and “attacking human dignity” because of an article quoting one of the leaders of the boyeviki (separatist rebels). A journalist working for a Muslim TV station was gunned down a few days later for still unclear reasons. At the same time, a journalist was badly beaten by two unidentified assailants in the neighbouring republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, apparently in connection with his work.

The Russia authorities often try to discredit opposition currents by branding them as extremist. As most TV stations are solidly behind the Kremlin, the opposition has little access to television. This was especially noticeable during the March 2008 presidential election campaign.

Natalia Morar, a young Moldovan graduate from a leading Moscow university who had been living in Russia for more than six years and who was working as a journalist for the Moscow-based *New Times* newspaper, was denied entry to Russia on her return from a trip to Israel on 16 December 2007, a week after writing an article entitled “The Kremlin slush fund” about financial irregularities in the parliamentary elections. Since then, she has been branded as a “danger for Russian security” and, despite being married to a Russian, is still barred from entering the country. Her case is indicative of the methods employed by the authorities to obstruct journalists and restrict free expression.

The authorities use a range of bureaucratic pretexts to silence critics. Many news media had their equipment seized because of alleged violations (including use of pirated software). The Moscow-based *Novaya Gazeta* announced on 12 November 2007 that it was closing its bureau in the southern city of Samara after its sole remaining computer was confiscated. The daily newspaper *Nezavissimaya Gazeta* was ordered to vacate the offices it was renting from the Moscow city hall in June, a few days after criticising a speech by the mayor.

Reporters Without Borders voiced concern during the past year about proposed amendments to the media law and the law on extremism that would have increased the threats to press freedom in Russia. The amendments have been shelved for the time being but vigilance is required as they could be presented again.

The authorities closed the investigation into Anna Politkovskaya’s murder although no one was ever named as the mastermind. Several suspects were released during the investigation, which was marked by a series of contradictory statements by those in charge, creating a climate of confusion around the case.

## **1. Online freedom**

Like other news media, news websites are often the target of accusations of extremism designed to hamper or completely block their operations.

## **2. Government steps to improve the situation**

Proposed amendments to the media law and the law on extremism were rejected.

### 3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)


The authorities did not reply to any letter from Reporters Without Borders.

### 4. Recommendations

- Investigate Magomed Yevloyev's death properly. All the circumstances suggest it was not an accident.
- Continue the investigation into Anna Politkovskaya's murder with the aim of identifying the masterminds.
- Guarantee the safety of journalists, especially in the Caucasus.
- Stop prosecuting and closing news media for defamation. Self-regulation is the most effective way to guarantee the quality of media content.
- Allow the opposition access to the news media.

*The data in this report has been gathered and verified by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in a score of countries.*

*In some countries, a journalist can be imprisoned for several years just for a word or a photo someone does not like. Reporters Without Borders, founded in 1985, works daily to support press freedom because imprisoning or killing a journalist removes a key witness and threatens the right of all of us to be kept informed of the news.*

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