

## **Russian Press Freedom and the Western Media Hoax**

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**By Jon Hellevig**

Freedom House, a US government-funded pseudo-NGO, just issued its annual «Freedom of the Press Index» for 2012. As usually happens, Russia again received a dismal assessment of the freedom of its press, being ranked a lowly 172 of 192 countries. Russia shared a spot with Zimbabwe and barely edged out places like Ethiopia, Gambia and Congo, but fell behind such beacons of liberty as Afghanistan, Sudan, the USA, and Brunei.

This index purports to represent the results of an annual survey of media independence assessing the degree of print, broadcast, and internet freedoms throughout the world. In fact, it is put together in an arbitrary fashion based on political motivations, and where Russia is concerned, the index serves as a tool in the anti-Russian propaganda campaign orchestrated by the USA. Let's take a closer look at the factors behind Russia's rating. The detailed report for 2011 (to which the 2012 index refers) has not yet been published; therefore we will refer to the details from the 2010 report. (It's interesting to note that although Freedom House has not yet done detailed reports for 2011, it has none the less already assigned each country a ranking in the index. What better evidence to show that the rankings are imaginary and the reports are done post factum merely to justify the imaginary rankings!)

Anybody who knows Russian and has access to the country's television, radio, print press, and internet will be easily convinced as to how nonsensical it is to assign Russia such a rank in a press freedom index. The print press and the internet are as competitive and pluralistic as in any country considered to have a free press. The only aspect of media that could potentially merit a negative assessment is the dominant position of the state in television. But this does not mean that there is a lack of candid public discussion. To my mind the situation resembles that in many other countries; one could mention, for instance, the concentrated ownership of television networks in the USA.

One can only conclude that there is something fundamentally wrong with these well-publicized press freedom ratings. The problem starts with the rating agency itself. Although Freedom House poses as a non-governmental organization, it is in fact an extended arm of the US Government. This pseudo-NGO receives at least two-thirds of its funding directly from the state budget, and most of its leadership positions are occupied by former career officials from the U.S. Government who have been directly involved with its foreign policy and intelligence services.

It is remarkable that Freedom House does not bother with the actual content of Russian media coverage; rather, they try to ground the bad rap given to Russia with other – at times quite fantastic – arguments. They completely ignore the real evidence at hand (the actual stories in the print press and television) in favor of their biased, and at times imaginary, circumstantial evidence. In reality, if Freedom House based their judgment on actual stories in the Russian press, they would have a hard time finding something amiss with Russia's press freedom.

Instead, Freedom House takes aim at the political structures (essentially blaming Russians for voting the wrong way) and social situation in Russia.

Along these lines, Freedom House has gone to great lengths to concoct a report purporting to show that Russian media freedom «remained extremely poor in 2010» (Freedom of the Press 2011 survey, which refers to conditions in 2010). The Russian government is, according to the report, «relying on alternatively crude and sophisticated media management to distract the public from widespread government corruption, domestic terror attacks, and the country's economic crisis.» All of these claims are demonstrably wrong.

«Distract the public from corruption.» State officials – starting with the president and prime minister – frequently address the problem of corruption in public, which would be evident to Freedom House, too, if they would bother to actually read the papers and watch TV.

«Distract from domestic terror attacks.» It is a mystery why Freedom House wants to show its total disconnection from observed reality by putting forth this ridiculous claim. It is a simple fact that every time a terror attack has occurred, it has been headline news in all Russian media, both print and broadcast.

«And the country's economic crisis.» The Russian government, they tell us, prevents the press from discussing its «economic crisis.» What can you say to this kind of argument? How can you prevent discussion of an economic crisis which does not exist in the first place? Is the government supposed to invent an economic crisis in order to appease Freedom House? The fact is that Russia started to recover from the global financial crisis in late 2009, and in 2010 – the year of the survey – industrial production in Russia grew by over 8% and GDP by 4%, and has continued to grow at a rate of 4% since.

Believe it or not, it is by these criteria that Freedom House condemns Russia's press freedom!

A curious aspect of all this is the fact that the Russian press itself gives wide publicity to Freedom House's press freedom rankings each year, prominently publishing the reports as headline news. This supposedly totally repressed media is the first one to report on its own repression!

Living up to its Orwellian name, Freedom House argues thus: «Most state and private media engaged in blatant propaganda that glorified the country's national leaders and fostered an image of political pluralism» – claiming that President Dmitry Medvedev was leading the process of Russian modernization while Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was working to maintain stability» This naïve claim is not substantiated by reference to any kind of evidence.

Further on, we read in this report written in the earnest, halting style of a high school essay: «Officials used the country's politicized and corrupt court system to harass and prosecute the few remaining independent journalists who dared to criticize widespread abuses committed by authorities.» Freedom House, of course, has its own definition of «independent journalists»: so-called opposition journalists, and more precisely, those that work on their side of the propaganda battle.

The report reaches its sick culmination with the lamentation that the US broadcasters Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America – which specialize in harassing the Russian population with their propaganda – have been prevented from doing their work by the government having «pressured» FM radio stations to stop rebroadcasting them.

In the 2012 index, Russia did achieve a minor victory: it was upgraded from 2011 by one notch, leaping from 173rd to 172nd place. (I can imagine the euphoria with which this news was

greeted by the Russian public.) The motivation for this exceedingly generous gesture was that «in Russia, new media made some progress in mitigating the government's near-complete grip on major broadcast outlets.» By «new media» they mean the internet, which in Russia has been totally free in every aspect since it started; indeed, much more free than the US internet. So even this gesture only confirms the totally arbitrary nature of this «index.»

What it boils down to is that Freedom House and its masters are aggravated by the fact that Mr. Putin still holds power in Russia. As long as he does, it's a fair bet they will keep publishing these and other nonsensical freedom ratings. And when Putin finally does leave office, we can expect the ranking to skyrocket, because «Twitter and Facebook have now consolidated their positions in the Russian regions.»

**Reporters Without Borders** (RWB) also assigns Russia a dismal place in their «Press Freedom Barometer.» In the latest issue for 2012, Russia was downgraded by two notches from 140th to 142nd place among 178 countries surveyed. Interestingly RBW, like Freedom House, chooses totally to ignore the actual media coverage and instead, again like Freedom House, condemns Russia to the lowest circle of media hell by reference to the same kind of imaginary circumstantial evidence. RWB also bases its judgments of Russia's press freedom on the standards set by their very own propaganda. For some reason RWB missed out on all the interesting developments in the blogosphere that Freedom House was so euphoric about as to raise the ranking to the level of Zimbabwe.

RWB caps its Russia report<sup>1</sup> with this startling conclusion:

«The Russian state is characterized by a lack of political pluralism and widespread corruption. In a country where respect for human rights is far from given, state control of the broadcast media, arbitrary use of an anti-extremism law and, above all, impunity for acts of violence against journalists, especially in the North Caucasus, are the main media freedom violations.»

This is a compilation of ignorance, lies and utter prejudice against Russia. Imagine these reporters without conscience claiming that Russia is a state «where respect for human rights is far from given.»

«Lack of political pluralism» – by this they mean that Putin is too popular for their liking.

«Corruption.» Let us note that Russian journalists with their media owners are notoriously not free from this vice. Corruption in the Russian press has been rampant since long before Putin took over.

«Arbitrary use of anti-extremism law.» Again there are no facts, not even a solid record of insinuations of behavior on the side of the authorities.

«Impunity for acts of violence against journalists.» By this argument Reporters Without Conscience wants us to believe that the government would be running a system of repression directed against journalists, leaving them as free prey for their foes, with the further implication that the government is the biggest foe. To back up this claim RBW reports that «there were at least 58 physical attacks on journalists in 2010,» as if no one other than journalists can be

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.rsf.org/report-russia,131.html>

subjected to violence. Then there follow references to killed journalists. Five journalists are reported to have been killed in 2009, and in 2010, the year of the report, one killing is reported, and for good measure one more is reported from the following year 2011. As the figure for 2010, one murder, was not convincing enough, RBW reminds us that in total 26 journalists have been killed since 2000 (the magic year when Putin became president; yet even more journalists were killed under Yeltsin's presidency than under Putin's, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists). It should be noted that, although both Freedom House and RBW regard the statistics on murdered journalists as the most incriminating evidence against Russian press freedom, the ranking did not rise at all with the dramatic decrease of murders in 2010 and 2011 (when only one journalist was murdered per year among thousands of ordinary citizens, whose lives are apparently of meager propagandistic value). We will return to these statistics later, but I should mention that RBW is in any case less conservative in their estimations than most of their peers in the propaganda business. The difference lies in RBW's references to killings that are connected with the work of the journalists, whereas most others want to refer to far bigger figures involving all killings without considering the link to work. Another thing: it is by no means clear that the cases described as work-related really are such. And more importantly yet, if the cases are work-related, it still does not imply that they are an aspect of state repression, which is what RBW ultimately wants to convince us of. However, they refrain from actually claiming that any of the murders would be the result of state repression. This is because there is no evidence whatsoever for such an assertion. And instead they work on a higher level of propaganda – after all, who would know better than the members of Reporters Without Borders how to play that game? – where headlines, insinuations, and an artful manipulation of facts are bundled together into one big package to deliver the intended effect.

So without any real evidence (as there cannot be any evidence of what does not exist), these reporters paint a lurid picture of Putin and his government keeping the press in a state of terror by violence and murder.

The problem with this approach of trying to prove the argument of repression by reference to killings of journalists is that journalists are not the only people that have been murdered in Russia. In fact, as a result of the years of criminal anarchy in the 1990's (the «romantic years of democracy,» as these same Western journalists think), the murder statistics for Russia are dire. Following a total collapse of the law enforcement organs and the judiciary in 1990's Russia, killers were free to strike with impunity. During these years the murder rate went through the roof, and Russia became one of the worst countries in the world in this respect.

In 2002, when Putin had not yet had a chance to consolidate power and implement his policies, there were 44,252 murders, or 30.2 murders per 100 thousand residents. By 2011, the number of murders had dramatically fallen to 16.4 thousand murders, or 11.5 per 100 thousand. The figures are still very high in comparison with some other countries but no longer match the highest global levels. Here are the statistics for some other countries: Colombia 61.1 per 100 thousand; South Africa 39.5; Brazil 30.8; Mexico 11; USA 5.6; UK 2.6; global average 9.61 (figures for 2004-2006)<sup>2</sup>. Here it needs to be kept in mind that in Russia there are big differences between the European territories, where the murder statistics are already well below the global average (and comparable to the US), and the more lawless southern regions. (One should bear in mind

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.rusfact.my1.ru/news/drugaja\\_strana\\_rossija\\_11\\_let\\_spustja\\_chast\\_1/2011-03-04-1694](http://www.rusfact.my1.ru/news/drugaja_strana_rossija_11_let_spustja_chast_1/2011-03-04-1694)

that in recent years a large share of journalist killings took place in southern republics like Dagestan.)

It is a sad fact, but only natural, that when so many people are killed in Russia, it is inevitable that journalists will be among them. Even though Reporters Without Borders and their peers might want to look at journalists as a different kind of human being, they are still human, all too human, leading normal lives like many others. And they get killed for the same reasons as ordinary people: accidents, violent crime, and entanglements in private and work life. Due to the specifics of the profession journalists are also more likely to be killed in covering armed conflicts and dangerous territories (hence deaths in crossfire and terrorist attacks).

It should be noted that in other countries with high per capita murder rates there is, by extension, also a high rate of murders of journalists. Thus, for example, in Mexico 80 journalists were killed in the past decade<sup>3</sup>. I remind you that Reporters Without Borders reported 26 killings in Russia since 2000. Nevertheless, no one has yet insinuated that the Mexican presidents or governments should take the blame. On the contrary, RWB pointedly states that involvement of state authorities does not imply a government conspiracy explaining all the intricate deep rooted problems involved like this: «Blame must also be shared by authorities who are either complicit or negligent. Human rights violations by the police and army and the corrupt practices of politicians, who are often implicated in drug trafficking, all help to block investigations into crimes of violence against news media and journalists.» We also believe that the central government of Mexico is not to blame. And much less the central government of Russia for the situation in its country, which furthermore is clearly improving year by year.

Let's now take a closer look at the statistics on killings of journalists in Russia. For reference I refer to a Wikipedia article (List of journalists killed in Russia, as it stands at the moment of my writing). The Wikipedia article further refers to investigation by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Committee to Protect Journalist (CPJ) and others.

According to the presented data, 3 to 12 journalists were murdered annually between 1993 and 2009 (with exceptions of years 1995, 2000, and 2002, when there were 16, 15 and 20 murders, respectively). The site offers a separate count which also includes deaths of journalists in crossfires during armed conflicts and in terrorist attacks, but these figures are clearly not relevant for our subject, that is, the analysis of whether a supposedly repressive government stands behind the killing of journalists.

Next we may compare the number of murdered journalists with that of ordinary citizens. To do so, we need to know how many journalists there are in Russia. According to one source at hand there were some 150 thousand journalists working in the field of the *print* press<sup>4</sup>. To this number we have to add the journalists from television, and also at least the camera crew has to be included, because they are also included in the corresponding figures on reported killings of journalists. We may thus reasonably posit that there are about 200,000 journalists in Russia.

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<sup>3</sup><http://knightcenter.utexas.edu/blog/forum-will-remember-80-journalists-killed-mexico-over-past-decade> and <http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2011/08/more-journalists-killed-mexico-afghanistan/40797/>

<sup>4</sup> Article in Russian Wikipedia “Журналист”

In the below table we have juxtaposed the number of murdered journalists with the number of murders overall per 100,000 people:

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>General Population</b>	30.4	28.8	27.2	24.8	20.2	17.8	16.7	15.5	13.1	11.5
<b>Journalists</b>	10	5.5	5	2	6.5	1.5	2.5	3	1	1

We notice a striking discrepancy here. The relative numbers of murdered journalists are only a fraction of that of murdered ordinary people. If anything, the statistics indicate that the lives of journalists are better protected in Russia than those of ordinary people.

I foresee further counterarguments. The reporters will probably want to claim that the reasons for which journalists are killed are very different from those for which ordinary people are killed. But the whole point is that they are not. Of relevance for the contrary argument would be a high number of cases if a journalist were killed for work-related reasons. But here we should immediately bear in mind that non-journalists too can be killed for work-related reasons. So, in and of itself, it is not such an extraordinary occurrence. The final measure would then be to analyze how many journalists are killed for political reasons – which really is the ultimate lie that Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House and other such propaganda organizations want to spread. In fact, this last category of reasons should be yet further fine-tuned into an analysis of what kind of political reason there supposedly was; that is, who was the alleged foe.

The cases presented in the Wikipedia article show no traces of the killed journalist having been a foe of a supposedly repressive Russian government or having been in the possession of supposedly damaging material implicating the central government. Of all these cases only one has even been presented as such. This is the case of Anna Politkovskaya. But in her unfortunate case we have all the signs of her being a sacrificial victim of some of the dark forces that have an interest in her murder as a means of heating up the anti-Putin propaganda. An interesting and macabre fact here is that – to make the most of it – the date of the murder was even chosen to coincide with Vladimir Putin's birthday. Prior to her murder Politkovskaya had been promoted by international anti-Russian propaganda as a courageous independent journalist who as a lonely voice dared to stand up against the «Putin regime.» Certainly she dared to do it – as did many others. But one should also analyze what she in fact wrote. She produced nothing in terms of investigative journalism that could have potentially damaged the government. Instead she wrote a series of lampoons directed against Putin, the most famous of them being her Putin's Russia, where, in naive fashion, she incriminated Putin for all the accumulated social problems of Russia although Putin had by then only been a few years at the helm. For details, I refer to my article

Anna Politkovskaya – Twilight of an Idol<sup>5</sup>. The reader can judge for herself what kind of challenge such writings could feasibly present to the government. Her role was not that of an investigative journalist exposing wrongdoings but rather of a rallying point for Western anti-Putin propaganda, which was actively spreading the narrative that Russia was a totalitarian system without any free press, in the Stalinist mold. This was going on while everybody in Russia had full access to information on all the social problems she purportedly exposed. Her writings were not taken seriously in Russia because they contained nothing new, and nobody could take seriously her approach of blaming Putin for all the problems they had lived with for the past 20 years. Clearly then, a dead Politkovskaya was of most value for Western propaganda purposes.

We may conclude that unfortunately a number of journalists and media workers have been killed in Russia – although in relative terms, it is still much safer to be a Russian journalist than an average Russian citizen. There is no indication that any of the murders could be connected with anything that would even hint at a system of persecution conducted by the government. The killed journalists are victims, like ordinary people, of the more dangerous environment of Russia in general, and especially that of the North Caucasus regions – a country that is only now recovering from the legacy of the criminal anarchy of the 1990's. We have seen that the situation has markedly improved during the time Putin has served as President and Prime Minister, and that today's Russia offers a much safer environment for the population at large and journalists in particular. It is therefore very important that Putin was reelected as President in order to further strengthen this movement towards a normalization of living conditions in Russia and further increased freedom of the press.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.hellevig.net/Anna%20Politkovskaya%20-%20Twilight%20of%20an%20Idol.pdf>