



Living without Fear

ELENA KOSTYUCHENKO IN PROFILE

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

At the height of the Kremlin's vehement denials about the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine, Elena Kostyuchenko, a journalist for Russia's independent investigative newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, interviewed a badly injured Russian conscript from the burn unit in Donetsk's Central Regional Hospital. It was March 2015, and the soldier, a 20-year-old tank operator from the Russian fifth tank brigade in Ulan-Ude, told Kostyuchenko that he had been enlisted by the Russian army to take part in a secret tank battalion in Ukraine the previous fall. A few months later, he caught fire during a tank battle against Ukrainian forces.

The interview, which proved Russia's military involvement in Ukraine, was an international sensation. The Russian government made no official response to the story, but Kostyuchenko's editor worried for her safety. He ordered her to leave the country until the story blew over. Kostyuchenko went to Spain, but she didn't enjoy it.

"I found that there's a huge difference between emergency leave and vacation," she told Miriam Elder, BuzzFeed News's foreign and national security editor, who interviewed her for a Harriman Institute event. "I supposed that I would rest,

eat some paella, walk along the seashore, but it wasn't like that," Kostyuchenko said. Instead, she spent her days writing emails to her boss, pleading with him to come back.

Kostyuchenko, the Harriman Institute's 2018 Paul Klebnikov Russian Civil Society Fellow, is 30 years old. She has been working for *Novaya Gazeta* since 2005. When she started there as a 16-year-old intern she was the youngest journalist ever to join the newspaper. She has since earned a reputation as one of the paper's boldest reporters, covering topics ranging from government corruption to real estate crime; the 2011 massacre in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan; drug addiction; the invasion of Crimea; and the government-sponsored abductions of gay people in Chechnya.

After her interview with Elder, Kostyuchenko, a petite woman with ombré green hair and striking bluish-green eyes, met me at the Institute. In Russia, she's known not only for her courageous journalism, but also for the bold LGBTQ activism she's been engaged in since she attended her first Moscow pride parade in 2011—the parade, broken up by antigay activists within seconds, ended with a blow to Kostyuchenko's head and resulted in temporary hearing damage.



Elena Kostyuchenko in
her office at *Novaya Gazeta*.
Photo by Yulia Balashova.



Elena Kostyuchenko (*far right*) at a protest on Moscow's Arbat Street. Photo by Yulia Balashova.

But she told me she didn't regret a thing. Nor did the incident stop her from going full speed ahead with her activism. Since then she's attended every parade and protest she could, famously staging a kiss-in—also broken up by antigay violence—in response to the passage of Russia's "gay propaganda" law in 2013.

I wondered, did she ever get scared?

Sitting across from me at a round, wooden table, Kostyuchenko looked into the distance and told me that she thought she lacked the biological response to fear. "I've talked to lots of people and asked them to describe what they feel when they [experience] fear and, it's very far from what I feel," she said, in a drawling Russian accent.

Kostyuchenko was raised by a single mother—a prominent chemist impoverished by the Soviet collapse—in the small Golden Ring city of Yaroslavl, about four hours north of Moscow. Though it is known for its onion-domed churches and ornate historic architecture, there was nothing idyllic about the Yaroslavl of Kostyuchenko's childhood. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Yaroslavl was overtaken by violence, following the path of many Russian cities.

Kostyuchenko felt this keenly throughout her childhood. When she was about 10, she told me, she saw an argument

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break out between some men on the street. One of the men took out a gun, and Kostyuchenko, who was on her way home from school, ran inside a building to hide. She heard a series of gunshots. After things calmed down, she emerged. There was a body lying in a pool of blood.

I suggested that she must have been terrified, but Kostyuchenko only laughed.

She just went home and forgot about it. "Totally!" she told me. "Because . . . things happen. We survived. It's not like you have some energy for being emotional."

Growing up, Kostyuchenko rarely saw her mother, who worked night and day to support Kostyuchenko and her adopted sister. To help out, Kostyuchenko started working odd jobs from the age of nine—cleaning floors, trimming hedges, and whatever other menial tasks she could get paid for. In her free time she hung around with a group of "street kids"—children who either didn't have parents or whose parents were never home. They roamed Yaroslavl looking for discarded bottles to redeem and having adventures; inventing games like "girls-bastards, or detectives, or monster fighters."

When she wasn't on the streets, Kostyuchenko read everything she could get her hands on. As a young teen, she found out that her school offered a journalism class run by *Severnaya Krai* (Northern Region), the local paper, and that interns were paid for published articles. She signed up right away—it beat cleaning floors—and found herself enjoying the work.

Back then, it didn't faze Kostyuchenko that local authorities controlled the paper and blatantly censored its reporters. "It was my first time in journalism," she told me. "And I didn't really know that things could be different."

During her second year at *Severnaya Krai*, Kostyuchenko bought an issue of *Novaya Gazeta*—a newspaper she'd never heard of. She sat on a park bench and read the entire paper from cover to cover. One article, an exposé by Anna Politkovskaya about Chechen children during the Second Chechen War, really struck her. So much so that Kostyuchenko reread it multiple times.

“I was shocked,” she told me. “I thought I knew things about my country, I thought I knew things about journalism, and it turned out I didn’t know anything.”

The experience so impressed Kostyuchenko that she vowed to find a way to get to Moscow and work for the paper. At the time, she had plans to enroll in the philology department of the local university. She marched home, laid the paper in front of her mother, and said, “Mom, I’ve changed my mind! I’m moving to Moscow and joining *Novaya Gazeta*.”

Kostyuchenko applied to the journalism department at Moscow State University (MGU)—the most prestigious university in the country—and, to her surprise, was accepted. In the fall of 2004, she packed her bags and moved into the dormitories at MGU. Several months later, once she’d settled down and earned enough money at a part-time job to buy a cell phone and a computer, she went to the *Novaya Gazeta* office and asked them to take her on as an intern. They agreed, and Kostyuchenko began reporting local stories alongside her studies at MGU. A year later, after publishing an exposé on homeless children in Moscow during the frigid winter of 2006, and exposing a pedophile who preyed on them, she was offered a staff position. Kostyuchenko was only 17 years old.

During her first few months as a staff writer on the paper, Kostyuchenko worked down the hall from her idol, the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya. “She was an incredible, beautiful woman,” said Kostyuchenko, recalling how Politkovskaya had worked tirelessly every day, without so much as breaking for a cup of tea or a cigarette. Meanwhile, long lines formed outside Politkovskaya’s office—people waiting to tell her their stories.

The young Kostyuchenko felt a sense of awe in Politkovskaya’s presence, so much so that she shied away from approaching her. “I was always dreaming that I would become a cool journalist and I would tell her how important she was for me, and how she changed my life,” she said.

Sadly, Kostyuchenko never got the chance. In October 2006, about six months after Kostyuchenko joined *Novaya Gazeta*, Politkovskaya was murdered in the lobby of her apartment building. It was a Saturday, and Kostyuchenko was just wrapping up at the office for the week. When she first heard about it, she went into shock, then locked herself in the bathroom and cried.

“From then on,” she told me, “I vowed that if someone was important to me, I would thank them immediately.”

When I asked if Politkovskaya’s death had changed her perspective on being a journalist, Kostyuchenko looked at me incredulously. “Not at all,” she said. “If you work for *Novaya Gazeta*, you should know how to cope with such things. I think of it as a professional risk. There are some jobs like firemen, like policemen, that are dangerous, but people go out and do them. And, yeah, I would prefer to work in a safer space, but it’s not going to happen during my lifetime.” ■

