



# INVESTIGATING RUSSIA'S ELITE

## Maria Zholobova in Profile

BY MASHA UDENSIVA-BRENNER

**O**n a hot, sunny morning in late April, Maria Zholobova, a Moscow-based investigative journalist on her first trip to the United States, walks into the cavernous halls of the New York County District Attorney's Office in lower Manhattan. Waiting to go through the metal detector, she looks up at the cylindrical lamps suspended from a golden sun decorating the white, vaulted ceilings, takes a breath, and says "*klassno*" (awesome).

Upstairs in the waiting room at the Human Trafficking Response Unit

(HTRU), which prosecutes sex and labor trafficking crimes and provides support for victims, Zholobova marvels at the pleasant atmosphere—the children's play area, the calming tree painting mounted above the soft beige chairs. She's there to meet with the HTRU chief—a friendly blond woman named Carolina Holderness—for an information session about the unit; it's part of a series of meetings and classes set up for her by the Harriman Institute during her residency as the 2019 Paul Klebnikov Russian Civil Society Fellow. The fellowship honors the memory of

investigative journalist Paul Klebnikov by bringing promising Russian journalists to New York for three weeks and introduces them to various experts and media professionals.

Founded by Klebnikov's widow, Musa, shortly after his death, the fellowship continues Klebnikov's efforts to support the creation of a free and independent Russian press and to help Russian journalists expand their professional networks in the U.S., learn Western journalistic techniques, and publish in Western publications. Musa Klebnikov hopes it will produce "a whole cadre of Russian journalists who think more of themselves because they have been abroad."

Holderness walks Zholobova down the wide hallway to her spacious, sunny office and explains that the center's pleasant atmosphere is intentional, designed to avoid the cold, bureaucratic feel of government offices so as not to "retraumatize" trafficking victims. Zholobova is impressed. Such details would never occur to the Russian government, which routinely prosecutes trafficking victims rather than helping them.

*Opposite page:* Maria Zholobova hosted TV Rain’s weekly segment, *Fake News*, where she uncovered inaccuracies in the Russian media. Photo courtesy of TV Rain.

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Throughout the meeting, which takes place under a large photograph of the Brooklyn Bridge, Zholobova leans forward, elbows planted on the round, cherrywood table in Holderness’s office, and asks questions: “Do you have enough financial support from your government?” “How do you use data in your work?” “Have you ever been an anonymous source for journalists?”

Zholobova, who is 30, has been working for various Russian news outlets for almost a decade. In August 2018, she moved from a job at Russia’s independent TV Rain to Proekt, a new U.S.-registered Russian media start-up modeled loosely on the U.S. investigative nonprofit ProPublica. In her relatively brief career, she’s investigated everything from Russia’s infrastructural problems to its criminal networks, President Vladimir Putin’s inner circles, and the hidden assets of public officials. When Holderness learns that Zholobova’s story about an alleged St. Petersburg mobster with ties to Putin has landed the young journalist in the middle of a criminal slander investigation, she looks concerned. Zholobova shrugs and laughs it off. “Don’t worry,” she says. “Nothing happened—just a case in Russia.”

Working as an investigative journalist in Russia is dangerous. In 2019, Russia ranked 149 out of 180 on the annual Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, 39 journalists have been murdered there since 1992. *Forbes* journalist Paul Klebnikov was the first and only U.S. journalist murdered in Russia. Klebnikov had spent much of his career investigating the connections between Russia’s business elite and the criminal underworld. He received frequent death threats, briefly employed a bodyguard, and spent years fighting a libel lawsuit brought against *Forbes* by the Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky. In 2003, he moved to Moscow as the founding editor of *Forbes* Russia; in July 2004, he was gunned down on the street outside his office. To this day, his murder remains unsolved.

On the way out of Holderness’s office, Zholobova’s phone buzzes. Suddenly, she’s pacing the hot, crowded sidewalk outside the DA’s building, coordinating logistics with a Russian drone operator she’s hired to photograph a high-security estate hidden in a compound outside Moscow. An estate that, she has good reason to believe, belongs to President Putin.

Zholobova spends much of her time in front of her laptop, scouring open databases for property ownership records. She uses them to uncover the hidden assets of Russian officials—expensive properties paid for with undisclosed funds and erased from public view. She found the estate in question by looking at the ownership records of old Soviet government dachas (country homes). It aroused her suspicion when she noticed ownership records from an offshore company registered in the British Virgin Islands.

She managed to link the estate to the president through previous owners and the offshore company’s director. “Of course, we’ll never be able to prove the offshore is his,” she says. “It’s in the world’s most protected jurisdiction.”

The day after her meeting with Holderness, Zholobova, picking at a Cobb salad at a crowded Amsterdam Avenue restaurant, is still thinking about how to obtain the photos. There seems to be a drone jammer in place, and Proekt’s drone—borrowed from the investigative website Bellingcat—can’t make it higher than 10 meters without being deflected by radio frequency. “They could knock our drone down; then we’ll have to pay a lot of money,” she says, twisting her lips in thought.

The property, valued at over 2 billion rubles (\$31.5 million), has been erased from Google Maps. Zholobova, who had to use pilot flight maps just to locate the estate’s coordinates, visited the site with a colleague a few weeks prior. Getting off on the “wrong” side of Rublyovskoye shosse (a highway connecting Moscow elites to fancy country homes),

Zholobova in her room at Columbia’s Butler Hall. Photo by Masha Udensiva-Brenner.





Zholobova meeting with BuzzFeed's World editor Miriam Elder during her residency at the Harriman Institute. Photo by Masha Udensiva-Brenner.

Mild-mannered and makeup-free, Zholobova seems nothing like the intimidating, stiletto-donning persona who used to expose Russian media fabrications on TV Rain, where she hosted a weekly segment called *Fake News*.

"We had a speech coach who told me to act like a bitch,"

she says with a laugh. In the nearly two years she worked for Rain (late 2016 to late 2018), Zholobova spent the bulk of her time on an investigative documentary series about the criminal networks in St. Petersburg and their connections to President Putin. It was her first time in TV journalism, and she never got fully comfortable with it—she prefers writing. "TV doesn't leave room for nuance," she explains.

Zholobova has loved writing since childhood, shunning other subjects in school as she excelled in the humanities and composition. Growing up in Kirov, a small city about 600 miles west of Moscow, Zholobova says she had a "very ordinary" childhood. Though her mother, a sanitation inspector, and her father, an electro-mechanical technician, have always "blindly believed" traditional Russian

media, they never tried to hold back her career as an independent journalist. When they watched her on *Fake News*, all they said was, "be softer; why are you offending people so much?"

That afternoon, in a profile writing class at Columbia Journalism School, Zholobova watches the professor—a petite woman with glasses and short, gray hair—write student sentences on the whiteboard and cross out unnecessary words in green marker.

Zholobova attended journalism school at the Institute for Journalism and Literary Arts in Moscow, but she did not learn how to write. Nor did she learn any investigative techniques. The education, she says, revolved around literature and trends in the field rather than practical skills. She is amazed to attend classes—"Art of the Profile," "Deadline Writing," "Investigative Projects"—that teach things she and other Russian journalism school grads have had to learn in the field.

After graduation, Zholobova worked for a book publisher, then won a contest that landed her an internship at *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, the most popular newspaper in Russia. The work was boring—"it's yellow journalism that publishes unverified facts," says Zholobova—but it got her enough experience to move to a better place. By 24, Zholobova was happily working at the respected Russian business daily *Kommersant*, learning the ins and outs of business reporting. But the experience ended abruptly in 2013.

In late September of that year, Zholobova's editor sent her to a lecture by Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov. According to Zholobova, the official let down his guard and made a controversial, on-the-record comment about Putin. Though Peskov quickly realized

they'd walked through a desolate village of half-abandoned garages and across a field of horse manure, to reach a tall, impenetrable fence on the banks of Moscow River. Zholobova managed to climb high enough to see to the other side, only to face another fence.

"Weren't there cameras?" I ask. "Of course," she says. "Several."

After lunch, Zholobova stops by her room in Columbia's Butler Hall—a hotel-like prewar building on 119th and Morningside—to pick up a Band-Aid before heading to class at Columbia Journalism School. She glances at herself in the mirror: straight, blond hair cropped above the shoulders, a black sweatshirt half-zipped over a red tank top, and a pair of jeans.

"Is it OK to wear these?" she asks, pointing to a pair of chunky white Nikes.

“We had a speech coach who told me to act like a bitch,” she says with a laugh.

his mistake and tried to retract the comment, Zholobova, understanding her journalistic rights, published the story anyway. It went viral, and Peskov, livid, claimed the remark had been off the record and demanded a retraction. *Kommersant* deleted the story and fired Zholobova that very day. Ironically, the incident only strengthened her career—it established her credibility in Moscow’s independent journalistic circles. It was her first experience with how Kremlin pressure can affect even seemingly independent outlets.

In Russia, it’s nearly impossible for mainstream media outlets—largely funded by Russian oligarchs susceptible to Kremlin pressure—to maintain jour-

nalistic independence. Several editors, such as Zholobova’s boss, Proekt founder Roman Badanin, have been able to stay independent by launching their own media projects and registering them abroad. But, though foreign registration provides some inoculation, it does not alleviate threats to journalists’ personal safety. Last June, Zholobova’s friend and former colleague Ivan Golunov, a reporter for the Riga-registered news website Meduza, was arrested on trumped-up drug charges and badly beaten by the police. If not for the enormous display of public support demanding his release, Golunov could have faced a long prison sentence.

The case was unusual—it is the first time in recent Russian history that authorities have succumbed to civic pressure and publicly admitted to a mistake. Some see it as a cause for optimism, but Zholobova and Badanin doubt that anything will change in the relationship between journalists and the state. The two journalists have faced their own obstacles: in 2017 they published a TV Rain documentary

about the prominent businessman and alleged St. Petersburg gangster Ilya Traber and his connections to President Putin. The notoriously secretive Traber accused TV Rain of slander. The criminal investigation dragged on for nearly two years. The statute of limitations expired in August, and, hopefully, the case is permanently behind them.

On her last day in New York, Zholobova pulls on a cigarette and looks at the cars rushing up and down Amsterdam Avenue. Her flight leaves in five hours, but she doesn’t want to go. “I feel so free in New York,” she says. “You can act however you want and no one cares.” In Moscow, she says, she feels confined. “People think you’re an idiot just for smiling in public.” ■

Maria Zholobova trekked across a field of horse manure to reach a tall, impenetrable fence on the banks of Moscow River guarding a property that Zholobova believes belongs to President Putin. Photo courtesy of Proekt.

