



THE GOLUNOV AFFAIR: THE REAWAKENING OF CIVIL SOCIETY OR A NEW EPISODE IN THE SECURITY FORCES' INTERNECINE CONFLICT?

BY NADEZHDA AZHGIKHINA

The arrest and imprisonment of Ivan Golunov, correspondent for the Riga-based online Russian news service Meduza, dominated the Russian news for more than two weeks and received worldwide attention. Internet references to Golunov outnumbered those to the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and Putin's meeting with Chinese president Xi Jinping. Without a doubt, the swiftly developing events surrounding the Golunov Affair represent a new stage in the development of the situation in Russia's media space and the domestic political situation as a whole.

Protester with tape covering her mouth takes part in the March for Free Internet in central Moscow on July 23, 2017 (MLADEN ANTONOV/AFP/Getty Images).





Chronology

On the afternoon of June 6, 36-year-old journalist Ivan Golunov was on his way to a business meeting in downtown Moscow. He had recently published investigative reports on the “funeral mafia” in Moscow and its ties to high-ranking officials in the police and FSB (Federal Security Service) and was continuing his work on this subject. Suddenly he was stopped by the police, frisked, and hauled off to the precinct. The police made a statement that they had discovered a bag with narcotics in Golunov’s backpack. He was beaten by police in custody, denied access to counsel, and not fed. They did not run tests on his hands and nails for traces of narcotics. There was no word about him until the following day.

Meduza, quickly followed by *Novaya Gazeta* and *Moscow Echo*, released statements that a journalist who not only did not use narcotics but who would not even drink a glass of wine was being prosecuted for his reporting. The Ministry for Internal Affairs, for its part, published an announcement of the arrest as well as photographs taken in Golunov’s apartment, where the police supposedly found drug paraphernalia. State-owned television channel Russia 24 further embroidered the story, adding that the journalist had been drunk. The photographs soon proved to be fakes taken at another location; no traces of narcotics were found on Golunov’s hands and fingernails once he was tested.

On June 7 and 8, lone pickets began to appear near the buildings of the Moscow police and the court where the

hearing was held, demanding Golunov’s release. Outside 38 Petrovka Street, General Headquarters of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, a line of more than 400 people formed, waiting for their turn to hold a placard as a lone picket. In cities throughout Russia—from Kaliningrad to the Far East—people went out onto the streets, demanding Golunov’s release and a stop to police abuse of power. Tens of thousands of people signed online petitions, and hashtags in his defense accompanied user photos on Facebook and other social networks. Three of the leading business newspapers—*Kommersant*, *Vedomosti*, and *RBK*—published identical headlines: “I/We Are Ivan Golunov” (Я/Мы—Иван Голунов), which could not but remind one of *Obshchaya Gazeta*’s attempt at solidarity during the 1991 putsch. Issues of the newspapers sold for 35,000 rubles (approximately \$500) on the internet!

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Left: The line for the lone picket to support Golunov.

Right: Ivan Golunov attends an arrest warrant hearing at Moscow’s Nikulinsky District Court (June 8, 2019).



Golunov told the court that police had planted the narcotics at the behest of the “funeral mafia.”

mafia,” from whom he had been receiving threats for some time. Late at night on the evening of June 8, Golunov was put under house arrest, which his supporters took as a victory since they had expected a sentence of anything up to 20 years.

During the next two days Golunov went from drug user to national hero. Stars of stage and screen, sports figures, and popular entertainers came to his support. If that were not enough, official media outlets and inveterate propagandists, not known for their affection for independent journalists, also lent support. Valentina Matviyenko, chairperson of the Federation Council, condemned the police’s unprofessionalism. The prosecutor general initiated an investigation; the chief of the Moscow Police requested that the president punish the culprits. . . . On June 11, the case was closed for lack of evidence, and Golunov was released from custody. Putin dismissed two police generals. The joy of this unexpected triumph of justice filled the air waves and the internet. Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova greeted the ruling with emotion, while the editor-in-chief of RT, Margarita Simonyan, wrote on social media that she was proud of her country.

Meanwhile, word came that the authorities had released Oyub Titiev, the well-known Chechen human rights activist and a faithful Muslim. Titiev had been convicted of selling narcotics; human rights activists believed he had been framed.

On June 12, Russia Day, a protest rally took place that had not been sanctioned by the authorities, but which had been planned before Golunov’s release from custody. The protesters changed their slogan to fit the new situation: now they demanded that the people behind Golunov’s arrest be punished and the law on selling narcotics, which activists believe has been used against thousands of innocent people, be amended. The authorities came out against the rally, and information spread on the internet that cancelling the rally was one of the conditions for the journalist’s release. On June 12, police detained more than 500 people—almost one out of every three protesters—but they were not held for long. The brief moment of solidarity was shattered.

The rally “Law and Justice for All,” initiated by Pavel Gusev, editor in chief of *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, and approved by the authorities, was held on June 16. Estimates put the attendance at slightly more than 1,000 people. Some of Golunov’s supporters called it a “rally for the



Top: A woman holds the *Vedomosti* daily newspaper with the front page reading “I Am (We Are) Ivan Golunov” during a protest outside the main office of Moscow Police (June 11, 2019).

Bottom: Police officers detain people during a rally in support of Russian journalist Ivan Golunov, who was earlier released from custody in Moscow (June 12, 2019). ITAR-TASS News Agency/ Alamy Live News.



propagandists,” designed to deflect attention from the real infringements on civil rights, and they urged people to ignore the event.

An independent union of journalists and media workers, together with the Libertarian Party, organized yet another rally, “against police abuse of power.” Approximately 4,000 took to the streets. They were addressed by colleagues of Abdulmumin Gadzhiev, the Dagestani journalist for the independent newspaper *Chernovik*, recently arrested for supporting terrorism; participants of the week-long protest against the construction of a garbage landfill site in Shiyes, in the Arkhangelsk region; and the

parents of a group of young people accused of creating an extremist group, and many others. Protests in solidarity against police abuse and freedom of speech took place in another 12 cities nationwide and were widely reported on social networks.

Meanwhile, three Dagestani newspapers followed Moscow’s example and came out with the headline: “I/We Are Abdulmumin Gadzhiev.” Another high-profile case ended with the prisoner’s release. Journalist Igor Rudnikov, publisher of the Kaliningrad

newspaper *Novye Kolesa*, accused of extorting bribes, was released after spending more than a year and a half in a pretrial detention center (June 17).

Putin was asked about the Golunov Affair during the course of his televised *Direct Line* and at a press conference. In Osaka he was again questioned about Golunov, and he harshly condemned the actions of the law enforcement officers, calling them an abuse of power. Every day Russian media published reports about the resignations of high-ranking police officials.

The End of the KGB's Omnipotence?

The Golunov Affair could not but call to mind another case known throughout the country during perestroika. Namely, the case of literary scholar Konstantin Azadovsky, which Yuri Shchekochikhin covered for *Novaya Gazeta*. Shchekochikhin, who was murdered in 2003, exposed the KGB's methods against the dissidents of the late Soviet era. At the time, the Azadovsky Affair ended with what seemed to be society's victory over the omnipotence of the intelligence services. Provocateurs had planted drugs on Azadovsky and his wife, and, after being sentenced to hard labor in the Kolyma region, the couple was not only rehabilitated, but also received compensation as victims of political repression. Support for Azadovsky and more generally human dignity over the absolute authority of the KGB came from respected members of the intelligentsia in Russia and abroad (for example, Dmitri Likhachev, Anatoly Rybakov, Veniamin Kaverin, Joseph Brodsky, Sergei Dovlatov), as well as from the American PEN Center, readers of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and the newly founded Memorial Society—in other words, from people who wished to see real changes in the country.

Pyotr Druzhinin devotes the third volume of his monumental study *Ideologiya i filologiya* (Ideology and Philology, published by NLO, 2012–16) to the Azadovsky Affair. The first two volumes cover the evisceration of the Leningrad philological school, to which folklorist Mark Azadovsky, Konstantin's father, belonged along with Viktor Zhirmunsky and Boris Eikhenbaum. By means of documents and eyewitness accounts Druzhinin uncovers the true picture not only of what was taking place in the country, but also how the conduct of these actors reflected the era and its concepts of courage and betrayal. In his recent appearance on Radio Liberty (June 19, 2019) the St. Petersburg mathematician Anatoly Vershik, drawing parallels between the Azadovsky and Golunov cases, asked: Will it be possible to find and

Will it be possible to find and name all those responsible for the Golunov provocation?

name all those responsible for the Golunov provocation? Vershik believes that there are grounds for hope and recalls how in 2017 Alexander Arkhangelsky, the editor of *Free People of the Dissident Movement*, brought up the Azadovsky Affair during a meeting of the Presidential Committee on Culture and Literature. Putin responded that he knew nothing about it and promised “to take a closer look.” Dmitry Peskov, Putin's press secretary, gave the identical response when asked by representatives of *Novaya Gazeta* about Andrei Sukhotin's recent publication that portrayed the Golunov Affair as an episode in clan warfare among the FSB and police higher-ups. The speaker for the Kremlin answered that he did not have any information about that. Soon afterward heads of police officials began to roll, and the mansion of an FSB general portrayed in Golunov's investigation in short order changed owners in the state registry.

Citing insider sources, the online media group Proekt reported that Kremlin and Moscow officials were trying to use the Golunov Affair in their own interests. At first the authorities took the police allegations on faith, but after the unexpectedly large protests they signaled to the judicial authorities to proceed with compassion, simultaneously giving the go-ahead to federal television channels to spearhead support for the journalist. According to Proekt, the Kremlin at the same time decided to teach the overreaching law enforcement forces a lesson. According to one of Proekt's sources, the Kremlin was literally enraged by the clumsiness of the police. At the same time, Proekt believes that the Golunov Affair will not induce the authorities to implement any fundamental changes in the legal system. As evidence Proekt cites Putin's announcement on *Direct Line* that the law regarding the sales of narcotics is not subject to review (a law that is responsible for the incarceration of tens of thousands of people, many cases of which are spurious, according to human rights organizations), along with the refusal to hold a referendum on the garbage landfill in Shiyes, about which residents have been protesting now for many weeks. Not to

mention the new indictment of terrorism filed against Dagestani journalist Gadzhiev on June 14.

One can point, however, to other takeaways. The demand for public oversight of the police and special services has resounded in protests throughout the country. The Golunov Affair, which has roused the nation and prompted authorities to take unprecedented measures “to redress shortcomings,” signals a new stage in society’s pursuit of well-being and self-determination. Many of the people who took to the streets in cities throughout Russia had not read Golunov’s investigations, but they understood all too well: this could happen to any one of us. The police had adopted the old KGB game of planting drugs. The journalist in theory could be replaced by practically anyone. The journalist’s release not only did not soothe the public, but instead prompted people to engage in more ambitious actions; for the first time in many years the public understood that something might result from taking a stand.

Dmitri Muratov, head of *Novaya Gazeta*’s editorial board, who together with Moscow Echo’s editor in chief Alexei Venediktov took part in the negotiations with Moscow authorities regarding Golunov’s release, believes that the events of recent weeks have opened up new possibilities for dialogue, without which there is no future.

One Country, Two Schools of Journalism

Ivan Golunov has become the new face of independent Russian journalism for the world. Against all odds, the Council of Europe received a positive reaction from the Kremlin, despite the fact that the European Federation of Journalists over the years has released dozens of statements regarding violations of freedom of speech in Russia that went unanswered. This is likely tied to the Russian delegation’s concurrent readmittance to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE). Freeing Golunov was an auspicious occasion to demonstrate consensus in approaches, particularly on such a sensitive issue.

Russia’s readmittance to PACE has given rise to highly fraught debates among human rights advocates both in Europe and in Russia. The authors of the appeal to European politicians not to deprive Russian citizens of the right to turn to the European Court of Human Rights—signed by, among others, well-known attorney Karina Moskalenko, MBKh Media journalist Zoya Svetova, and Yury Dzhibladze, president of the Centre for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights—have been severely criticized by radical human rights advocates who believe that any contact with the “bloody



Yuri Shchekochikhin, journalist for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* during the perestroika years.

regime” is unacceptable. It is interesting to note that the military “hawks” are just as unhappy with the decision as the Stalinists, since they oppose any participation in European institutions that “imposes alien practices.”

Galina Arapova, a media lawyer and director of the Mass Media Defense Center, is of the opinion that a sustained opening up of the scope for human rights, coupled with wide-ranging dialogue, can gradually change the social climate and the state of human rights in Russia. The center has already won several cases in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which Arapova believes to be the most important mechanism for democratization and a practical instrument for applying pressure on the authorities. In Russia, 95 percent of the ECHR’s decisions have been carried out and citizens have received millions of euros in compensation for everything from being detained during a protest rally to illegal convictions and being subjected to abuse and torture. It cannot be ruled out that Golunov will also appeal to the ECHR if Russian authorities do not bring to justice those involved in his case.

Golunov has become the new face of independent Russian journalism.

General Secretary of the European Federation of Journalists Ricardo Gutiérrez is confident that Russia's return to PACE, above all, represents an opportunity to influence the Russian situation and to work for the defense of journalists. Meanwhile, the profession of journalism becomes more and more dangerous. The report

Russian journalist Ivan Golunov talks to reporters outside the office of the Main Investigations Directorate of the Moscow Police after being released from custody (June 11, 2019).

"Russia's Strident Stifling of Free Speech, 2012–18," issued by PEN International together with the Free Word Association (Moscow) and the Moscow and St. Petersburg PEN Centers, portrays the shrinking sphere of freedom—which writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya calls in her preface a "horrifying picture of the relationship between the state and civil society, the state and the individual, the state and the artist." Each successive act of legislation circumscribing the activities of independent mass media, the internet, and journalists—for

example, the laws on extremism, offending believers, internet controls, fake news, and disrespecting government—makes a journalist's work more and more difficult. New initiatives are constantly being floated, for example, to punish publications whose work leads to sanctions against Russia—in other words, criticism of any kind is becoming impossible. All these acts of legislation are passed without debate and without regard to expert opinion. In fact, experts, the Council for Human Rights, and even some ministries have actively protested some of these laws. The fact that legal enforcement is selective and that punishment meted out to critical voices is often unreasonable is another problem. A genuine scourge is the extrajudicial blocking of websites, which is at the behest of the prosecutor general.

As Galina Arapova has testified, in recent years another problem that has arisen is charging undesirable journalists with criminal acts—whether it be accusations of dealing drugs (Chechen journalist Zhelaudi Geriev, who spent four years in prison on what his colleagues believe to be trumped-up charges); extortion (Igor Rudnikov in Kaliningrad; and before him Sergei Reznik in Rostov province); legislation on extremism (Svetlana Prokopieva in Pskov); or supporting terrorism (Gadzhiev in Makhachkala).

Another very important factor in limiting freedom of speech is an





Police officers detain opposition activist Konstantin Kotov during a rally in support of Ivan Golunov (June 12, 2019). On September 5, 2019, Kotov was sentenced to four years for “multiple breaches” of protest laws. In the photograph he is wearing a T-shirt supporting political prisoner Oleg Sentsov, who was released to Ukraine as part of a prisoner exchange on September 7.

economic one. The Russian advertising market, which is dependent on the government, cannot cover even half the expenses entailed by mass media, which consequently must seek funds from business and government, thereby falling into inevitable dependence. The recent scandal when *Kommersant's* entire political department quit over the firing of two journalists for publishing a piece alleging the replacement of Federation Council chairperson Valentina Matviyenko is but one of many examples of censorship by the owner. Self-censorship, avoiding sensitive issues and investigations, and criticism of the authorities in general have become ubiquitous. Fear of losing one's job, as well as fear for personal safety and the safety of those close to you, is another factor in self-censorship.

The majority of the crimes against journalists in Russia have not been investigated as they should, despite the article in the criminal code that provides for up to six years' imprisonment for interfering with or harming a journalist while she is carrying out a professional assignment. Everyone knows, however, that these perpetrators often act with impunity. The martyrology compiled by human rights advocates comprises more than 350 names of those who have been murdered or died under mysterious circumstances or who have simply disappeared since 1991. The overwhelming majority of these crimes have not been solved, even in those cases where the immediate perpetrators of the murder have been convicted—as in the

Politkovskaya case their employer remains at large. In the majority of cases, according to human rights advocates, corrupt police and security forces, politicians, and people in positions of authority are responsible. But the reasons for impunity are attributable not only to the absence of political will but also to unqualified investigators.

The absence of professional solidarity as well as the absence of solidarity shared by journalists and society is another factor. If during the years of perestroika citizens had more faith in the press than in all the branches of government and social institutions put together, then today this lack of trust in the mass media is a genuine problem. In the current situation—and this is true not only of Russia—the consumer is generally clueless about how to separate fake news from the truth and therefore stops believing everyone outside her small circle of trusted people, generally found on social media.

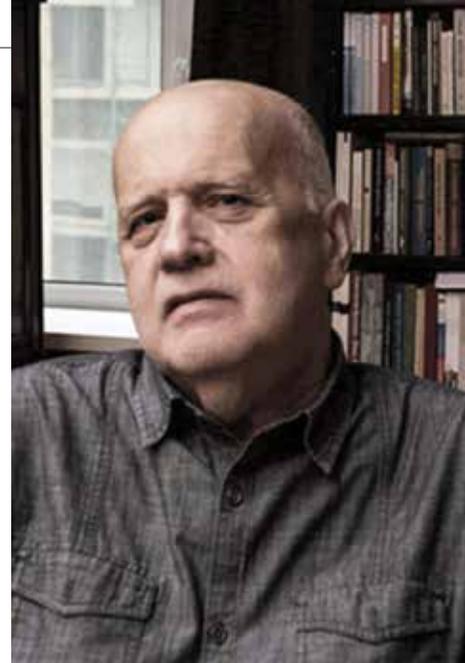
In Western Europe professional organizations with influence and experience are trying to mitigate the pressure from business and politicians on the tradition of independence, and on journalism as “a public good,” and to this end they are developing programs to promote media literacy and build support for public mass media. Nothing comparable exists in Russia. The professional community is splintered and confused. Over the course of 25 years the Russian Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers had tried to create an independent, national organization

outside of politics, based on democratic values. But all that came to an end when the new union administration came on board in 2017 and fundamentally changed the union's direction and priorities and became a recipient of government funding, thus becoming an appendage of the state by supporting and even proposing limitations on freedom of expression. The union advocates for all the world to hear that the main problems for Russian journalists do not lie inside Russia but are to be found abroad, where they are attacked by Russophobes and hostile governments. Many journalists who work outside the capitals do not share the positions of the new union administration but are loath to object, turning for support to the Mass Media Defense Center and the Union of Journalists and Workers in Mass Media, which came into being on the wave of defending journalists' rights. This new union prepared its own report on the conditions of freedom of expression, which together with the report by PEN International and the two Russian PEN centers will be discussed this fall by the Council on Human Rights. But the true significance of this discussion will only come about when the Russian audience will perceive attacks on journalists and the violation of their rights to be a violation of its own rights and the Russian people come to the defense of journalists on its own behalf. The Golunov Affair shows that in principle this is possible.

As Dmitri Muratov, chairman of the editorial board of *Novaya Gazeta*, told me at the memorial evening for slain journalist and politician Yuri Shchekochikhin (June 2, 2019):

For the first time since the publication of *Obshchaya Gazeta* during the August 1991 putsch, journalists have exhibited a real sense of solidarity. In the '90s the people and journalists were against the authorities. And then the journalists turned out to be alone; the people had fallen in love with the authorities. And the authorities began to punish journalists, and many editorial boards began to serve the authorities. Today something has changed. And it's not just the fact that journalists and mass media editors of all stripes united in their demand for Golunov's release. A new technology has come into being: the very same text now is published by all manner of mass media, and more and more new people are becoming engaged; consequently, the audience for these materials grows larger than the one for the propaganda channels. That's another outcome.

Portrait of
Konstantin Azadovsky
© Mark Serman.



Muratov believes that the people will once again understand that they have a personal stake in freedom of expression, as they did during the perestroika years. Many young people believe this as well. It is not accidental that students are once again posting to social media that they believe in the profession—in its higher calling to be a boon to mankind. They understand that their individual voice can also make a contribution to this cause.

There were always two schools of journalism in Russia. The first Russian newspaper, the *St. Petersburg News*, which came about by decree of Peter the Great in 1703, was published in German and addressed primarily to European monarchs; later it was published in Russian for the autocrat's governors in faraway places, reporting on the tsar's orders and actions. Censorship and iron-fisted totalitarian control came into being with this publication. But soon afterward, under the auspices of Moscow University and its faculty, another type of journalism came into being, inspired by the ideas of the Great French Revolution, progress, and respect for one's fellow man. Journalism has flourished in Russia for more than three centuries. The intense debate and adversarial relationship between the two directions in journalism has been going on for nearly as long: the first is conservative, totalitarian, propagandistic, while the second is independent and based on respect for mankind and its rights and on a respect for freedom and democracy. This battle continues today. And the outcome depends on what choice journalists and readers make. ■

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Nadezhda Azhgikhina, former vice-president of the European Federation of Journalists (2013–19), is a journalist and executive director of PEN-Moscow.