

Singling out the women

In 1990, journalist Galina Semyonova was the only woman in the Politburo. Hand-picked by Mikhail Gorbachev after almost a decade editing *Krestyanka* (Peasant Woman) magazine, she told *Soviet Life* magazine that being appointed to the country's highest political body came as a complete surprise. In an interview not long after her appointment, the (male) journalist asked Semyonova briefly about her Politburo role – she was, not surprisingly, put in charge of women's issues – before grilling her on more pressing affairs. What traits does she value in a man, he asked? "Understanding, faithfulness, and sincerity – a rarity these days," came the reply. Her advice to women who want to keep fit and look good? "Be happy! Smiling makes you beautiful," she revealed.

The good news today is that Russia is, at last, taking women journalists seriously – at least some of the time. The bad news is that this means they are being seen as a credible threat to Vladimir Putin's regime and some are being expelled from the country, if they are lucky, and poisoned, beaten and killed if they are not. Their phones are being hacked – even outside Russia's borders – and the government keeps close tabs on what they do. It's no surprise that Russia has slipped down to the bottom 20 in the annual Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders, coming in at 164 out of 180, a ninepoint drop from the previous year. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, of the 43 reporters who were killed in the line of duty since Putin came to power in 1999 – including both men and women – at least 25 of them were in "direct retaliation" for their journalistic work.

Galina Timchenko, the founder of the independent Russian news organisation Meduza, says she was the recent victim of phone-hacking when her phone was infected with Israeli Pegasus spyware when she was at a media conference in Berlin (Meduza is based in Latvia). *Novaya Gazeta* journalists have also recently received notification that their phones had been hacked, and one – Elena Kostyuchenko – says she might have been poisoned, after two other Russian female journalists made the same claim earlier.

Timchenko said she is "unable to confirm" who hacked her phone. "Pegasus does not leave fingerprints behind," she said in an interview with the BJR. "Of course, after every attack or threat, we in the first instance think it's Russia. But experts at AccessNow and Citizen Lab are positive that Russia doesn't have access to Pegasus yet, at least for the time being." She adds: "I don't think that the version that Russia used a proxy country is convincing (because it's too complex, expensive and time-consuming). I am inclined to believe that either an EU country or several EU countries could be involved, considering that many have access to the software."

She is equally unclear about why she was hacked, saying it is "impossible" to find any compromising material on her phone. "If they wanted to find sensitive data – for example, the name of our freelancers in Russia – then that would be impossible, because according to our safety protocols I don't have access to that information. But a hacked phone may be used for wiretapping. For example, at an important meeting." She knows of four other cases of phone-hacking, she said, but she is the only one who has spoken openly about it. "I decided to make my own case public – first of all, this is the only way to keep myself and my editorial team safe. Secondly, wiretapping journalists and activists, by security services inside the EU, is unacceptable and shouldn't happen to anyone. The governments that bought Pegasus claim that they use it for spying on terrorists, human traffickers, and so on, but in reality, as you can see, the states use the software for different goals."

Hacking is only the tip of the iceberg. Investigative journalist Yelena Milashina was badly beaten up in the Russian republic of Chechnya in July. She and a human rights lawyer, Alexander Nemov, were

in the capital Grozny covering the trial of Zarema Musaeva, the mother of exiled activists who challenged leader Ramzan Kadyrov. According to the UNHCR, Kadyrov was quoted as saying on social media that her family “was waiting for a place either in prison or in the ground”. The masked assailants smashed their equipment, tore up documents and stole their phones. “You were warned. Get out of here and do not write anything,” they were told.

In August, three female journalists were expelled from Russia: Eva Hartog, Anna-Lena Laurén, and Luzia Tschirky. “I’m not the first to experience this,” Laurén said in an interview with Svenska Yle. “Russia has gone from a semi-dictatorship to being a full dictatorship. This is about Russia wanting to limit the number of journalists there, both Russian and foreign. It is obvious why.” In February this year, a female Finnish journalist, Arja Paananen, faced difficulties renewing her visa and was forced to leave the country. That same month, Russian journalist Maria Ponomarenko received a six-year prison sentence for posting about civilian casualties in Ukraine’s Mariupol on social media. And in October, a Russian-American journalist working for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Tatar-Bashkir service, Aslu Kurmashev, was detained in the southern city of Kazan for not registering as a “foreign agent”, a designation all foreign (and some domestic) media must accept. Kurmashev had reportedly arrived in Russia in May for a family emergency, and had her passports confiscated in June when she tried to leave. She received the new charge on October 18 and could face up to five years’ imprisonment.

A war seen through female eyes

It’s not surprising that so many women are being targeted. “Women journalists from the very first days of the full-scale invasion covered the war and reported on the horrible war crimes that we now know about. That’s because Ukraine banned male Russian citizens from entering the country. We see this war through the eyes of women reporters,” said Timchenko. Foreign female journalists are also doing a lot of the heavy lifting. “I personally think that if female journalists are being targeted, it’s because they are more willing to break ranks and point out corruption and opposition to the war,” said a former Moscow correspondent for a Western news organisation. “One of the takeaways I had from Russia is that there is much more equality in Russia generally, whether in business or in journalism. That doesn’t discount that there is sexism.”

More women are in “serious positions in power” in Russia than in the UK, she added, using Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the pro-Putin Russia Today, as an example. “She is the most powerful media figure in Russia. What she says is the new Kremlinology,” she says of the broadcaster many would describe as a Putinist puppet who would put Kelly Anne Conway’s cosying up to Trump to shame. “I think it’s significant that the most high-profile and powerful pro-Putin propagandist is a woman. People hang on her every word as a clue to what is happening inside the Kremlin.”

Women journalists “do not just face more risks than their male counterparts, but also different risks”, according to Free Press Unlimited. Those include sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and gender-based violence – and not just in Russia. But a 2021 study of sexual harassment in Russian newsrooms involving 176 media professionals conducted by City, University of London, WAN-IFRA Women in News and ANRI-Media found that 22 per cent experienced physical or sexual harassment, with a fellow colleague the usual perpetrator. Despite the figures, an additional 15 out of 16 media executives interviewed said they did not feel sexual harassment was an issue in the media industry.

Only 26 per cent of people who experienced harassment reported it to management, with only half the complaints dealt with. Interestingly, 17.1 per cent said they did not report it as there was no

reporting mechanism within their organisation, with 14 of the 16 executives saying they were unaware if their organisation had a sexual harassment policy. "Right now, most people don't have the confidence in their news organisation to report. They fear the backlash that will happen to them from co-workers," lead researcher Dr Lindsey Blumell was quoted as saying. "They'd rather stay silent than risk their reputation or job being impacted."

In 2018, State Duma Deputy Leonid Slutsky, head of the international affairs committee, was publicly accused of sexually harassing female journalists. "BBC reporter Farida Rustamova has an audio recording of an encounter with Slutsky, who flirted with her and groped her. Rustamova says he placed his hand above her vagina and refused to stop. Deputy chief editor Ekaterina Kotrikadze, of the privately owned Russian Television International (RTVI) and producer Darya Zhuk of independent Dozhd (TV Rain) have come forward with similar allegations. "There's only one reasonable explanation for three journalists independently describing sexual harassment by Leonid Slutsky: they're telling the truth," Meduza wrote in an editorial. The Kremlin, however, took a different stance, with spokesman Dmitry Peskov comparing Slutsky's victims to Harvey Weinstein's, saying the women remind him of "prostitutes", according to Meduza. "Maybe he's [Weinstein's] a scumbag, but none of them went to the police [sic] and said 'Weinstein raped me!'. No! They wanted to earn 10million dollars. What do we call a woman who sleeps with a man for 10million dollars? This might sound rude, but we call her a prostitute," he was quoted as saying. Did Slutsky get fired or resign, or was he even reprimanded? No.

Meduza has had its own sexual harassment scandal, when chief editor and co-founder Ivan Kolpakov was accused in 2018 of groping the wife of an employee and saying: "You're the only one at this party I can harass and get away with it." He was suspended from his job, and the ensuing uproar on social media prompted a BuzzFeed article titled "This #MeToo Moment Is Tearing The Russian Internet Apart". A Russian journalist told me: "When asked about how Meduza dealt with it, Elena Kostyuchenko, who's an outspoken feminist, said 'I know what kind of policies and ethics commission Meduza has in place, and I am satisfied with it'." The journalist implied that *Meduza* did the right thing, saying: "They could have just ignored it. They would only have lost a few thousand readers." Kolpakov was reinstated four months later. What does Timchenko say about the incident? "Since that (singular) event, we have developed a code of conduct that defines the culture of relationships within *Meduza*. We have also developed a 'rulebook of ways to resolve conflict situations' inside the editorial team. These rules have been accepted by everyone and apply to all members of the news organisation."

Wendy Sloane

Wendy Sloane worked as a journalist in Moscow from 1989 to 1995, writing mainly for Moscow Magazine, the Associated Press, The *Daily Telegraph* and *Christian Science Monitor* before becoming a magazine editor in the UK. She is currently an associate professor and journalism course leader at London Metropolitan University and is working on a book on press freedom in Russia.