

Session Four: Putin, Power and Other Russian Headlines

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Speakers at the “Russian Journalism Under Fire” conference at Miami University did not agree on the many topics, except two. The first is that Russia has a long way to go until there is transparency regarding the government and public documents. The second, according to panel member Fred Weir who has been a foreign correspondent for the Christian Science Monitor for 20 years: “Nobody on this specific panel would call (the Russian government) a democracy.”

The fourth session of the conference entitled, “Putin, Power and Other Russian Headlines,” focused on the challenges journalists face today when covering the government sources such as the Kremlin and President Vladimir Putin. Panelists also discussed Putin’s control in general, and whether or not he will leave office after his second four-year term, which ends in 2008.

Weir presented Russia as a “news rich country, partly because of the Cold War heritage.” The government controls the country’s political landscape, he said, and in turn it is heavily managed. Weir also discussed the variety of stories that being written in Russia.

“One of the most important stories Russian journalists are writing about today is about Putin deciding to leave and obey the constitution,” Weir said. “There is inconsistency in walking away... It’s almost guaranteed to throw the entire political system in Russia into turmoil.”

Editor of *Russia Profile* magazine Andrei Zolotov added, “The idea of a third term is a populist stance... No matter how many agreements you make with your successor, they have all the power and can quickly turn the tables,” Zolotov said in reference to Putin continuing his rule.

Zolotov added that while the Putin story is a top one in Russia today, another storyline is taken up.

“The story that comes from Russia, what is expected, is that Russia will fall apart tomorrow,” Zolotov said.

Igor Zevelev, a Washington, DC bureau chief of the Russian News and Information Agency, tackled the topic of accessibility and the government’s power over the press.

“Sensitive issues on TV and in print are very controlled,” Zevelev said. “There are still stories covered the way journalists want to cover them, but the issues of Putin and Chechnya are still heavily controlled.”

Zevelev offered hope when he explained that there are still issues that journalists can write more freely about.

“Some important government policies and issues are being discussed, not just delivered the way the presidential administration wants. Some areas are allowed to be more open to debate,” Zevelev said.

With regard to Putin’s third term, Zevelev hopes the president will adhere to his constitution.

“There are very influential people, even those who may be Putin’s successors, who have differing opinions on very important issue, such as changing the constitution

(to allow Putin to serve a third term),” Zevelev said. “I think for Putin to continue for a third term would be a disaster.”

Because of all the criticism and disaster Zevelev spoke of, some audience members wondered where Putin’s support was coming from.

“The economic situation has improved by all accounts,” Zevelev said. “This is the basis for Putin’s support. Anyone would look good after Yeltsin.”

Zevelev closed his remarks with a quote that summed up what he believes divides Russian sentiments: “A Russia pessimist says ‘Things could not get any worse’. A Russian optimist says ‘yes they can’.”