

Session 5: Cooling the Fire

By Lauren Reinhard

Journalists in Russia must work together to remain safe said panelists at the fifth and final session of the “Russian Journalism Under Fire” conference.

The session, “Cooling the Fire,” dealt with the questions of what is being done to enhance press freedoms in Russia and the future for journalism there.

The conference, held April 2 and 3 at Miami University, featured six speakers involved in Russian journalism or organizations that deal with press freedoms in Russia.

Nina Ognianova, program coordinator of the European and Central Asia Committee to Protect Journalists, said it is tough to place blame or find solutions to the extreme pressures placed on Russian journalists.

“Russia is the third deadliest country in the world for journalists,” said Ognianova “but Russia is a relatively peaceful country so it is a troubling statistic.”

Ognianova stressed that the suspects involved in the 46 murders over the past 15 years need to be brought to justice. “We need to combat impunity,” said Ognianova.

Those who committed these acts are not serving Justice. Investigations move slowly in Russia. Ognianova says that bureaucracy and government slow the process.

In addition, “there is a lack of solidarity in seeking a push for justice,” said Ognianova.

Thirteen of the 46 murders have occurred since Russian President Vladimir Putin took office in 2000. None of the suspects in those 13 murders have been brought to justice.

One of the most recent murders, last October, was the murder of renowned Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

After her murder, Putin recognized Politkovskaya for her work in journalism but refrained from saying that her murder was related to her profession.

Only recently has Putin begun to make positive remarks about the necessity to protect journalists.

Ognianova said that those in the Russian journalistic community want to hold Putin accountable for his remarks.

Fred Weir, a Russian correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, said that since the collapse of the USSR pro-Soviet and pro-West voices have clashed over the definition of inherent human rights. The West has won its argument, Weir said.

“Western States have highly organized civil society, which creates a coherence of society,” said Weir. “With participatory democracy, the wrongs of society can be corrected and overcome through the workings of the system.”

Russia, despite its claims to the contrary, is not quite a democracy and that is why extreme pressure can be placed on journalists in that country by the government said Weir.

“Putin has arrested many of these fundamental rights,” said Weir. This has set back the progress, stability, and modernization in Russia.

Concrete examples of how outsiders could help relieve the pressure on Russian journalists were highlighted during the final session of the conference.

Ognianova suggested that people could campaign in magazines, newspapers, and Web sites by buying advertisements to raise awareness of these murders.

Second, she suggested lobbying diplomatic representatives in Washington to talk about concerns and discuss solutions.

Finally, “A developed relationship with embassy in Washington would aid in seeking justice,” said Ognianova.

“Freedom is exclusively for the one who disagrees, according to that test there is no freedom in Russia,” said Weir.

The conference was sponsored by Miami’s Journalism Program and Havighurst Center for Russian and Post-Soviet Studies.