

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Timothy Frye, Director

Columbia University 420 West 118th Street, New York, NY 10027 <http://www.harriman.columbia.edu>

October 7, 2009

In Memory of Natasha Estemirova: A Panel Discussion

On October 7, 2009, the three-year anniversary of Russian Journalist Anna Politkovskaya's murder, the Harriman Institute at Columbia University sponsored a forum to commemorate the murder of Chechen human rights activist Natalya Estemirova, a colleague and friend of Politkovskaya's. The panel fell on this tragic date by chance, but the significance of the women's shared fates resonated throughout the discussion.

The three panelists are Columbia alums, Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch, Sarah Mendelson, Director of the CSIS Human Rights and Security Initiative, and Heidi Hoogerbeets, Research Associate in the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program. Denber and Mendelson discussed Estemirova's murder and its implications in the broader political context of human rights violations in the region, while Hoogerbeets discussed Estemirova's life and work.

Estemirova's life and work Hoogerbeets met Estemirova while she was researching her master's thesis in Grozny during the summer of 2007. Estemirova worked at the Chechen branch of the human rights organization Memorial. "I would argue that Natasha was Memorial," Hoogerbeets proclaimed. "Memorial provided the umbrella, but it took this courageous woman to meticulously document what was going on," she said.

Hoogerbeets asserted the importance of Estemirova's role in the region, "Natasha was the regional backbone for journalists, researchers, PhD candidates, and human rights activists wanting to collect information," Hoogerbeets said. "She was unique because while so many people left the region, she decided to stay," she continued, disclosing that after the war, Estemirova's family moved to Yekaterinburg, and most of her colleagues fled to Austria or the United States. Hoogerbeets also noted that Estemirova, who was born to a Chechen father and a Russian mother, had the advantage of understanding and reaching out to both cultures.

Hoogerbeets relayed how she had stayed at Estemirova's home on her first night in Grozny, and Natasha had rushed her in front of the

computer to show hundreds of photographs of mutilated corpses, "She felt that each picture was a snapshot of some family's life and loss," commented Hoogerbeets, "I was impressed by the way she said—if Memorial didn't exist there would be no ear for the people."

Hoogerbeets highlighted that Estemirova had always served as an ear to the human rights abuse victims in Grozny, "So many war victims had no outlet, there was no psychological rehabilitation," Hoogerbeets stated. "There was always a line waiting for Natasha outside of Memorial," she remembered that women would hand Estemirova handwritten notes with their personal stories as she passed, "exclusively entrusting her with their intimate accounts."

Marveling at the fact that victims came to Estemirova despite the known dangers of reporting human rights abuses, Hoogerbeets expressed that "what was remarkable about Natasha was her ability to gain people's trust." She recalled how policemen would often stand outside of Memorial trying to intimidate people from reporting their cases, "These women, they were mostly women, would come to see Natasha anyway," affirmed Hoogerbeets.

Many activists and journalists would stay with Estemirova when they passed through Grozny and the more regular ones would have their own sheets, house shoes, and toothbrushes. "Natasha used to save the sheets and clothing of regular visitors," Hoogerbeets recounted. She articulated with poignancy how Estemirova had opened a cabinet and pulled out a pair of Aeroflot slippers, "these belonged to Politkovskaya," she told Hoogerbeets, clutching them to her chest, sobbing, and said that Politkovskaya would never wear them again.

"Politkovskaya always stayed with Natasha when she was in Grozny," stated Hoogerbeets, "despite the fact that Natasha's apartment was still largely destroyed by the aftermath of the wars, with no windows and little security." She laughed saying that "nobody would have suspected that Politkovskaya would have stayed with her."

Estemirova told Hoogerbeets that she and Politkovskaya “would stay up for hours arguing about how they would use the evidence they collected.” Hoogerbeets explained that as a journalist Politkovskaya instinctually wanted to publish all of the information they had gathered to publicly shame authorities, while as a human rights activist Estemirova wanted to protect people individual victims and urged that they withhold the names until a case was about to break through.

“Natasha asked me to accompany her to visit Politkovskaya’s grave,” related Hoogerbeets, “Politkovskaya had loved red roses and Natasha brought along a rose for each of us to place on her grave.” Hoogerbeets described the anger on Estemirova’s face as she stepped up to the grave and put a flower on the dirt. “What kind of a country is this?” She had said. “How can something like this go unpunished?”

Almost three years later, on July 15, 2009, unidentified assailants abducted Estemirova in front of her Grozny apartment building. Her body was found that afternoon in the neighboring Republic of Ingushetia. Her killers are yet to be found. This was just two days after the release of a Human Rights Watch report she published, criticizing the administration of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. “I certainly did not think that I would be speaking with you today about Natasha,” lamented Hoogerbeets.

Human Rights Violations in the Broader Context

Rachel Denber remarked that Estemirova’s murder was part of a disturbing trend, and attributed the complexity of the human rights situation in the North Caucasus to two factors. First, “the environment for human rights work on issues that are controversial, like the North Caucasus, criticism of corruption, and criticism of particular government officials, is very hostile,” she said, mentioning that there have been various physical, legal and verbal attacks against activists and journalists for their work. Denber stressed that while these problems are acute in the North Caucasus, people must remember that they are part of a “broader pattern” in Russia.

Second, Denber referred to the North Caucasus as a “theater of Islamist insurgency,” which started in Chechnya and spilled over to other republics. She indicated that attempts to counter the insurgency have resulted in grave human rights violations; local government officials are abducting and detaining suspected insurgents without trial, as well as targeting and threatening their families. Often, suspects are selected purely based on appearance, “people who have long beards and a different style of dress, people who profess Islam differently,” related Denber.

Emphasizing that “no human rights advocate or anyone else would say that the government should not effectively and robustly address the insurgency,” Denber explained that it should be dealt with in a humane and transparent way, describing the current procedures to be “characterized by detention-style abduction,” where people are “literally hauled off the street, brought into custody, beaten and tortured, with no access to lawyers or relatives, in some cases disappearing completely,” she portrayed.

“Organizations and individuals who are involved in documenting these kinds of abuses have been threatened, killed, marginalized, and vilified,” said Denber, “it’s a bad atmosphere, and this is the reason we are having this panel today.” She lamented that there is little remedy for these problems because there is an “engrained, recalcitrant, resistance on the part of the authorities to hold anyone in the law enforcement security apparatus accountable.”

Denber described a movement towards the collective punishment of people suspected of being involved in the insurgency, or having family ties to alleged insurgents in Chechnya. She added that these violations are executed by local law enforcement structures, not federal ones. “There has been a significant jump in abduction style detentions,” she said, “the message is—make your relatives surrender or you will be punished.”

Estemirova was documenting public-style punishments and executions in the North Caucasus before her murder. The most dramatic punishment she recorded, according to Denber, was punitive house burning. She stressed that this is not only approved, but openly encouraged by regional governments. Groups of armed men barge into the houses of insurgents’ families, and even into the houses of insurgents’ friends, force people out, sometimes at gun point, and pour gasoline over their property. “They torch it and then stand around, wait, smoke cigarettes, and make sure the thing is burning adequately,” related Denber. “A collective call for punishment and house burnings is something that we have not seen outside of the North Caucasus,” she stressed, pointing out that these abuses “run rampant in Dagestan,” and that Ingushetia, which was once perceived as a “calm haven from insurgency,” is home to them as well.

Denber conveyed the escalation of a disturbing pattern in the past year, “I’ve been working at Human Rights Watch for eighteen years and frequently travelling to Russia, and I cannot recall a time when human rights defenders have been more imperiled,” she declared. In January human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and journalist

Anastasia Baburova were murdered on the street in Moscow. Markelov had worked extensively with both Politkovskaya and Estemirova on human rights abuses in Chechnya, and now all three of them are gone.

Less than a month after Estemirova's death, Alik Dzhabrailov and his wife Zarema Sadulayeva, who worked for the children's charity Save the Generation, were dragged away from a Grozny courtyard and murdered, their bodies turning up the next day. Denber highlighted that those human rights defenders that are left alive, are constantly receiving threats, mentioning a colleague of Estemirova's at Memorial, who was working with her "on a very sensitive disappearance case and the threats against him were so bad he had to leave." These threats often come from an official capacity. "There have been numerous hostile and threatening statements by Ramzan Kadyrov and other officials," Denber affirmed.

Denber mentioned some hope for victims of human rights abuses to obtain justice through the European Court of Human Rights. The existence of a venue for human rights violations is "very satisfying," because these abuses are finally recognized; however, this is not a criminal court, so it is unable to "hold perpetrators accountable," and "cannot serve as a replacement for national justice," Denber insisted, explaining that the court can only require the payment of a civil indemnity. Unfortunately, the Russian authorities are not fully implementing these rulings, because while they often pay the indemnity, they are not finding the perpetrators for these abuses. Mendelson noted the overwhelming number of cases funneled through Russia, are "choking" the European court, "it is not meant to serve as a substitute for a functioning domestic judiciary, which is essentially what it has become."

Violence in the North Caucasus Mendelson discussed the recent spike of violence in the North Caucasus. "We have been tracking the situation for several years, and the summer of 2009 has been particularly appalling," she said, producing disturbing statistics. In 2008, there were 265 incidences of violence in the region between May 1 and August 31 and, in the summer of 2009, there were 470. In terms of "deaths due to violent incidents," there were 150 in the summer of 2008 and 445 in the summer of 2009.

"It's been particularly perilous to be a high-ranking government official," commented Mendelson, disclosing that there had been 11 cases of serious injury or murder between May 21 and August 12 this year. "Just to pick a few, the Minister of Internal Affairs in Dagestan, the Deputy Chief Justice of Ingushetia's Supreme

Court, the President of Ingushetia was practically assassinated, and four high ranking police officials were killed in a suicide bombing in Grozny," Mendelson reported. Regional governments have attempted to tackle the insurgency with the abusive punishments discussed by Denber. Mendelson urged the importance of action on the Federal level.

Despite unbridled violence, Mendelson noted that during several administrations, U.S. government officials have often dismissed the severity of the situation in the North Caucasus, in some cases stating that Russia has handled the situation there well and in other cases privately praising Kadyrov for reconstruction in Chechnya.

She broke her comments into three sections: potential causes for the spike of violence in summer 2009, why we ought to care from a policy perspective, and what we can do about it. She pointed to the rampant poverty of the region as one of the spike's potential causes, noting a positive correlation between the drop in the average cost of crude oil and the number of violent incidents. The central government has cut funding to the region, making socio-economic conditions a lot worse "We have this perfect storm of rule of man, utter lawlessness, and poverty. One could imagine the situation turning around if the Russian government and the international community were to take specific steps," Mendelson reflected.

From a Policy Perspective Mendelson stated that we should care from a policy perspective, "because Russia's political trajectory has been a national security concern for every post-Soviet U.S. administration," and emphasized that "this is the greatest amount of violence going on in, or just outside of, the Euro-Atlantic community." Adding that Russia has not yet solved this problem by itself, "and it is not at all clear that Moscow controls the situation on the ground."

"The spillover to international organizations is tremendous," Mendelson continued, using the example of the European Court for Human Rights (ECHR), which, as mentioned above, is paralyzed by the high number of cases coming from Russia. She recounted her shock at a colleague's comment that it would be better for the international community (and specifically, the function of the Court) if Russia were to leave the Council of Europe; as is the ECHR is replacing a domestic judicial system.

From the point of view of the Obama administration, we should care because "this culture of impunity directly threatens the ability to reset the US-Russian relationship," pronounced Mendelson.

What can we do about it? “As for what we should do,” Mendelson reflected, “In August I wrote a piece for Foreign Policy where I suggested shifting the burden from those on the ground documenting these abuses, to policy makers and diplomats in Washington and in European capitals.” She proposed that the US and the EU should work on a joint approach, starting with a meeting between senior policy makers from both regions.

Mendelson urged that investigations into murders of human rights activists should always stay at the federal level, never dropping down to the regional level. “We need to send a clear message to the Medvedev-Putin government—this is not how G8 countries conduct themselves, and it will not be tolerated.” This culture of impunity should be an embarrassment to them. It should certainly be an embarrassment to Medvedev as a lawyer. Mendelson advised that Secretary Clinton should meet with human rights colleagues in Moscow as soon as possible, and alluded to potential measures such as a visa ban for those that have been implicated in crimes against numerous activists and journalists.

Mendelson encouraged everyone in the audience to consider policy recommendations stating that “we are in a position to funnel ideas to colleagues who are now in the Obama administration.” However, she added, “the challenge is to come up with smart policy recommendations.” Mendelson mourned the lack of support for projects on the North Caucasus, “despite the fact that this violence has gone on for so long, there are so few donors who support work on this and much more needs to be done.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner