

For Russia, journalist's self-immolation is a wake-up call

Irina Slavina's last message was: 'For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation.'

By Eva Hartog

POLITICO (09.10.2020) – <https://politi.co/3lInVlK> – Before the pallbearers walked out there was a protracted silence. Then, as Irina Slavina's two children led the white coffin carrying her scorched corpse toward the hearse, the crowd of several hundred broke out into spontaneous applause.

To many of her supporters, Slavina's self-immolation was an act of stoic self-sacrifice and the ultimate rallying cry. Many compared her to Jan Palach, the Czech student who set himself on fire to protest Soviet occupation in 1969.

On October 2, Slavina made her way to the Interior Ministry, sat down on a bench between two bronze figures, a monument dedicated to Russian law enforcement "through the ages," and set herself on fire.

There is no doubt she meant to die – footage shows her pushing away a bystander who tried to save her from the flames even as she must have suffered excruciating pain.

Several hours earlier she had written a post on Facebook: "For my death I ask you to blame the Russian Federation."

Older social media posts that have surfaced since suggest Slavina had been considering the idea for at least a year.

In her home city of Nizhny Novgorod, some 400 kilometers east of Moscow, Slavina held celebrity status as the founder of the independent news website Koza.Press. A one-woman band, it was nonetheless among the most cited outlets in the region, providing relentless coverage of local misdeeds in a no-nonsense factual style.

"She was a straight shooter but very balanced, she never let her emotions affect her writing, " Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, a prominent human rights activist, told POLITICO at a memorial service Tuesday. "But underneath it she suffered."

He recalled her driving him home after he was released from the umpteenth detention and saying: "I can't live like this. I keep writing about all of this injustice but nothing is changing."

Though many in her circle could recall similar moments of despair, the 47-year-old was known for her stoicism and her suicide has come as a huge shock.

Above all, it has drawn new attention to the toxic triple whammy faced by independent journalists in Russia generally, and regional journalists in particular; of financial pressure, harassment facilitated by draconic laws and a seemingly apathetic readership.

A day before Slavina's suicide she wrote that 12 law enforcement officers had raided her apartment at 6 a.m. after forcing open her door, confiscating USB sticks, phones and computers in a hunt for evidence of ties to Open Russia, an organization backed by former oligarch-turned-Putin-critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The case itself and its connection to Slavina are, to put it mildly, tenuous: She had merely attended an event organized by the election monitoring organization Golos, at a property owned by a local businessman who, to add a tragicomic spin, also heads the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, a parody cult.

It is he who is under investigation for supposed links to Open Russia (a connection both sides have denied). But that hasn't stopped the authorities from implicating Slavina alongside a number of activists and opposition politicians – supposedly as witnesses.

“The pressure she was under would have been bearable if it had just been about her personally. But it was affecting everybody who in any way raised their voice,” Marina Chufarina, who as a regional coordinator for Golos organized the event in question, said.

Chufarina said she was expecting a similar raid at her own home “any day now.”

Slavina was no newbie to harassment. In recent years, Russia has introduced a spate of increasingly restrictive laws and last year alone the journalist was given a taste of a number of them.

In March she was convicted of breaking protest laws for leading a small group through the city to commemorate the murdered opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, a Nizhny Novgorod native.

Just before summer, she was convicted of cooperating with an “undesirable organization” (Open Russia again) for promoting a series of pro-democracy lectures on social media. And in October she was convicted of “disrespecting the authorities” after mocking a memorial plaque to Stalin online.

More recently, she was found guilty of “spreading fake news” after writing about an alleged first case of coronavirus in a different town.

Combined, the convictions resulted in fines totaling some 160,000 rubles (€1,700) – about five times the average Nizhny Novgorod salary. Moreover, every day spent in court was one she couldn’t spend writing.

The use of the lawbook over the fist or bullet – or other means of silencing independent voices which were popular in Russia in the nineties and noughties – might look like evolution. But especially for regional journalists, the constant court cases and raids, or risk thereof, pose an existential threat.

“For us crowdfunding the money to replace even a couple of laptops is a big problem,” Andrei Grishin, the editor of independent outlet Vesma in Russia’s Far Eastern Magadan, said.

Independent outlets like his face a bind: stripped of state funds they can’t accept foreign grant money lest they be labeled “foreign agents.” Meanwhile, local businesses are wary of placing ads in outlets that might be deemed anti-government. So even in good times, their futures hang by a silver thread – let alone in bad times.

“Irina made a radical choice in expressing her protest. But a huge number of editors and journalists at a local level are being pushed in that same direction by the Russian authorities. If nothing changes, I don’t know what will become of Russian journalism in the coming years,” said Grishin.

In Russia, harassment does not discriminate by size or location; journalists at large outlets in Moscow are persecuted, too. Famously, the investigative Moscow journalist Ivan Golunov was slapped with drug-dealing charges last summer and more recently the former military reporter Ivan Safronov was detained on treason charges.

But in both cases, visibility has acted as a shield, sparking public protest or at least ensuring the authorities' actions do not go unnoticed. Sometimes, a regional case breaks through to national headlines such as that of Svetlana Prokopyeva, a journalist in Pskov, who risked landing in jail for "justifying terrorism" in a column but ending up receiving a fine.

Most of the time, however, distance from Moscow correlates negatively to visibility, even within the journalistic community. That leaves local journalists extra vulnerable to the grudges and gripes of local authorities equipped with increasingly draconian laws.

"For years we covered the news around Slavina. But we failed to see the systematic pressure being applied to one and the same person, our fellow journalist," Alexei Venediktov, chief editor of the opposition-leaning radio station Ekho Moskvy, said in a broadcast. Venediktov is among those who have signed an open letter demanding the possible prosecution of officials who might have contributed to Slavina's suicide.

Even the Russian authorities seem to have been cowed. Hours after Slavina's self-immolation, investigators released a defensive statement disputing any link between their raid and her action, saying she had just been a witness. And in a highly unusual personal Instagram post, the governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, Gleb Nikitin, pledged he would take personal charge of a probe into her death.

But many in Slavina's circle are unimpressed, asking: If Slavina was only a witness, why was her home raided and her property confiscated? And if the governor appreciated her work, why hadn't he stopped the authorities from harassing her before? To them, the statements just underscore the arbitrariness of the repression she was subjected to.

At the memorial service on Tuesday, Slavina's inner circle was adamant that her suicide was not the result of mental instability – a narrative peddled by pro-Kremlin media and hinted at by Russian investigators – nor of helplessness. To them, her self-immolation was a final act designed to change minds in a way she felt her journalism could not.

“She didn't want to die tragically, she wanted change,” Maria Popova, an environmental activist whose acquaintance with Slavina goes back a decade, said.

Unlike in Palach's case, however, Slavina's death has largely been met with stunned resignation. In a city with a population of more than a million and a country of more than 140 million, the turnout of several hundred at the memorial is a drop in the ocean. “Where is everybody? Why aren't there tens of thousands of people?” asked Stanislav Dmitriyevsky, the rights activist.

Some of Slavina's acquaintances said she had become increasingly demoralized about the general apathy in Russian society and the lack of reader donations. A day after her mother's suicide, Slavina's daughter stood in the city center with a handwritten sign saying: “While my mother burned you

stayed silent.” The message will have been lost on many of those passing by.

Still, to her followers and peers, Slavina is a source of inspiration.

Speakers at the memorial service did not mince their words and hundreds marched through the city center towards the site of Slavina’s death opposite the police headquarters, at one point chanting “Butchers!”

The website Koza.Press has continued to publish news, for now about Slavina herself. But there are plans to keep it running.

And in Magadan, too, work continues unabated. “You’re always internally bracing for some bad turn of events, so you have to take precautionary measures,” said Grishin, the editor of Vesma.

“But if they come for us, we’ll know what to do.”

Photo credit: Eva Hartog for POLITICO