



PREMIO NACIONAL
DE PERIODISMO
**SIMÓN
BOLÍVAR**

Discurso de la invitada especial, edición 48, 2023

Kateryna Babkina

Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear community of the Simon Bolivar Journalism Prize:

Miguel Cortés,
President of Grupo Bolívar

Silvia Martinez de Narvaez,
Director of the Simon Bolivar National Journalism Award

Ladies and gentlemen members of the jury
and members of the journalistic book award committee,

Ladies and Gentlemen, winners of the Simon Bolivar National Journalism Award.

It is a great honor for me to be here and speak to you, as my country and, perhaps, my life, serve as an example of why honest and high-standards journalism matters.

In the Soviet Union, the country where I was born, everything related to the press, information, or publishing was officially called "mass information and propaganda." There was a Ministry of Mass Information and Propaganda, departments of mass information and propaganda in universities, degrees in mass information and propaganda, and the media were referred to as the means of mass information and propaganda, quite literally. The term "journalism" was only used informally, although it is doubtful that what they had in the Soviet Union could be considered true journalism.

When the man-made famine, known as the Holodomor, organized by Stalin and soviet government, struck in 1932, and more than 4 million Ukrainian people perished in just one year, no newspapers or radios were reporting on it, even though it occurred on a huge, in terms of Europe, territory. The few voices that spoke up on this issue came from the West, from Europe, the United States, or Canada. Soviet media never brought this crime into the spotlight.

During the Second World War, the largest military disaster of the twentieth century, when the Soviet army fought for the colonial expansionist interests of their country, and occupied far more territories than were necessary for defense, Soviet media only spoke of heroic resistance and portrayed Soviet soldiers as the sole victors of Europe. Even today, there are people in Russia who not only believe that the Soviet Union single-handedly won the Second World War but are also unaware of how many territories were forcibly incorporated into the so-called "socialist camp" after and remained under Soviet military control for decades.

When the Chernobyl disaster began in 1986 with the explosion of the reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, no media reported it. Even the nearby cities were not evacuated promptly. While hundreds of thousands of people were at risk of radiation exposure, the government and media remained silent. It was only two days after the explosion when radiation levels set off alarms at the Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant in Sweden, over 1,000 kilometers from the Chernobyl Plant, that the Soviet Union finally acknowledged the accident and began responding to it. It took years of investigations by foreign experts and organizations to acknowledge the environmental and human harmful impact of the catastrophe and its long-term dangers. Still, people outside the Soviet Union knew more about it than those within, who were primarily exposed to state-controlled mass information and propaganda.

Russia inherited the propaganda machine of the Soviet Union and adapted it to the modern era. While the official label of "total propaganda" was removed, it continues to operate, investing significant resources in covering up murders, kidnappings, imprisonment, torture, rape, and territorial occupations. In the twenty-first century, Russia committed numerous military crimes in Georgia, Chechnya, Dagestan, and Syria. Currently, Russia is waging a criminal and bloody war against my country, Ukraine.

Russia is targeting civilian infrastructure with bombs, destroying hospitals and schools, and subjecting farmers and workers from occupied territories to torture and execution. Since 2022, Russia has displaced around twenty thousand children from the occupied territories, changed their names, and forced them into adoption by new families. Furthermore, there have been more than ninety thousand reports of sexual-based crimes committed by Russian soldiers since the attempt of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

What empowers us to fight, resist, and oppose an army from a country so much larger and richer is our courage, solidarity, and belief in our values. And the support we receive. And this support is possible because the world is aware of the situation and who is truly responsible for it. We hold onto the fact that Russia's crimes are being exposed, and justice will prevail.

As of May 16th, 2023, at least 17 foreign journalists and media workers and over 30 Ukrainian journalists, photographers, and videographers have lost their lives while covering the Russian-Ukrainian war. I knew some of them personally. They were courageous and dedicated professionals who aimed to reveal the truth and provide authentic information instead of the fake narratives propagated by Russia. Now, new people are working on the place of those, who are gone, doing the same and risking the same. Risking their lives.

In the age of social media, everyone shares information daily. Everyone has the opportunity to influence and shape narratives. But people's data is so fragile, and being focused on their own lives and their own business they are so easy to manipulate. We know a lot about that in the example of the situation with Cambridge Analytics, and we also know this is not easy to change.

Professional journalism, led by strong ethical standards, is on guard of what we know about the world and how we perceive it. These ethical standards, at their highest level, require journalists to be honest, act in the public interest, and minimize harm. Journalists have an obligation to seek out the truth and report it as accurately as possible, which involves diligently gathering all relevant facts for a story. And some give all, even their lives, for this cause. Journalists also must maintain their independence from external influences, be they political, commercial, or personal, to ensure that things are reported without interference, upholding the public's right to know the truth.

Ethical standards in journalism are not just a matter of professional integrity but a safeguard for the very principles of democracy. Journalists often serve as checks and balances in a democratic society. If they fail to uphold these standards, corruption and abuses of power can go unchecked, eroding the foundations of a just and fair society. These standards underpin our society's right to information, accountability, and informed citizenship.

I am grateful that my country can now rely on high-quality journalism from around the world to counter Russian propaganda. And I'm grateful to and proud of each of those, who work hard day by day to make it possible.

Thank you.