

UPF St. Petersburg, Russia Hosts International Media Association for Peace

Natalia Chigrina
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St. Petersburg, Russia -- UPF took the first step in establishing the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP) in Russia, inviting a legendary journalism professional, Lyudmila Fomicheva, to be interviewed online.

IMAP, a project of UPF, was given an international inauguration in February 2020 during the World Summit in Seoul, Korea. UPF-Russia staff are asking leading journalists in Russia how much such an association is in demand and what issues should become its main areas of focus here. We hope that many journalists will contribute to the development of such an association in Russia.

Lyudmila Fomicheva is the president of the Interfax North-West news agency and the chair of the Union of Journalists of St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region. She was the press secretary of three well-known personalities of Russia: the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak; the general director of the Baltika company; and the chair of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of Russia's parliament), Sergei Mironov.

Mrs. Fomicheva is an Honored Worker of Russian Culture, responsible for many publications and collections. In 2000, she won the Grand Prix of the Proba-2000 professional competition in the category "PR Manager of the Year."

In 2005, she was ranked 45th among the 200 most influential businesswomen of Russia. In 2006, she placed first in the media category of the "Top 50 Most Beautiful and Famous People of St. Petersburg" competition, held by Sobaka.ru magazine. She also placed first in the "Most Influential Women of St. Petersburg" competition held by the Business Petersburg newspaper.

Mrs. Fomicheva began her career as a correspondent for the Novy Put newspaper in the town of Boksitogorsk. She was the editor-in-chief of the Baltiysky Luch newspaper in the city of Lomonosov and worked as a columnist and editor-in-chief of the St. Petersburg branch of the ITAR-TASS news agency.

The UPF interview with Mrs. Fomicheva on June 14, 2020, was opened by UPF-Russia Secretary General Maria Nazarova. She explained that the International Media Association for Peace is a worldwide professional network of journalists supporting socially responsible and moral media in their quest to convey accurate information and contribute to solving the problems of our time, using the highest principles of ethical journalism as well as the understanding that universal values are key elements of global peace.

Mrs. Nazarova said that IMAP brings together media professionals from around the world to address important industry issues, including the current state of the media, the impact of innovations, ways to restore and improve the mission of journalism, freedom and responsibility of the press, and the role of the media in addressing critical social and geopolitical issues.

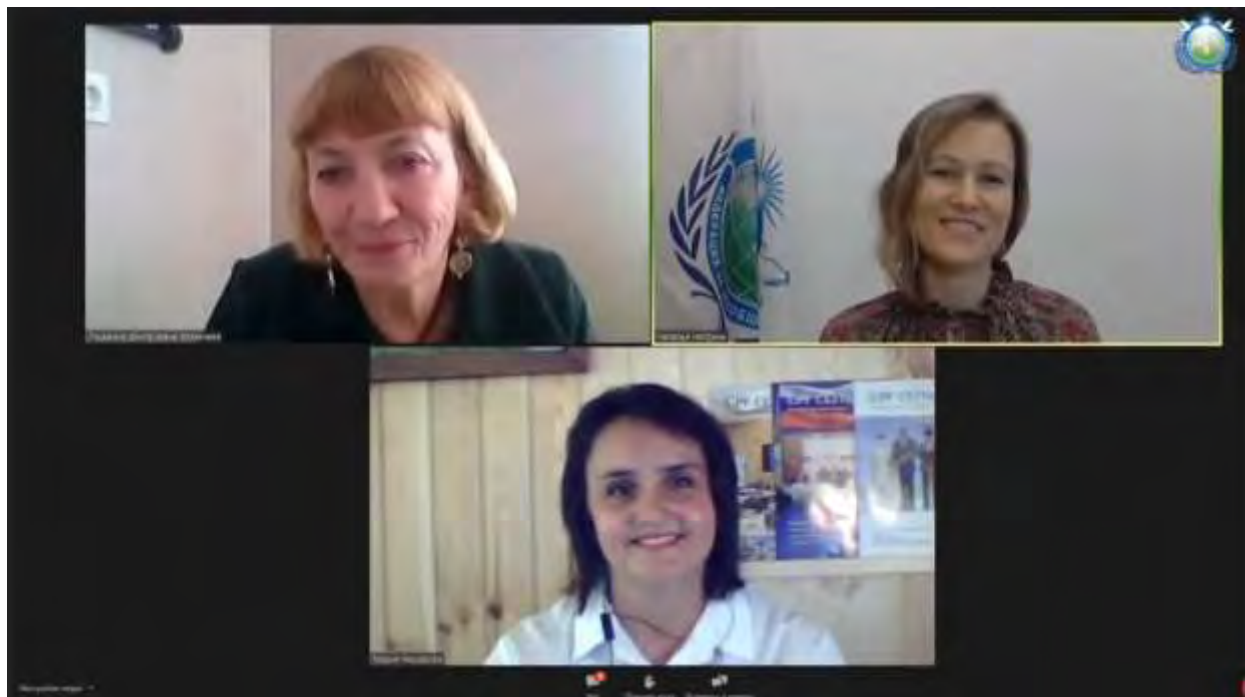
The main part of the conversation was conducted by Natalia Chigrina, head of UPF for Northwest Russia.

Lyudmila Fomicheva: I have been living for a very long time, and for a very long time in journalism. The profession of a journalist is the most amazing and finest profession on earth. It gives the opportunity to learn something new all the time, to constantly get to know different people and not to stop being surprised at all of this, and to absorb this knowledge like a sponge throughout one's life. There is probably no such profession anymore. There are other great professions, but the profession of a journalist is good.

The journalist's profession has another feature: Journalists can help people: They talk about them, they raise issues that concern people, they fight for the environment, they fight for the purity of the genre, they are sensitive to the public and political life of any country. I want to say that journalists are a huge part of civil society. The level of democracy and freedom in society depends on the work of journalists. They cover the economic situation, and all this together creates a large spatial and cultural educational environment.

Natalia Chigrina: So, freedom of conscience is the right of every person to build their beliefs.

Most recently, society has worried that the mass media had virtually supplanted literature -- books that so subtly, beautifully, and carefully helped a person form his convictions. Journalism during its existence has become a harmonious sphere with its professional principles and laws. Are you afraid of something in the new era of digitalization? Will journalists be replaced by bloggers? How do you think? What is the danger of such a change? What does journalism need to maintain its position and influence?



Lyudmila Fomicheva: What distinguishes journalism from bloggers and social networks? Of course, the Internet and social networks can lift up any person and they can destroy them, and we see this in the examples of election campaigns: in the Duma, in presidential elections, and not only in Russia, but throughout the world. There are no laws that can be used to judge or prosecute bloggers for incorrect information, because they are not registered media. Journalists are still distinguished by a sense of responsibility. We talked about morality, about the level of consciousness. From my student days I recall the words of Immanuel Kant: "Two things in the world are worthy of surprise: the starry sky above our heads and the inner law within us."

So a journalist, of course, must have some kind of internal law. He must understand what is important, and talking about some problem, about some person, he can then look into the eyes of this person. He will not destroy him, make him worse, or cause him many problems. Some kind of internal censorship should be a responsibility.

Therefore, of course, bloggers will never replace journalists. Journalism is a profession. There are honest journalists. There are people who make custom-made materials; such people are often used -- probably this is a person's weakness. I believe that a true journalist, even having financial problems, is like a doctor who takes the Hippocratic Oath: He is obliged to help and save people. Also, a journalist should help, although there is no oath in journalism, but he must help and he must have this internal moral law within him. Necessarily a journalist must be a moral person. Loyalty to the profession of journalism leads to the purity of the genre in journalism.

Natalia Chigrina: Censorship and ethics -- have you often encountered a conflict between these two, in your experience?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: There is a code of ethics for a journalist; it exists in the international practice of journalism. How it is carried out -- little attention is paid to this. This topic is blurry. Very often, you understand, media have owners, investors, the state, and the media implement the strategy of these people or organizations, because they are supported by them financially. Because the newspaper cannot be published if it has no financial support. We have an ethics committee in the Union of Journalists.

The pursuit of circulation or ratings is very harmful; it has two sides. Most people like scandals. But this is probably a special kind of journalism.

As for quarantine, the current isolation -- I think this is a great test for people: for journalists, for doctors, for all people. Now we are beginning to understand the importance of such professions as doctors and teachers. Why do we have children who have stopped reading books and are sitting on social networks? Why do we have someone being beaten on the street, and no one intervenes because they are afraid of being harmed? Therefore, now in the period of isolation we understand what a human treasure real communication is.

We need to return to universal values and not lose them. We have done so much to our planet: We abused her so much, we spoiled her resources and her beauty so much, that she is now beginning to take revenge on us with all sorts of viruses, so we must protect nature, the planet and, most importantly, our peace.

Natalia Chigrina: Journalism tends to be personalized. Personalization also gives greater efficiency. But that has its drawbacks. Tell me, please, what is freedom of the press -- freedom to publish facts, or freedom to express opinions? Is it "views rather than news," to use modern slang? Or am I wrong?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: This is a very interesting line. I work in a news agency, and by our standards, when we give information, the journalist does not express his opinion. If the information is controversial, we give objective information and always two different opinions, analysis of commentators, experts who cover this. But our journalists themselves do not express their opinion.

Natalia Chigrina: What do you think are the origins of culture? How are attitudes toward the things and phenomena of this world formed by universal and spiritual values? Where does culture originate?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: The origins of culture are in parenting and education. These are the foundations for a person's level of consciousness, responsibility and other character traits, which in our view form a real educated person, an intellectual. An intellectual is not only an educated person, but rather a person who also has moral traits, universal human values, which are not an empty phrase for him.

The media are now playing the role of navigators. Because now there is such a huge flow of information, it is very, very easy to drown in it, especially for young people. The Internet, of course, is a great asset of science and technology, and through the Internet we can find out everything, receive any information. On the other hand, there is a lot of unverified information there, sometimes inaccurate. Sorry for the comparison: It is a kind of garbage dump where gossip, scandals, etc., are washed out. That is the other side of technological progress.

I am never ashamed to study. A person must learn something new all his life. The media are doing things like reviews of "what to read," "what movies to watch," "where to go on the weekend," "which lecture to listen to." The media help one to get one's bearings. For example, lectures are an old genre, but people go.

Natalia Chigrina: The media shape public opinion and contribute to the formation of culture. Perhaps today we have placed too much responsibility on the shoulders of journalists and publicists. As [the 19th-century Russian writer] Alexander Ivanovich Herzen said about people in his profession: "We are not doctors at all, we are PAIN."

It is very important to bring to the surface topics that are painful for society. Freedom in this is the key to a healthy society. But must one talk about pain all the time? Why are the media silent about: morality, kindness, family values -- outdated concepts, not hype? Why is so little written and talked about these, in comparison with scandalous, painful news? Lyudmila Dmitrievna, you as a well-respected PR manager, please share the secrets of the "viral" distribution of news and opinions, as applied to spiritual, moral, cultural values. Is it time to reveal these secrets?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: For example, the Culture television channel has educational programs. This channel is from the Russia channel, and they can afford it; others cannot, because they do not have large ratings.

We need a state policy, probably, so that all these [educational] programs are exciting, vibrant, so that the presenters can tell what an interesting science physics is, what an interesting science history is, and do it highly professionally. Everything needs professionalism. Even a kindergarten teacher must be a person with a heart, a soul, and a special education. He must convey something, like Alexander Pushkin's nanny told him stories, and due to this, it was formed as "our everything."

Therefore, it seems to me that the state should support educational and moral topics. In addition, pay attention to the old [Soviet and Russian] animated films: They are all kind. Modern cartoons, it seems to me, provoke aggression.

And this kindness is sorely lacking. Now children are being taught: You must be able to hit back; if you are hit. The role of the media here is not as great as you think. As I said, these genres are withering away ... and you cannot put your soul into short information. Putting some kind of moral message into short information, which consists of one heading, is impossible. So, just like that, human consciousness is not formed; it is a complex of everything.

Question from Instagram: Where does fake news come from? Is it a matter of unverified sources or the subjective opinion of a publication or journalist -- if you do not take into account deliberately falsified information?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: Fake news is fabricated news; someone needs it. The fabrication is made, and the reaction of the audience, listeners, those who read them, is checked. This, as a rule, happens to defame a person or, vice versa, in order to somehow glorify him. Often fake news speaks of the lack of professionalism of those who release it. So there are two types: either complete lack of professionalism, or it is deliberately made.

Question from a journalist from Vladivostok: How do you assess the state of journalism in Russia? If possible, compare it with the time when you worked with [St. Petersburg Mayor] Anatoly Sobchak. What are the main challenges facing modern journalism?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: In the days of Sobchak there was a surge of democracy, freedom of speech, when anyone could say anything. With the rise of lawsuits, people became more careful, but still, I think, there was more freedom of speech then than now.

As an example, I can recall the Kukly ["Puppets"] television program, in which they copied all sorts of officials, ministers and there was a Boris Yeltsin doll, and, of course, it was ridiculous. And once Yeltsin came to this program, and that was the right reaction to criticism, to humor. Now officials are very sensitive to criticism, up to the point that they either begin to destroy these journalists or publications or react to it incorrectly and painfully.

I remember, in the time of Sobchak, I brought him all critical speeches in newspapers, printouts, and he paid attention to them. If he was criticized for anything -- some kind of medical facility, housing and communal services -- he assigned it to committees. He would take measures, and after 10 days the results must be reported to him.

There was such a heading: "The newspaper spoke -- the world accepted." Now this, unfortunately, is no longer. Criticism is not pleasant for anyone, but to try to fix instead of harassing journalists, I think that now is a more difficult time for journalists.

Question from the audience: As a journalist, you have a beautiful and rich [use of the] Russian language. It's nice to listen to it; it enriches and pleases! Do you see a threat to the literary Russian language from modern bloggers and online resources? How can the tendency to reduce, simplify, use slang be prevented? There may be certain standards, censorship, which can maintain a high standard for delivering information and communicating with readers.

Lyudmila Fomicheva: The Russian language, of course, is great and powerful, and it is very unfortunate that it is rinsed all over with foreign words, foreign terms and generally slang.

I graduated from the philological faculty of the university, and I am very sensitive to the Russian language, and I think that any foreign word has a replacement in the Russian language. Why do you need to shine with knowledge of English? Of course, this is very good, but why mix it all up?

I know that we have done a lot in the city about the Russian language. The former rector of St. Petersburg University, Lyudmila Alekseyevna Verbitskaya, was not just a propagandist of the Russian language, but Putin even phoned her and asked how best and correctly to speak. Indeed it was, and he tried very hard to pay attention to the language, and I was very pleased to note this characteristic feature for myself. And then in our subway cars there were posters saying, "Let's speak Russian correctly," and the sound recording when you go on the escalator in the subway, the announcer says: "Let's speak Russian correctly."

I worked for a while on the radio, I always had vocabulary and spelling books at home, besides other dictionaries, I have a whole shelf of them, I love them very much. Again, I think it should be in the family, kindergarten, school, universities, it should be protected, it should be a national policy regarding language. Look what is happening with our language: It is banned in some republics; they are trying to fight it. It's wrong. We all the more have to save our own language, keep it and pass it on to younger generations.

Question from the audience: Why is there so little neutrality in our journalism? Many people often see

two extremes: One side criticizes everything and attaches labels; the other side gives a rosy view of everything. For example, on voting violations, some say, "Fraud is around, everything is fraudulent"; the other pole says, "The best elections in the world; there are no violations anywhere except one polling station."

Lyudmila Fomicheva: There have always been different opinions and a multi-party system, but there are people who don't know how to figure it out. For example, people of the older generation are sitting watching TV, and now some say one thing, others say another. How can they understand where the golden mean is, where the truth is? We cannot shut their mouths.

It seems to me that the only way to find the truth is to look at several sources of information -- the news feeds of one, two, three news agencies -- and then draw an independent conclusion.

Question from the audience: What is the difficulty for domestic journalism and the media to break away from a mostly negative agenda? On the one hand, demand gives rise to supply, but why not generate a demand for good, eternal values in the media, and not constantly publicize almost only the negative side of life?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: This is a general trend. It seems to me that the issue has been discussed many times. There were hearings in the State Duma about what our television and films are promoting. It seems to be solidly negative, and I'm already trying not to watch TV, except for the Culture channel, and I get news from other sources, I don't even turn the television on, because there is so much craziness, aggression, shouting. People on television seem unable to lead a discussion or to listen to other opinions. They do not respect words and deeds.

It seems to me that we cannot reverse this trend now. All the media are fighting for ratings, visits, etc., and people are not interested in reading about goodness. Everyone is interested in who divorced whom, which celebrities were doing something in secret, who shot down whom, who got hold of a mistress. This is the news that we are promoting, which we read. How to set people up for interest. Yesterday I saw a piece of a film about Einstein. This was a scientist, and the film was about how he was formed, how he studied, all his human errors and human weaknesses.

We now want patriotism to be the national idea, speaking of the 75th anniversary of the Victory [in World War II], although now because of the coronavirus pandemic this all has been brushed aside. Nevertheless, I can say that patriotism is not brought up in this way when the old veteran comes and says something at school, and it's not very interesting for them.

Patriotism is when a delegation goes to lay wreaths at the monument to the Motherland at the Piskaryovskoye Memorial Cemetery [in St. Petersburg], and when people come with their grandchildren and children and put pieces of bread and a flower on these graves -- this is the education of patriotism. What we have in St. Petersburg is that every family honors the Siege of Leningrad. On January 27 -- the day of the complete lifting of the blockade -- people light a candle in their window in memory of those who died.

No matter how much I read, how much I have heard about the blockade, I still cannot understand how it was possible to survive, how it was possible to endure it, how it was possible not to destroy and burn these parquet floors in the palace at Tsarskoye Selo, in the Hermitage museum, not to burn pictures in a potbelly stove. That is why, I think, the Siege of Leningrad is the most terrible page in history, but it is also the most amazing. From this example, you really can bring up patriotism, and love, and memory, and these universal values.

Question from the audience: It's no secret that the media are a powerful tool of power. What is the state order for the journalistic community today, and what are the tools for broadcasting this order to journalists?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: We have a vertical structure of power -- this is the most important order of the state. And the main task is to maintain stability in its many manifestations, both in the economy and in statehood. It seems to me that young people have always been revolutionary-minded: They always want changes, something new, new impressions, new names, new discoveries. But not everyone wants this.

I think that, unfortunately, the media are now using and manipulating them a lot. This is what I do not like in the modern media, because I think the main task of the media is the formation of civil society, freedoms, the protection of citizens' rights, the protection of journalists and, most importantly, helping people -- in civilian assistance, in upholding some opinions, protection of small and medium-sized businesses, protection of people, their affairs and their lives, in the domestic, economic and social-moral planes.

Natalia Chigrina: At the beginning of this conversation we mentioned the International Media

Association for Peace, a project of UPF which was established this year. As UPF seeks to inaugurate a Russian chapter of IMAP, we have identified a number of problems, as well as the role of the media in solving them. There is censorship, there is an order from the state, but there is also a niche that is not yet sufficiently covered and insufficiently equipped with tools -- this is support for moral and ethical positions in journalism. Do we need an association that could support these moral positions, which are gradually fading away? Or do you think that such an organization cannot survive?

Lyudmila Fomicheva: Perhaps such an association is needed, but I do not know what support points it will find in Russia. This is either an association of some journalists and major publications, but then what about small publications, district and municipal publications, that barely survive? While large publications and mass media are collapsing, what can we say about small publications? You can try, of course, to make such an association, but then you need to attract some iconic figures and iconic media in order to listen to their opinion.

What are the methods, what will be the means of influence, what will it be able to do? Now I can't quite understand it. It's probably necessary to try to create it, but I don't know what will come of it. "They wanted the best, but it turned out as always."

Moreover, you understand what's the matter: During a pandemic that will end, according to the Ministry of Health, no earlier than March of 2021 at best, you need to see what remains. At the moment, 70 to 80 percent of small businesses, restaurants, and cafes are closed, and whether they will find funds, whether they will find customers in order to reopen -- we do not know.

We really will live in a different world. We do not know how much of the media will remain, and whether they will remain. How many print media will remain, how many radio stations will remain. ... There may be huge losses. I say this not because I am a pessimist. I'm optimistic in life, but at the same time I'm a realist who sees that the consequences of quarantine measures, a virus and a pandemic will be very sad. It will be very important that we can build on the debris.

Of course, I hope that there are young people who have the most important thing: not just youth, but knowledge. Most importantly, I hope that they will not lose their soul and will do everything with the soul. Then everything will work out; then it will be possible to build a different world -- everyone says we will live in a different world. Probably it really will be a different world, but it is important to preserve the core and the spiritual and moral foundations, without which no good deed will work. Probably you can create some kind of machine, some kind of robot, but it will not have a soul. It may be able to compose poetry, but it will not be poetry.

Natalia Chigrina: Thank you very much. These are wonderful words at the end of our meeting, which lasted twice as long as we had planned. Thank you very much, Lyudmila Dmitrievna, for your time. I think your words will affect the souls of so many people: your colleagues, readers, viewers who are consumers of the media. I think that these seeds gradually will germinate, and we should talk about it. We want the pandemic not to bring even greater disunity. Therefore we, as the Universal Peace Federation, invite people from different fields of activity and interests and propose solving common problems together, because we have common problems and general principles for solving problems, and maybe one common soul for everyone.

Lyudmila Fomicheva: We are for world peace! Thank you for listening.