

# Another Mystery in Moscow

*Did a respected military reporter really jump to his death? In the case of Ivan Safronov, there are many questions, few answers, and not much hope.*

**by Ann Cooper**

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The days had turned into weeks since Ivan Safronov's corpse was recovered from the courtyard of his Moscow apartment building, but police investigators had not visited the offices of *Kommersant*, the independent business daily where Safronov had worked for a decade as military correspondent. No officer had met with his colleagues. None had searched his notes or his desktop computer.

"They didn't come here, they didn't take anything," said Ilya Bulavinov, *Kommersant*'s deputy editor. Over the course of seven months, investigators conducted a handful of cursory interviews with *Kommersant* journalists before formally concluding that Safronov had committed suicide when he plunged from an open fourth-story window in the stairwell of his apartment building on March 2.



Ivan Safronov

AP

Safronov was known to keep a lot of his reporting in his head, said Bulavinov, but that didn't stop *Kommersant*'s journalists from

finding plenty of reasons why he could have been targeted. Colleagues knew, for example, that he was working on one of his trademark investigative pieces, the sort of story that routinely embarrassed Defense Ministry officials.

They also found evidence that seems to contradict the official finding of suicide. In one March story, headlined "Ivan Safronov Was Killed," the paper reported that Safronov took a sick day on the day of his death, saw a doctor for treatment of his ulcer, took a trolley home, and bought some oranges before arriving back at his building.



Ivan Safronov plunged from a fourth-floor stairwell window to the courtyard below. (CPJ)/Ann Cooper

The oranges were found scattered on the stairway between the building's fourth and fifth floors, a detail suggesting someone may have surprised the reporter on the stairs.

Prosecutors had called the death a suicide from the onset, although they suggested for a time that Safronov may have been “incited” to throw himself out the window. They did not say how or by whom. “Incitement to suicide” is a crime defined in the Russian penal code as the act of provoking suicide through threats or abusive treatment.

By September, prosecutors had returned to their initial conclusion—that Safronov had taken his own life for “subjective, private reasons.” But the explanations given by the Central Administrative District prosecutor's office were notable for the questions they raised.

Investigators did not describe Safronov's “private reasons,” and they disclosed little evidence supporting their conclusion. In explaining their findings to *Kommersant*, investigators cited two details: a security videotape showing Safronov entering the apartment building alone that day; and interviews with neighbors, who said they noticed no disturbance. It was not clear why either was considered conclusive. The medical report appears to state the obvious—that Safronov died from internal injuries and bleeding caused by a significant fall—without exploring such details as the trajectory of the fall.

Bulavinov said prosecutors had prejudged the case and had averted their eyes to the possibility of murder. “It was obvious to me that they didn't want to seriously look into Ivan's journalism as a motive,” he said.

If that seems cynical, consider this: Since 2000, 14 journalists have been killed in Russia because of their work, but convictions have been won in only one case. With this record of impunity, it's unsurprising that not a single journalist interviewed by CPJ, at *Kommersant* or at rival publications, expressed any hope the case would be properly investigated.

In the absence of hard evidence, there has been wide-ranging speculation. Some believe Safronov may indeed have taken his own life. But Aleksandr Golts, deputy editor of the online opinion magazine *Yezhenedelny Zhurnal* and a longtime writer on military affairs, said, “Ivan was the last man in the universe who would have committed suicide.”

Golts, who knew Safronov as a worthy competitor for more than a decade, cited the same evidence that has made others skeptical about the police theory: There was no suicide note, and Safronov had no known debts or nagging personal problems. “It was absolutely clear he loved his family. He loved his life,” Golts said.

Yuri Chaika, Russia's top prosecutor, did not respond to CPJ's written request seeking clarification on the cause of death, details about the investigation, and a copy of the final autopsy report.

**The Tools of Diplomacy**  
*In August 2 testimony on Capitol Hill, CPJ urged the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe to use diplomatic pressure to combat impunity in journalist murders ...*

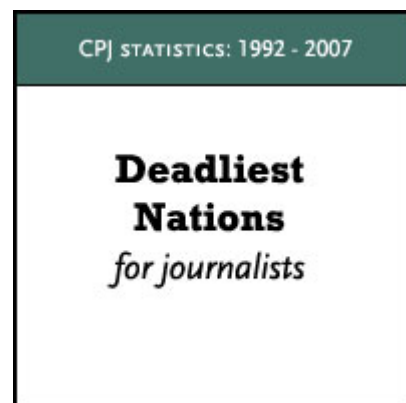
Safronov, 51, was a former Russian Space Force colonel who cultivated exclusive sources for his sometimes sensational scoops on defense and space issues. His reports on failed tests of the new Russian Bulava intercontinental ballistic missile were said to particularly infuriate military officials.

“He was a very good reporter with wonderful connections in the military,” said Pavel Felgenhauer, military columnist for the staunchly independent Moscow newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. “I always said, if it’s Safronov, and it’s about rockets, it’s most likely true.”

Last December, Safronov scored an exclusive with his report on the third test failure of the Bulava missile. The failure was never publicly acknowledged by the Defense Ministry, which developed the Bulava for deployment on a new Russian submarine. The submarine is nearly ready for launch, Felgenhauer said, but without a reliable missile, it is “a senseless asset.” Felgenhauer called the faulty Bulava missile “a major defense crisis,” and cited it as a possible motive for Safronov’s killing. “The government wants to cover up its mishaps,” he said.

Another theory suggests that this was a pre-emptive killing. According to *Kommersant*, at the time of his death Safronov was investigating alleged plans to sell Russian fighter jets and anti-aircraft missiles to Syria and Iran. Military correspondents described the transaction as a “gray deal,” referring to an illegal practice in which Russian officers peddle military equipment abroad and pocket the profits.

The piece was never finished, but in March *Kommersant* published the broad outlines of Safronov’s reporting based on his conversations with the paper’s editors. Authorities have not publicly confirmed or denied the report.



Felgenhauer said the deal apparently would have involved selling military equipment at a discount to neighboring Belarus, which would then resell it to Syria and Iran. It was the sort of deal, said Felgenhauer, where “everyone’s happy. Everyone’s getting a lot of money. Russia isn’t involved officially.” Anyone who threatened to expose it might have been at risk. “When you’re talking about hundreds of millions of dollars, well, in Moscow, they kill for lesser things,” Felgenhauer said.

Threats and physical violence are considered part of the job among the small community of Russian journalists who report on military affairs. Grigory Pasko, a naval officer and journalist, was imprisoned for more than two years for reporting on environmental hazards caused by Russia’s decaying nuclear submarine fleet. And one of the most brazen journalist murders carried out in post-Soviet Russia claimed the life of Dmitry Kholodov, a young journalist whose reports on Defense Ministry corruption ended in 1994 when he was killed by a briefcase bomb.

Military correspondents say that the most common risk stems from Russia's broad and vaguely written laws against revealing state secrets. "Many military officials themselves don't remember what's secret and what isn't," said Ivan Safranchuk, a military analyst at the nonprofit World Security Institute in Washington. In fact, he said, Russian military correspondents are often questioned by the Federal Security Service, or FSB, for allegedly revealing "state secrets" when the information they published had already been made public by the military itself. "A lot of information that is in public circulation is, by legal standards, classified," Safranchuk said.

Golts, of the *Yezhednevny Zhurnal*, recalls being interrogated by the FSB after one of his stories cited a specific number of Russian missiles and nuclear warheads. The FSB said the information was secret. Golts pointed out that the number came from a very public document—the START 1 treaty. He was not charged.

Nor was Ivan Safronov ever charged, although his editors said the FSB summoned the reporter for questioning at least a couple of times every year. "All those who write on military issues in Russia are in a rather difficult situation," Golts said. "On the one hand, a journalist wants to be the first to publish information. But it's risky to be the first."

The deaths of Safronov and the young military reporter Kholodov are markers for a tumultuous period in Russian journalism. In 1994, when Kholodov was killed, Russian journalists were admired figures; his murder brought thousands of mourners into Moscow's streets and sparked widespread demands for justice. Then-President



Ilya Bulavinov, a *Kommersant* editor, says investigators prejudged the case. (CPJ/Ann Cooper)

Boris Yeltsin wrote to Kholodov's parents to say that their son would "remain in people's memories as a person of high civic and journalistic duty."

Yet no one has been punished for Kholodov's murder or for the murders of most of the journalists killed in post-Soviet Russia. CPJ research shows that Russia is the third deadliest country in the world for journalists, and the trends are growing worse. The press is wary of tackling risky stories. Public respect for journalists is falling. State

repression of the media is growing.

Today it is hard to imagine President Vladimir Putin expressing solidarity with a muckraking journalist. When Safronov plunged to his death, the Kremlin said nothing and prosecutors seemed eager to brush aside any notion that journalism played a role in his death. "He hardly caused sufficient harm to anyone's interests," the prosecutor's office said in a statement, "including those of the government."

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