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Elena Kostyuchenko  
*In Russia*

Putin's Russia is brutal in its treatment of critical voices but that hasn't deterred the *Novaya Gazeta* reporter from exposing the harsh realities of her country while maintaining faith in its people.

Elena Kostyuchenko is slender and light, with blue eyes, a bright smile and a face out of a Botticelli painting. Her voice is measured but when she becomes agitated it takes on an air of ironic mischief. On first meeting her, you would never think she had been under artillery fire in eastern Ukraine or witnessed a violent crackdown on unrest in Kazakhstan. "I wanted to travel ever since I was a child but not like this," she says, laughing. On the day that MONOCLE meets her, she's just got back from another reporting trip.

Recognised with various journalistic awards both in Russia and abroad, Kostyuchenko modestly describes her beat as "social problems". In the past year alone she has written about the plight of gay people (as a lesbian, she's all too familiar with endemic Russian homophobia); an environmental disaster near the Arctic city of Norilsk; and the underside of Moscow's fight against coronavirus. She is the author of two books of reportage and a play. Kostyuchenko's subjects are often the wretched of the Earth, the rejects, the small people; all those at the mercy of big business or the government, which in Russia is usually the same thing. "Russian authorities are not ready to co-operate with people," she says. "They only listen to supplicants. This is dangerous. When a system stops listening to its citizens, sooner or later those citizens will destroy it."

Kostyuchenko first dabbled in journalism as a teenager, writing for a newspaper in Yaroslavl, a town 270km northeast of Moscow, where she lived with her mother and sister. But she only decided to make it her vocation after seeing a harrowing report from war-torn Chechnya in the independent broadsheet *Novaya Gazeta*. It was by Anna Politkovskaya, the acclaimed journalist who would become Kostyuchenko's role model. In 2005, Kostyuchenko joined *Novaya Gazeta* and the two women briefly became co-workers. A year later, Politkovskaya was murdered in

her block of flats. Three other *Novaya Gazeta* employees have been killed since. Kostyuchenko has received death threats and been accused of treason over her reporting but there's an implacable quality to her, the same that drove Politkovskaya. "The mission of social journalism such as mine is to create invisible but strong connections between people, because Russian society is extremely fragmented."

At *Novaya Gazeta*, Kostyuchenko writes op-eds and commentary but her specialities are long reads that often have her at the heart of the narrative – although she shuns speaking from the first person, preferring instead to be a silent chronicler. She was forced to put her principles on hold for the Norilsk story, called "Rust". "I wanted to show how the realities on the ground opposed the photographer and me; that's why I put myself in it," she says. The story took up an entire issue of the newspaper and followed Kostyuchenko as she helped a group of activists expose a huge diesel-oil spill originating from Nor Nickel, the world's leading nickel and palladium producer. The company, owned by oligarchs close to Vladimir Putin, hindered Kostyuchenko's investigation, bullying those she contacted and downplaying the scale of the incident. "Rust", also available in English, is a must-read. "It's an important story about what Russia is really like," she says.

The latter is something that Kostyuchenko is unsentimental about. "The reality in Russia is gruesome," she says. "You can have a perfectly normal life but then one day your son might be beaten up by police to the point of coma and you have to live with that." Despite seeing so much injustice and violence, Kostyuchenko retains her faith in the essential goodness of human nature. "I have met very bad people but I have also experienced a lot of beauty and kindness," she says. "I have spoken to people willing to stand up for each other and for the truth." — AKO