2025-72: Simmons v The Globe and Mail

September 25, 2026

The National NewsMedia Council (NNC) has considered and dismissed a four-part complaint about the accuracy, lack of context and newsgathering practices stemming from the publication of a photo essay published by The Globe and Mail.

The photo essay was published by The Globe and Mail on November 28, 2025, under the headline, “Death from above, despair from below.” The photo essay documented the activities of Russian soldiers, who are members of Akhmat Spetsnaz (Special Forces), as they fought against Ukrainian forces in Donbas, Ukraine.

The NNC received multiple complaints about the photo essay raising similar editorial concerns. As is standard, when similar complaints are received, the NNC selects a representative complaint to assess.

Jonathan Simmons filed a complaint with the NNC stating the photo essay presented the Russian Akmat Spetsnaz forces in “sympathetic terms” and without disclosing their “well-documented record of war crimes, torture, rape, and murder across multiple conflicts.”

The complainant argued that the photo essay breached ethical journalism standards on four grounds:

a. First, the complainant argued the photo essay failed to provide readers with essential context about the force’s documented atrocities;
b. Second, the complainant alleged the news organization platformed “state propaganda as journalism” because the photographer embedded with Russian forces;
c. Third, the complainant accused the news organization of “illegal newsgathering”;
d. Lastly, the complainant alleged the photo essay was “amplifying” Russian disinformation.

In response to the complainant’s concerns, the news organization underscored that the photo essay was accompanied by an editor’s note that put their coverage into a wider journalistic perspective.

The editor's note reads, in part: "This is not to cast a blind eye to what Russia's leadership stands for – its capture of journalists as hostages, its propaganda and its lies about Ukraine's Nazification. We have photographed what we saw. That is the work of journalists. It is not to moralize, or turn a sympathetic lens only on those we deem to be the 'good guys.'"

The complainant was unsatisfied with the news organization's reply. They argued the note was "inadequate" and did not address the fact that the news organization "legitimized war criminals, distorted public understanding of an ongoing genocide, and violated basic principles of independent journalism by serving as a distribution network for state-sponsorsed propaganda".

The complainant stated, furthermore, that the inclusion of the editor's note "acknowledged expected objections" and "demonstrate[d] he knew the content was problematic but published anyway."

In reviewing the complaint, Council considered journalistic standards of accuracy and practices surrounding embedding and reporting on conflicts.

With regards to the complainant's first concern, Council recognized that additional context about foreign institutions, bodies, or concepts, may be helpful to provide Canadian readers with a strong factual understanding of the subject matter being examined.

At the same time, Council noted that the photo essay was presented to readers as part of a series. This series also included a photo essay capturing combat activities on front lines in Donbas, Ukraine and a second photo essay that explained more about the special forces unit. Both pieces are linked to the feature that is the subject of this complaint.

Council reviewed the text that accompanied the photos and determined it provided readers with some insight into the structure and operations of the forces by stating: "Within the war machine that Russia has deployed against Ukraine, the Akhmat Special Forces are a machine of their own." The text also described the forces as "mercenaries."

Council recognized that the complainant would have preferred to have a more detailed analysis of the history and activities of Akhmat Setsnaz soldiers. While this argument is not unfounded, Council determined the news organization provided readers with a basic introduction to the

group and how they are part of Russia's wider "invading force(s)." For this reason, Council dismissed this portion of the complaint about a lack of context.

With regards to the complainant's second area of concern, Council considered widely-accepted journalistic practices surrounding embedding, particularly in the context of war and/or conflict reporting.

Journalists have long embedded with military forces to provide accounts from the frontlines. The NNC understands that this practice is subject to criticism. For example, trading journalistic access for one's independence is an ongoing topic of discussion within and outside the journalism industry.

Critics would argue that having reporters dependent on military forces for transportation, access and security raises the risk of presenting readers with a one-sided view of a conflict. In this case, it is clear the complainant shared this viewpoint and believed the news organization erred in its decision to embed a photojournalist with a military aggressor.

While not privy to specific editorial choices made within the newsroom, Council noted that the complainant only provides general statements and concerns about "manipulated information" and "propaganda-adjacent narratives." These allegations are presented, however, without any clear supporting evidence. For this reason, Council dismissed this portion of the complaint.

That said, the Council considered the editor's note that preceded the article, which disclosed that the photojournalist "spent four days on the front lines with Russian soldiers." Council did note that the news organization subsequently published a more detailed account of the journalistic reasons for reporting this story in a July 2026 article. This article explicitly stated the photojournalist was embedded with Russian troops on two reporting trips, the first of which resulted in the feature published in November 2025. The news organization confirmed that in both instances the photojournalist was "embedded" with the Russian forces. The news organization noted that while the reporter lived and travelled with Russian forces, their coverage was not directed in any way.

In its deliberations, Council agreed that this additional information was helpful for readers to understand the news organization's editorial decision-making process. Council likewise

acknowledged that had this information been made available to readers earlier, it could have helped to pre-emptively address some of the concerns raised by the complaint. That said, Council determined that the original absence of such information did not constitute sufficient grounds for a breach of journalistic standards.

With regards to the third portion of the complaint, Council considered the complainant's concerns that the news organization's newsgathering practices were "possibly" "illegal," as they likely would have had to obtain permission from the relevant Russian authorities.

In reviewing the argument, Council observed the complainant's submission did not provide evidence to support the allegation. Further, this concern appears to be related to a specific accreditation process, outside the NNC mandate of assessing allegations of breaches of journalistic standards in published content. For this reason, Council dismissed this portion of the complaint.

The final portion of the complaint argued the photo essay amplified Russian disinformation.

As the editor's note states, the focus of the piece was "not to cast a blind eye to what Russia's leadership stands for – its capture of journalists as hostages, its propaganda and its lies about Ukraine's Nazification." Council acknowledged that the complainant disagreed with the substance and focus of the piece, and that they worry about the impact of "legitimizing" or "humanizing" subjects without framing them clearly and comprehensively in the larger context.

Editorial standards and press freedom principles underscore that journalists are permitted to choose the scope and focus of their work. In this case, the feature is framed with specific references to the invading Russian forces and includes critical statements in their actions during the conflict. For these reasons, Council dismissed this portion of the complaint.