

Putin and the murder of Anna Politkovskaya

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19 October 2006

More than a week after the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, there is still no definite evidence to indicate who was responsible. However, when one poses the question of who stood most to benefit from silencing a prominent and courageous opponent of the terror being carried out in Chechnya, then the answer is the ruling clique surrounding President Putin and his governor in Chechnya, Ramsan Kadyrov.

Putin made his first comments on this disgraceful crime only two days after the murder, when he declared that it was an “abominable and unacceptable crime, an atrocity,” only then to immediately add that Politkovskaya had been a “sharp critic of the ruling powers in Russia,” although “with very little influence in Russia.” He told the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper that her “murder harms the Russian and, in particular, the Chechen leadership much more than any newspaper article could do.”

In the manner of a mafia godfather who increasingly has problems with his birthday gift, Putin (whose 54th birthday fell on the day of Politkovskaya’s murder) has sought to play down the crime in order to allow it to disappear later into police files.

A crowd of 2,500 attended the burial of Politkovskaya on October 10, but the only official representative attending was the government’s human rights ambassador, Vladimir Lukin.

The murder of Politkovskaya led to a storm of indignation throughout Russia and internationally. In an open letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who played host to Putin last week in Germany, the Russian journalist Elena Tregubova, who herself narrowly escaped an assassination attempt two years ago, gave this assessment of her murdered colleague: “She was the most consistent and incorruptible critic of Putin and his political regime.” She ended the letter with the words, “Do you really believe, Mrs. Merkel, that Russian gas or Russian oil is sufficient payment to justify closing one’s eyes to the physical destruction of the opposition and the free press in Russia? In this situation silence means complicity.”

The journalist Andrey Babitski, who has also suffered repression because of his work in Chechnya, told radio *Svoboda* that Politkovskaya “was one of the last journalists who wrote on the dictatorship of Kadyrov, on his despotism and the violence in Chechnya. Up to today there is no other journalist who conducted such scrupulous research and laid bare the reality of Kadyrov’s Chechnya.”

The human rights activist Elena Bonner also criticized Putin in the radio channel *Echo Moscow*. “To say that her publications had damaged Russia means admitting that the truth harms Russia,” she said.

Rupert Neudeck, founder of the private aid organization Cap

Anamur, wrote, “The blood froze in my veins when I heard the message on Sunday. Anna Politkovskaya was one of the most courageous and finest representatives of the profession of journalism. Whether it was convenient or not she documented the entire repression and humiliation suffered by Chechens in the North Caucasus. For many years she flew in month after month and reported bluntly and without frills.”

This is exactly why she represented so much of an obstacle to the Putin regime. Since coming to power, first as prime minister in 1999 and then as president in March 2000, Putin has developed a form of government characterised by powerful authoritarian tendencies.

The increasingly aggressive foreign policy adopted by the US, which ever more openly threatened Russia’s traditional spheres of influence, forced the Kremlin to change course. The 1999 US-led NATO war against Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia, was seen as an unmistakable warning that the US was ever more openly challenging Russia’s remaining influence over the former republics of the Soviet Union.

In order to confront this danger, influential layers of the post-Soviet ruling elite decided to adopt a tougher line and sought a solution based on an alliance between the country’s intelligence services, the army and the various clans organised around a number of powerful oligarchs. The uncontrolled exploitation of the former Soviet Union by the oligarchs under former president Boris Yeltsin had unleashed tensions between competing interests that increasingly threatened Russia’s political system. There was the risk that a divided Russia would no longer be able to stand up against the US.

After coming to power Putin introduced a broad range of measures to increase the power of the state apparatus and strengthen his government’s ability to deal with any opposition from home or abroad. His aim was the ruthless elimination of any sort of political opposition—even of the most limited democratic nature—and the repression of the broad majority of the population which had been plunged into poverty and desperation.

In a number of stages the country’s electoral laws were increasingly stripped of any element of democracy. Among other measures, the country was divided—as was the case a hundred years earlier under the Czar—into seven regions ruled by governors handpicked by Putin, and who in most cases had their roots in the country’s secret service or army.

At the same time the media was forced to adapt to the general line of the regime, and independent media outlets were suppressed or forced to close down. Oligarchs who opposed the new course, such as Boris Beresowski and Vladimir Gussinski, were driven out

of the country and their media empires, which included influential newspapers and television stations, were put under the control of state institutions. Critical journalists were forced to quit and those who remained were required to spout the line laid down by the Kremlin.

According to the figures by the organization Reporters without Borders, independent journalism has become virtually impossible in Russia. In a list of 167 countries dealing with press freedom, Russia ranks 138th, compared with Germany at 18th and the US at 44th). While Reporters without Borders reports a total of 42 journalists murdered in Russia since 1992, with 85 percent of cases remaining unsolved, other estimates put the number of journalists killed since the collapse of the Soviet Union as high as 246.

The last prominent murder of a Russian journalist took place in July 2004, when Pavel Khlebnikov was gunned down. Khlebnikov was the editor of the Russian edition of the magazine *Forbes* and author of *The Godfather in the Kremlin*, a book on the ascent to wealth and power of oligarch Boris Beresowski. Since then, the last remnants of independent media in Russia have been subject to increasing repression, with punishments handed out to critical journalists or advertisement fees removed from the “offending” newspaper or radio or television channel.

The most important single measure to ideologically justify this new course, however, was Russia’s “war against terror” and the second Chechnya war.

The pretext for a renewed offensive against Chechnya was provided in August and September 1999, when Chechen separatists invaded the neighbouring republic of Dagestan, and shortly afterwards blocks of flats were blown up in Moscow and other cities, claiming more than 300 victims. In both events there is considerable evidence indicating that the attacks were in fact deliberate provocations carried out by the Russian secret service.

In the military campaign which followed, much of Chechnya was laid to waste, tens of thousands were killed, and hundreds of thousands were forced to flee the republic. All of the government structures that had been painstakingly rebuilt after the first Chechnya war (1994-1996) were promptly declared to be no longer legitimate.

Instead, at the official end of the second Chechnya war in 2000, Akhmad Kadyrov was appointed the new governor and, following a rigged election in October 2002, proclaimed president of Chechnya. Following Achmad’s murder in May 2004, his post was taken over by his son Ramsan.

The task of the Kadyrov clan consisted of securing formal political control over Chechnya for the Kremlin and at the same time keeping the conflict going in collaboration with the Russian army. Such a state of ongoing tension and hysteria over the alleged threat of “Chechen terrorism” provided the ideal pretext for further draconian repressive measures within Russia itself.

To this end, the Kadyrov clan and the Russian army were given free rein to conduct continuous provocations against the local population in Chechnya. The region became a sort of lawless playground, where the most brutal and ruthless crimes could be carried out and remain unpunished.

A thriving market in weapons, drugs and a slave trade became the mechanism by which both sides—the Russian army and the

Chechen warlords—could profit from the situation. Human life was rendered worthless and the military, together with criminal gangs, could intimidate, extort, rape or murder residents and their families at will, without fear of retribution.

The kidnapping of family members in order to extort the rest of the family became a regular occurrence. Victims would be held in pits under indescribable conditions and were tortured on a regular basis to drive up their ransom price.

Such grievous violations of human rights were the issues Anna Politkovskaya systematically and painstakingly reported from the onset of the new war in 1999. Through her reports, she became an unquestionable source of moral authority in Russia and internationally.

Her colleague at the paper *Novaya Gazeta*, Wjatscheslaw Ismailow, characterized her as follows: “Anna had received murder threats for seven years and was afraid. But she was able to overcome her fear, because she understood how important her work was.”

In her last radio report for *Svoboda* on October 5, on the 30th birthday of Ramsan Kadyrov, she spoke about the increasing number of kidnappings for which Kadyrov bore direct responsibility. She described Kadyrov as a “coward, armed to the teeth, sitting in the middle of his bodyguards.” On her current work, she commented, “Above my table there are two photographs which I am currently investigating. They show abuses carried out yesterday and today in Kadyrov’s torture chambers. These people were kidnapped by Kadyrov’s men for absolutely no reason. . . . The photos of which I speak show horribly abused bodies.”

With regard to Kadyrov, she said, “My personal dream for Kadyrov’s birthday is simple. I dream that he is sitting in the dock while a thorough legal investigation into all of his crimes is being carried out, with all the necessary consequences.”

She attracted special attention because some of her own investigations forced the Russian leadership in the Kremlin to participate in a number of court cases that shed light on the repressive and brutal methods of its rule.

“Putin will never have another birthday,” commented Chechen journalist Manat Abdullajewa. “It will always be the day on which Anna Politkovskaya was murdered, a woman who could neither be bought nor intimidated.” The bloody deed of October 7 is an indictment not only of the Kremlin despot, but of the entire regime in Russia headed Putin.



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