

Russia

What killed Politkovskaya?

By Viktor Erofejev

Putin, whose policies Politkovskaya openly disliked, was right when he said after her death that her impact on Russian politics was minimal

THE contract killing of Anna Politkovskaya, the 48-year-old independent Russian journalist known above all for her articles on the war in Chechnya, can already now be accorded the status of a historic killing. It will enter the history of the Russian state as a monstrous but sadly logical event.

The killing comes at a moment of Russian history when those in power, having done so much over the past seven years to limit criticism of the authorities, are finally enjoying tangible triumph: Anna Politkovskaya, a specialist in investigating political crimes in Russia, had been an endangered species.

The ranks of dauntless journalists ready to speak fearlessly

of those in power is thinning. Some have begun sidling up to the authorities, others have taken up less dangerous topics. In these circumstances, Anna Politkovskaya had become a unique phenomenon — and an exposed target. If there were hundreds of such journalists in Russia, her killing would have made no sense.

I am convinced that her killer was, first and foremost, the paucity of freedoms in Russia. The lack of freedom killed freedom — this is where the sad logic of her killing comes from, no matter who is behind it.

Lack of freedom spawns lawlessness: Russia has fostered numerous vindictive, unpunished people indignant that someone dares to point a finger at them and to say that their actions are criminal. At the same time, authoritarian power always fragments into clans, and the accusations of an independent journalist can be a priceless weapon in the battle of clans or for the liquida-

tion of political rivals.

Anna was killed by the impenetrable fog of secrecy of Russian rule. This was a killing with several levels, in which the executioner, who negligently left his image in a baseball cap on the security camera, played the least role.

Anna was buried at Moscow's Troekurov cemetery, a sort of branch of the famous Novodevichy cemetery where the big bosses lie. This has its historic paradox, a mixing of the styles of different eras. Stalin, after eliminating yet another of his comrades, liked to give them magnificent funerals.

No living leaders were spotted at this funeral. There were, to be sure, former leaders from the time of Yeltsin; the shards of Russian democracy. I felt as if I had returned to the Soviet Union. Hundreds of people who came to say farewell to Anna looked not only crushed, but also helpless. The mourners were shown their real place, as people without rights, who will

be told only what the authorities want them to know.

They shot at Anna, they hit Russia. They shot at a courageous woman, the mother of two children; they killed many of the hopes for the future of the country.

The killing undermined the international reputation of Russia. Actually this worries Russia less and less. What remains is only the semblance of concern. Russia seeks justification more and more within itself, passing its backwardness and lack of competitiveness off as its unique nature.

In principle, Politkovskaya's role amounted to finding ways to modernise Russia and adapting them to moral norms. Everything else she exposed as savagery, corruption or simply incompetence. Her voice became ever more strident not because she was enraged, but because the problems of the country, whether the plight of the Army, or the war in Chechnya, or the rise of one-man rule, or the growth of

nationalism, were becoming ever more complicated, even insoluble. The knot of these problems, that's what killed Politkovskaya.

Her death coincided with Vladimir Putin's birthday and the official eruption of anti-Georgia sentiment, which cannot but frighten ethnic minorities in Russia. Putin, whose policies Politkovskaya openly disliked, was right when he said after her death that her impact on Russian politics was minimal. If we take into account that Politkovskaya represented an unrealisable idea of Russian civil society, then Putin's comment verges on hopelessness.

Russia wants to see itself as big and beautiful. And it resents those who, even out of sober love for the country, prevent it from giving in to illusions.

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