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Subject: Anna Politkovskaya and the Self-Defense of Democracy

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## **Anna Politkovskaya and the Self-Defense of Democracy**

By Jon Hellevig

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The murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya has once again induced a surge of anti-Russianism in Finland. Politicians, so-called researchers and media declare that Russian leaders masterminded the murder. Many people cautiously avoid these direct expressions, while being highly critical of the Russian government. Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja falls somewhere between the two groups, whereas Markku Kivinen from the University of Helsinki affiliated Aleksanteri Institute and MP Heidi Hautala clearly belong to the latter. It is obviously not in the interests of the Russian President to have a well known journalist killed (pointing this out would not be necessary, but for the continuous smear campaign against Russia). Based on information I received from Jukka Mallinen (translator of Politkovskaya's "Putin's Russia" into Finnish), there were no Russian government officials behind the murder. On the other hand, there is reason to put forward an alternative motive, which is quite possible -- that the murder was orchestrated by those wishing to create the kind of public opinion climate to compliment an anti-Russian agenda.

In our culture, we usually honor the memory of the deceased by saying positive things about the departed in times of sorrow. One would like to show the same respect for Politkovskaya as well. But I cannot keep quiet when I see how her memory has been turned into a weapon to hit the Russian people in a manner that hinders Russia's development.

Some are not happy with the opportunities that have been created during Putin's presidency. This includes the chance for many to now actively participate in a democratically run market economy. Upon the Soviet breakup, criminal elements took advantage of the weakness of a young nascent democracy by grabbing and stealing enormous possessions. Putin, courageously challenged the Mafia and oligarchs (often separated through a fine line drawn on water).

Thirsty for "revenge", some of the non-Russian former Soviet states egg on the EU to engage Russia in a confrontational manner. They overlook that Russia and the Russian people were the biggest victims of communism. Led by Yeltsin, the Russian people freed themselves from that burden and encouraged this spirit to other former prisoner-countries. Due to Russia's large land mass encompassing troubled regions, Russia unwillingly gets drawn into dirty games. This predicament gets twisted into the claim of a revanchist Russia bullying small, defenseless others.

Given the uncritical fanfare accorded to Politkovskaya's work as a journalist, there is

reason to critically review it. A case in point is her book "Putin's Russia", (published in 2004) which has been translated into several languages.

In this book, she emotionally focuses on peoples' life situations (a style used in Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, where he childishly tries to prove his theories of capital through the stories of people's everyday lives). Politkovskaya begins and ends her book with a stated disgust of Putin (as per the English translation of the book, see the Introduction as well as pages 281 and 282). She states her dislike of Putin "because he was a product of the Russian security service" (as if George Bush Sr.'s politics should be condemned on the grounds that he headed the CIA; a prevalent talking point in some circles). According to Politkovskaya, the KGB influenced Putin "does nothing but destroy civil liberties as he has all through his career". No mention is made of Putin's support for the late democratic mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. At the end, Politkovskaya states she is disgusted with Putin because there is a war in Chechnya (as if he started it). She adds that in her view, he is a cold, cynical, racist, who is prone to lying (among other references in her book, see pages 281-82). Politkovskaya does not like the fact that this evil (in her view) man goes to Easter church services (pages 279 and 280).

Politkovskaya attacks Putin for being a "racist" and then like a racist claims that Silvio Berlusconi as a European has better powers of thinking than Russia's Putin (page 279).

Politkovskaya's likening of Putin with Stalin (page 272) shows that neither the journalist nor her prize givers and back patters have any sense of proportion. But one should remember that the purpose of this investigative journalist was to tell us about her feelings on why she abhors another person.

Politkovskaya displayed no perception that all phenomena in society are based on social practices and that only a positive historical process can promote the wellbeing of society. She does not understand that the basis of a working society was totally destroyed in the Soviet Union and that it was not until 1990 that the building of a democracy, market economy and society at large was started from the ruins of the bankrupt Soviet estate. Through glimpses of peoples' life experiences, she brings up some of Russia's problems, such as the undeveloped democracy, criminality, corruption, the poor condition of the army, low pensions and the state of the judicial system. In her state of disgust, Politkovskaya did not analyze what has been done about these matters during Putin's presidency. Nor does she consider the impact of decisions taken under him. Instead, she writes of human tragedies like the suicide of an alcoholic and about a former friend of hers; a busy businesswoman who went into politics to grab more riches, etc. She tries to convince the reader that Putin is to be blamed for a tragic suicide and a woman politician's ruthlessness (who succeeded remarkably well). Politkovskaya's idea was that from day one of his presidency, Putin alone had to make sure that all in Russia was right. Much like if President Tarja Halonen was responsible for the unemployment in Kainuu and drunks at Hakaniemi Market Square.

In one of her brief accounts, Politkovskaya mentions an 80 year old man, who had been found frozen to a floor in Irkutsk, Siberia (page 194). The journalist says the emergency services refused to come to the rescue claiming "the man was so old he could obviously not be all right". According to Politkovskaya - Putin should have stopped this. She seemingly suggests that it was brave of her to have said as much.

Politkovskaya writes of an impoverished former navy captain Aleksey Dikin (page 198). His fate is attributed to Putin (with Politkovskaya having the guts to say so).

She does not even think of referencing Soviet Communism as the main culprit Mind you, her chronicling of Dikin in was in the first year of Putin's presidency (2000). Since then, there has been an enormous increase in pensions. I have personally experienced this in the Russian hinterland. At the beginning of this year, I visited a friend of mine in the native village of Azikeevo, situated in the Ural Mountains region of Bashkortostan. A road connection to Azikeevo was opened about ten years ago, at approximately the same time that gas and heating systems were installed. A couple of years ago, phone connections were completed to every cottage. Without any prompting, my friend's 70 year old uncle repeatedly lauded how good living conditions had become. In a healthy spirit, this senior citizen regularly takes care of horses, cows and chickens. Some retired teachers in that village (a married couple) said that pensions were now so good that they could support their children's families (there is a photo report of this trip at [www.hellevig.ru](http://www.hellevig.ru)).

Politkovskaya was far from expert on government, military and legal matters. Topics which Putin has frequently discussed in an openly candid way.

Politkovskaya's writing on terrorist dramas sugarcoated the actions of terrorists. Through their deeds, terrorists try to hurt the society they hit. By killing innocent people, they create public discussion designed to fault the leaders of the target country (reference how terrorists sparked a change in government in Spain). This is incomprehensible logic for a sound person to comment on.

In "Putin's Russia", Politkovskaya blames Putin for government corruption in Ekaterinburg. There is no acknowledgement on her part that this political environment was evident BEFORE Putin became president. Putin proposed to correct this by having the political center play a more active role with the outlying regions. Instead of lauding this action (a popular one with most Russians), Politkovskaya wrongly concluded it to be anti-democratic. A stance overlooking how the political center was more democratic than the most "independent" of Russian regions. The regional governors operated under the cloak of democracy. They were chosen through "democratic" elections, as in the Soviet Union (in another connection, Politkovskaya remembered how people were elected in the Soviet Union, page 271). A colorful bunch of criminals and adventurers appointed themselves as governors under the shelter of formal electing and voting procedures. This view is acknowledged by the European Commissioner for Human Rights (see: Alvaro Gil-Robles, Report on Visits to the Russian Federation, 2004). In these conditions, anyone wanting to be governor had himself elected by using threats, bribes, blackmail and bodily harm. Putin's proposal to strip the regional governors of their mandates made a positive impression. Democracy is now practiced in much more civilized circumstances, based on a democratic competition between the regional parliament and the president. To have the courage to rise against a powerful elite and to succeed is an unbelievably big achievement. In the West, this reality is not fully appreciated, let alone understood. Instead, Politkovskaya's blinded disgust with Putin is uncritically accepted as the gospel.

Politkovskaya characterizes Putin as seeking "revenge" against the oligarchs. Her characterization of the Mikhail Khordorkovsky owned and operated YUKOS is flawed (pages 275, 276, 284 and 285). She erroneously claims that this business entity "operated in daylight" and "gave five percent of its profits to charity". YUKOS flagrantly violated tax laws and other legislation through (among other things) criminal tax paradise companies (I reference a Sitra Report: Suuri Maa Pitka Kvartaali, Big Country Long Quartile, 2005).

Furthermore, Politkovskaya claims that Khodorkovsky got into trouble with Putin

because he supported "the liberal opposition". She omits the fact that Khodorkovsky supported the Communist Party. The romantic side of her activity would be lost if this point was made. She did not state the ulterior motive behind Khodorkovsky's political activism. The "democratic" parties sold him top positions in electoral candidate lists to enable him to place his own trusted candidates. This was how he planned to carry through a takeover of the Russian Duma. But is this the kind of democracy desired by Politkovskaya, Tuomioja and Hautala? In Finland, this advocacy would be considered treason.

A number of anti-Putin analysts admit that former YUKOS CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky had committed crimes, while rhetorically asking "but why Khodorkovsky, just Khodorkovsky"? The answer is clear: others were quicker to realize that their criminal activities in Russia were over. A society cannot be built on revenge. Putin offered an invitation for all to move forward. Russia loses if there is a large scale injustice. This does not mean that democracy has no right to self-defense. This is Putin's Russia, and mine.

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