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Russia

Putin steps up attacks on dissidents

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As the recent murders of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and former spy-in-exile Alexander Litvinenko make clear, anyone who attempts to expose the political subterfuge and corruption in Russia today can pay with their lives. And Russia's new bourgeoisie looks likely to demand an ever more authoritarian state.

The origins of the murdered Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the Russian President Vladimir Putin could not be more diverse.

Politkovskaya was a child of the Soviet bureaucracy, born in fact in New York as the daughter of two Ukrainian diplomats to the United Nations. When the Soviet Union still existed her place as part of the ruling bureaucracy was all but assured but even with its collapse she was better placed than most to jump ship and become part of the new Russian capitalist class. But rather than do any of this she chose to carve out a career for herself in Russia as an investigative journalist. A journalist who through her writings exposed the political reaction and corruption that underpinned post soviet Russia.

If Politkovskaya was born into the Soviet bureaucracy then Putin became its adopted child. Though originating from more humble circumstances Putin was recruited to the KGB (the Soviet secret police) in the 1970s shortly after graduating from university. As a KGB officer Putin would have had first hand practice of carrying out the political persecution and repression of dissidents and has admitted as much in interviews published in *First Person*, his biography.

Putin only resigned from the KGB in August 1991 during the failed putsch against the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Though a part of the ruling bureaucracy albeit as a relatively minor functionary he had clearly come to realise that the political winds of Russia were now blowing in the direction of capitalist restoration.

The political liberalisation that preceded (in the form of Glasnost) and was to continue after the fall of the Soviet Union can be seen as a means of sugaring the very bitter pill of capitalist restoration in Russia. This for example is in complete contrast to China where the ruling Communist Party has maintained its monopoly of political power in the transition to a capitalist economy. But today in Russia even this has barely been able to sweeten the very bitter pill of a neoliberal capitalism. A very tiny minority had been able to buy state owned enterprises at knock down prices to form the new capitalist class whilst the vast majority of the Russian working class were forced into grinding poverty. This has reflected itself for example in mortality rates, where life expectancy especially for men has actually declined in Russia over the last decade or so. Given that things are hardly likely to get better the likelihood is that Russia's new bourgeoisie will come to demand an evermore authoritarian state and one day possibly even one that will dispense with even the formal trappings of bourgeois democracy.

All his forms the political background to the writings of Anna Politkovskaya and other internal critics of the existing regime in Russia. In commenting on the current Russian situation Politkovskaya herself had remarked that Bush and Blair's 'war on terror' after the events of September 11 had been of enormous help to Putin. Putin and others were now more able to openly use similar racist and islamophobic arguments alongside greater Russian chauvinism to justify Russia's occupation of Chechnya. Similar arguments that Bush and Blair had used as a pretext for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Given that the Chechen people are almost overwhelmingly Muslim the Chechen resistance was now increasingly portrayed as Russia's home grown branch of the Islamicist 'axis of evil'. Similarly as Politkovskaya also pointed out the abuses in Abu Ghraib prison, Guantanamo Bay, revelations of the use of torture, CIA secret prisons etc were also used to justify any number of human rights abuses against the Chechen

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people. Not least the tens or even hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths in the First and Second Chechen Wars. After all the argument was that if the 'democratic' west was trampling on human rights of Muslims then it was OK for Russia to do the same against the Chechens.

In 1999 a series of bombings of Russian apartment blocks over a period of two weeks killed over 300 people. The bombings were blamed on Chechen separatists and were used to justify the invasion of Chechnya in what became the Second Chechen War. In the book he co authored *Blowing up Russia: Terror from Within* the now murdered Russian political exile Alexander Litvinenko argued that the 1999 bombings had in fact been orchestrated by the FSB (Federal Security Service, successor to the KGB) to justify the invasion and reoccupation of Chechnya. This also facilitated Putin's election as Russian President in 2000, as the 'hard man' who could deal with the rebellious Chechens. Whether true or not Litvinenko's allegation cannot be dismissed out of hand. Firstly as a former officer in the FSB Litvinenko would have been better placed than most to understand the political psychology of his former working colleagues. Secondly Litvinenko himself was not the first or only person ever to make this allegation. Others both inside and outside Russia having arrived at the same conclusion given that there was an abundance of circumstantial evidence pointing to FSB involvement in the bombings.

Anna Politkovskaya and Alexander Litvinenko were not the first political opponents of Putin to have been murdered for their journalistic activities. Politkovskaya is in fact known to have been the thirteenth journalist murdered in Russia since Putin's election in 2000. Unlike her twelve murdered predecessors Politkovskaya's murder only attracted attention in the west because she was far better known. Her books having been published in the west as well as her having written for liberal western newspapers such as *The Guardian* in Britain. The message sent out from Russia though is clear, anyone who attempts to expose the political subterfuge and corruption in Russia today could well end up paying for it with their own lives. The recent murder of Alexander Litvinenko in London by radiation poisoning has shown that this principle also applies to Russians in exile.

There are though weapons other than political murder that are being used to stifle dissent. One example is a law recently signed onto the Russian statute books by Putin has that been clearly designed to restrict the activities of NGOs. The new law requires all non profit organisations to register with the newly established Federal Registration Service. Furthermore they will also be required to supply full details of their membership, financial records including sources of finance as well as records of all meetings. This law has actually attracted the opposition of religious leaders. Given that theoretically at least the law now requires priests to supply the names and addresses of everyone who attends their congregations, the dates of these congregations etc as churches are now legally deemed to be non profit organizations! The point is that the law is so extensive that strict compliance with the letter of the law is virtually impossible. This will give the Russian government carte blanche to take action against any NGO or campaigning organisation it considers to be troublesome.