



by Predrag Matvejevic

EDITORIAL

*I wrote the first few lines of this letter in Russian after the tragic death of Anna Stepanovna Politkovskaya, shot dead in the lift of her apartment block on Lesnaya Street in Moscow. A version of the text was sent to the Russian embassy on the occasion of Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Rome. Some fragments of it were extracted and published in various languages in the newspapers and on the Internet. After the repression of the protest march by the democratic opposition in Moscow on 14 April and the arrest of some friends of the group "Another Russia", it seems useful and necessary to me that the entire text of this open letter be published.*

Mr President, Vladimir Putin,

I had already started thinking of writing this letter before – and particularly after – all the murders that have taken place in Russia recently: that of Pavel Klebnikov, who opposed “gangster capitalism”, and Viktor Cherpakov, who had decided in faraway Vladivostok to work as “defender of Russia’s poor”; after the violent deaths of courageous and determined women such as the Democratic Russia Party deputy Galina Starovoitova, the defender of minorities Nadezda Chaikova and the twenty-five-year-old journalist Nina Yefimova, correspondent for the liberal weekly “Obshchaya gazeta”, killed on the outskirts of Grozny; Ivan Safronov, correspondent for the daily “Kommersant”, who as investigating Russian arms sales to Syria and Iran, was thrown out of the fourth floor of the house in Moscow where he lived. More than fifteen people such as the above-mentioned ones have been killed, including three journalists with “Novaya gazeta”, the newspaper for which Anna Stepanovna worked. They were all guilty of the same mistake: they had criticised the regime that you head in their writings. Nothing bad has happened to those who have written and continue to write well of the regime: at any



rate, they have not been assassinated. This leads one to make comparisons, draw conclusions. But this is not the only reason why I am writing to you. I would like to add that the support given to political allies such as the Stalinist Alexander Lukashenko or the tyrant Ramzan Kadyrov seems to me to be unworthy; it is reprehensible to joke about the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, particularly Ukraine and the ambition of restoring to Russia its status of “great power”, with everything that the term implies, is suspect. After all the misfortunes that befell Russia in the Soviet era, I found your declaration to the Federal



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Parliament in April 2005 astonishing: you said that “the collapse of the USSR” had been “the twentieth century’s biggest geopolitical catastrophe”, a catastrophe that had led to the “destruction of old ideals, the sudden dissolution and destruction of many institutions”, a collapse in which “groups of oligarchs have conquered unlimited power (...), while mass poverty has been accepted as the rule and we have attained the paralysis of the social sphere”.

What are these destroyed “old ideals” if not those that Stalinism had already destroyed in the worst possible way? Many of us once shared some of those ideals...

What are the “dissolved institutions” that should have been preserved? They were already worn-out or repressive...

Who allowed the “groups of oligarchs” to brazenly grab economic power, thereby letting “mass poverty” become even more entrenched than it had been previously?

Those who attempt to provide answers to these questions face a tragic end in Russia today. Those, on the other hand, who have produced or encouraged this situation have an easier time of it and face no dangers. People who know Russia and its history; people who knew the Soviet Union and its reality, certainly did not expect the transition to be fast and easy, or the transformations to occur without difficulties and obstacles. However, they would not have believed that, in the end, the Russian people would plunge into even worse poverty than that which they had experienced in the Soviet era; that Russia would become technologically backward compared to other industrial powers; that privatisation in Russia would take the form of a generalised ransacking of public goods and that social inequalities would worsen in unacceptable, abyssal proportions and that, in a country so immense and so rich in natural resources, average life expectancy would drop to under the average level in all the other countries of Europe. We would have expected democracy to gradually impose itself but not the

continuation of dictatorship, which was of times past, not only Soviet times.

The decision by which presidents and governors of the Russian Federation's republics are no longer chosen by citizens through elections but are named from on high, by a personal decree of the President of the Federation, provokes disgust or, at the very least, mocking laughter. Many of us have the impression that even an oligarch of high finance such as Khodorkovsky was not toppled from his pedestal and confined in Siberia for having unlawfully accumulated too much money – he is certainly not the only one – but for having financed and supported opposition parties such as Yabloko, which, like the murdered journalists, has criticised those in power.

I do not know if your counsellors have sufficiently informed you of the fact that there are people in the world who

\_Gary Kasparov, leader of the United Civil Front, Alexander Averin of the Bolshevik National Party and St Peterburg MP Sergei Gulyayev at one of the recent anti-Putin protest marches



love Russia but do not shut their eyes to what is happening there; people who reflect on the situation and write about it. The ferocity of the repression in Chechnya, justified as a response to Islamic terrorism – more often a consequence than a cause in the Caucasus (we read Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat* quite some time ago) – has not escaped us. We saw the way Ukraine's attempt to carry out reforms was thwarted and how Yushchenko and Tymoshenko were forced into silence. Having had the opportunity to meet Gorbachev several times in Italy and Spain at the World Political Forum, of which he is president and I am an executive member, I have realised that the promoter of *glasnost* is afraid of you and has therefore decided to avoid any criticism of the current situation – criticism that *perestroika*, on the other hand, made possible in other areas.

Authoritarianism has not brought Russia luck. Great power policies have destroyed it. The power it exercised, and still exercises, on other countries and peoples has covered it in shame.

I am convinced that you and your collaborators are well aware of these things. You know how hard the lives of Russians were and continue to be, today as in the past. You know how great and justified is their desire to free themselves from poverty and conquer the dignity of free men.

I am also writing you these few lines in the name of many men and women – not only of Russian origin – who are keenly aware of the great sacrifices Russia made in the Second World War, contributing to the conquest of freedom and the good of humanity. I know many intellectuals all over the world, Russians and others, who appreciate Russian culture and art and above all its great literature; these are a memory rather than a real presence today.

Please reflect on how much needs to be done so that Russia's future can be different, better than the present and the past. Allow me, therefore, to conclude this letter with some of the opinions of the regretted

Anna Politkovskaya, whom I met in Paris a few years ago and got to know in Mantua: “Brezhnev was awful. Andropov was bloodthirsty under a patina of democracy. Chernenko was an idiot. Gorbachev wasn’t popular. With Yeltsin, we had to make the sign of the cross every so often for fear of the consequences of his decisions... The political movements spawned recently by a Kremlin decree are much in vogue at home, so that the West will not suspect that ours is a single-party, authoritarian and non-pluralist system”.

I wrote a few of the following lines to President Gorbachev before he left power to tell him how I saw the alternatives for the country he had led. For a long time now we have been asking ourselves: What will the Russia of the future be like? Traditional and conservative, as it once was, or modern and liberal? “Holy” or profane? Orthodox or schismatic? Will it be more “white” than red or more “red” than white? Slavophile or Occidentalist? Asiatic or European? More collectivist than “populist”? Mystic and Messianic in its way, or laicized and secularized? Will it be a Russia that “cannot be understood with the intellect” and in which “we can only believe” as the poet Tyutchev claimed in the 19th century, or the tough, “big-bottomed” (*tolstozadaja*) Russia that Alexander Blok exalted? A Russia “with Christ” or “without the Cross”? A real democracy or a mere “democratura” (I coined this terms several years ago)? Will it be only Russian (*ruskaja*) or “of all the Russias” (*rossiskaja*, *vserossiskaja*)? Whatever its destiny, Russia must in any case take into account both what has remained after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and what, with the dissolution, it has perhaps irretrievably lost. With best wishes.

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