

## DFN Hosts Online Meeting with Journalist Anna Politkovskaya

### Exiled Author to Discuss Chechnya and Russia's Role in the Fight against Terrorism

NEWARK, N.J., November 9, 2001 — The Digital Freedom Network (DFN) will host an online meeting with Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya on Thursday, November 15 from 4:00 PM to 5:00 PM New York Time (Thursday, 9:00-10:00 PM GMT).

#### DFN CHAT

DFN's chat with Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya will take place on **Thursday, November 15** from **4:00 to 5:00 PM NY time** (Fri. 9:00-10:00 PM GMT) at <http://dfn.org/meet>.

The online meeting, which is free and open to the public, will take place on DFN's Web site at <http://dfn.org/meet>. No registration is required. Anyone may attend the meeting and post questions to Ms. Politkovskaya in the moderated forum. The chat will be in English, translated by author Andrey Kurkov.

Anna Politkovskaya is an award-winning Russian journalist who covered the war in Chechnya. Her exposes of the atrocities there sparked international protests and forced her to flee her native land last month after she received death threats from the Russian military. Ms. Politkovskaya's articles were collected into a book, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, published recently by Harvill Press.

Ms. Politkovskaya will discuss her experiences in Chechnya as well as Russia's new role since the terrorist attacks of September 11. She will also answer questions from the audience.

**A free copy of *A Dirty War* will be awarded to one chat participant, selected at random.**

The online meeting will be accessible to anyone running a Java-enabled Web browser or an Internet Relay Chat (IRC) client application.

*The Digital Freedom Network (DFN) is an international organization that develops and promotes the use of Internet technology for human rights activism. DFN designs online campaigns, makes technical information more readily available to activists, and provides an online voice to those attacked for expressing themselves. DFN's web site is <http://dfn.org>.*

## PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Life in a Failing Democracy

By Anna Politkovskaya

Metropolitan. 274 pp. \$25

Since coming to power in 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin has had one clear central objective: strengthening the Russian state, at home and abroad. For Putin, Russia's second post-Soviet leader and a former KGB official, the disappearance of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a tragedy that produced anarchy, corruption, instability and uncertainty. He pledged to end the chaos by restoring the state power that had been lost under his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin. Everything else, such as free-market economic reforms or careful, balancing diplomacy, was a means to this end.

Above all, Putin believed that the way to make Russia stronger was to shift more authority to the Kremlin. Motivated by this conception of state-building, Putin has shrunk or eliminated every serious check on presidential power. Russia's two houses of parliament, its independent media, regional governors, the prime minister's office, independent political parties and civil society -- all are weaker today than they were in 2000, leaving the presidency as the country's sole meaningful center of decision-making.

Putin's more autocratic state is supposed to be a more effective state. But has it delivered? In "Putin's Russia," Anna Politkovskaya answers with an emphatic no. A courageous investigative journalist who has produced jarring and tragic accounts of Putin's brutal war in Chechnya, Politkovskaya makes her case against Putin not by systematically cataloguing the democratic rollbacks that he has successfully pursued in the past six years; on the contrary, despite the book's subtitle, it contains almost no direct discussion of Russia's increasingly autocratic politics. Instead, she focuses on dark dramas of individuals in the Putin era. If a theme unites the snippets of everyday life stitched together in this volume, it is that the state is not effective but corrupt -- unable and unwilling to provide basic public goods to the suffering people of Russia. "Putin's Russia" suggests that fear is the only public good that today's Kremlin provides effectively.

Politkovskaya devotes considerable space to showing how Putin's government does little to provide the most basic of state services: a professional army capable of defending the country. Instead, Russia's army "is mostly a prison camp behind barbed wire where the country's young are locked up without trial." Rather than protecting civilians from terrorism or violent crime, the Russian armed services, Politkovskaya argues hotly, have themselves become a perpetrator of terrorism -- first through their activities in Chechnya, where civilians are tortured, raped and murdered, and second through a brutal and unaccountable system of initiating draftees (known as *dedovshina*) that reportedly kills and wounds hundreds every year.

Effective states have independent courts capable of enforcing the rule of law, but Politkovskaya makes the case that Russia has no such institutions. She tells the (overly) detailed story of a violent fight for property among thugs in Yekaterinburg, a city in the Ural Mountains, to demonstrate how Russia's courts serve the interests of criminals and oligarchs, not the rule of law.

Effective states draw borders between the activities of the government and the private sector. Politkovskaya argues that in Putin's Russia, one can become rich only by maintaining close relations with the authorities. Corruption, a problem Putin pledged to fight by building a stronger state, has instead exploded during his tenure.

Effective states provide their citizens a basic level of subsistence. Not Putin's Russia. To make the point, Politkovskaya tells of a World War II veteran who froze to death in his apartment in Irkutsk because local government authorities would not repair a broken heating pipe.

Putin and his comrades simply do not care about people, in Politkovskaya's account: "Their line is wholly neo-Soviet: humans have no independent existence; they are cogs in a machine whose function is to implement unquestionably whatever political escapade those in power have dreamed up. Cogs have no rights, not even to dignity in death." This is strong stuff, from a woman who obviously feels passionately for her people and her country. In the tradition of the great Soviet dissidents, Politkovskaya is unwavering in telling the gruesome truth about the injustices that she has witnessed.

She also unapologetically criticizes Putin and the political and economic system that he has consolidated. Her stories are certainly true, but they are not the only dramas unfolding in today's Russia. Every day that an army private is hazed to death, a middle-class family in Moscow drives to Ikea to purchase furniture for their newly renovated dacha. Every day a veteran dies tragically from the state's neglect, millions of other retirees receive their state pensions on time, something that rarely occurred under Yeltsin. In the aggregate, Russians are wealthier today than they were when Putin took office. Driven by high oil prices (not Putin's state-building), Russia's GDP has grown steadily for the past six years, investment is booming, and the Russian stock market was among the hottest in the world last year. The number of people below the poverty line has dropped significantly, and consumer spending is skyrocketing.

Of course, the trends of state corruption and decay outlined in Politkovskaya's book do threaten the more positive economic story. As this clash between bad political trends and good economic trends deepens, the evidence in "Putin's Russia" suggests that the dark side -- the forces for a non-transparent government and a noncompetitive economy dominated by the state -- will win out.

And yet hidden within Politkovskaya's bleak stories are flashes of individual inspiration. The dominant tone in "Putin's Russia" is one of despair that echoes the Soviet era. But a few of the victims-turned-heroes in Politkovskaya's stories are taking actions that no Soviet citizen would ever have contemplated. For instance, Nina Levurda, a Russian mother whose son died in Chechnya, is trying to sue the state -- not in response to the tragic loss of her son but because of the inhumane manner in which the state reported (or did not report) his death to her. Judge Vladimir Bukreev -- another courageous, very un-Soviet citizen described in these pages -- dared to convict a decorated soldier of the rape and murder of a Chechen woman, despite pressure from the Ministry of Defense. That Politkovskaya herself has withstood poisoning and harassment to tell the truth about Putin's Russia should give even the most pessimistic observer of current Russian affairs some hope.