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From the Baltimore Sun

West must take action to stop Russia's slide

By Svante E. Cornell

October 12, 2006



WASHINGTON -- Recent weeks have seen two events that should alarm American and European leaders about their relationship to Russia. This time, however, alarm and worry aren't enough - what's needed is action.

On Saturday, the renowned journalist Anna Politkovskaya was murdered outside her Moscow home, silencing one of the last independent and critical voices in the country. In the preceding week, Russian authorities chased down ethnic Georgians living in Russia in pogrom-like circumstances, closing businesses and asking schools to register Georgian children, all to punish the Georgian government's refusal to toe Moscow's line.

These two events seem unrelated but in fact have much in common. First, they are both related to the troubled but strategic Caucasus region to Russia's south. Ms. Politkovskaya made her fame - and her enemies - reporting on Russian atrocities in Chechnya. Georgia, just south of Chechnya, is, unlike Chechnya, an independent state. Yet the Georgian government's decision to choose a foreign policy course truly independent from Russia is behind the recent acrimony in its relations with Moscow.

On a deeper level, both events represent the dangers to individuals and states alike of not giving the resurgent and oil-rich Russian government the respect it demands.

Ms. Politkovskaya's frank and fearless reporting was a constant irritant to President Vladimir V. Putin's government. High officials alternately decried her as insane or a traitor. Russia's security services - which Mr. Putin used to lead - once kept Ms. Politkovskaya in a pit for three days without food or water, and once poisoned her on an airplane to the Caucasus, hospitalizing her for weeks. In spite of all this, while the Kremlin took control of almost all media in Russia, she refused to fold.

Constantly followed by a security services car, she kept filing stories at home and in the West. Last week, someone apparently had enough. The murder - like the dozens that led the Committee to Protect Journalists to label Russia one of the three most dangerous countries in the world for journalists - will likely never be solved. But remaining voices of dissent will certainly take note.

As for Georgia, a Russian deputy foreign ministry recently said, "Russia does not want to be provoked; Russia wants to be respected," adding that Russia's policies in Georgia would not change until Russia felt it got the respect it deserved. Until then, Moscow will continue trying to strangle Georgia - endorsing separatist regions in its territory, banning imports, cutting energy supplies and threatening military strikes.

Moscow can't kill a country, but one of Mr. Putin's closest advisers, Gleb Pavlovsky, once suggested the best way to solve the "Georgia problem" was "the cost of a bullet," a reference (never denied) to assassinating Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili.

Russia claims to seek respect, but its behavior is based not on earning respect but rather on instilling fear.

Ms. Politkovskaya revolted against the massive violations of human rights she witnessed in Chechnya. These were, she concluded, condoned if not encouraged by the top leadership. She also decried the increasingly authoritarian system Mr. Putin has installed in a country where freedom of the press is a thing of the past.

Mr. Saakashvili's sin is to lead Georgia away from Russia's embrace and toward Europe, including membership in NATO. He has also laid the foundations of a lasting democracy, an example Mr. Putin does not want to see next door, and has the audacity to seek the removal of Russian troops and the restoration of his government's control over its territory.

The West has been remarkably silent as the Kremlin's stifling of dissent at home and bullying of its neighbors gets uglier. American and European leaders have grown worried, written some and discussed much. But they have done little in terms of support for freedom in Russia or for its beleaguered neighbors. Even Western public statements have been weak and wobbly.

Western leverage over Russia, it is true, is receding as oil revenues grow. Yet this is not an excuse for inaction. What Russia's leaders do at home and abroad must receive a much more forceful and united response.

Concretely, the West must first realize that the 15-year-old policy of appeasing Russia and seeking to integrate it has failed. Appeasement has made Russia not more but less European. The West must coordinate policy priorities on Russia, both across the Atlantic and within the European Union. This will have to include bolder efforts to break Europe's energy dependence on Russia by seeking alternative sources, including from the Caspian Sea region. Finally, it is high time for the West to take up a role in resolving the "frozen" conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and Azerbaijan. This would deny Russia the privilege of manipulating its neighbors, and contribute to stability and freedom in increasingly strategic areas of the world.

American and European leaders must clearly mark the boundaries of what is acceptable; otherwise, the problem of a reckless and wayward Russia may soon become unmanageable. Let no one say the West did not try.

Svante E. Cornell is research director for the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of the [Johns Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies](#) and an associate professor at Uppsala University in Sweden. His e-mail is scornell@silkbroadstudies.org.

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