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Collège d'Europe



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Mr Chairman,
Foreign Secretary,
Mijnheer de Burgemeester,
Mijnheer de Gedeputeerde,
Beste Minister Landuyt,
Excellencies,
Dear Rectors,
Dear Colleagues,
Dear Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Introduction

Freedom of speech, and particularly freedom of the press, is at the heart of any democratic society. The vast majority of countries in the world recognises that freedom at least in theory and in Europe all Member States of the Council of Europe are bound to protect it.

In fact, freedom of the press is subject to various threats in the world at large, even in Europe.

Today, the College of Europe would like to celebrate the memory of two European journalists who were recently murdered because they thought they should speak freely.

First Anna Politkovskaya.

Anna Politkovskaya

Anna Politkovskaya was a Russian citizen of Ukrainian origin. She was born in New York in 1958, the daughter of a Soviet diplomat. She studied journalism in Moscow and then worked for various newspapers and magazines in the 1980's and early 1990's. At that time, as a member of the Russian liberal intelligencia, she placed much hope in the emergence of a democratic Russia. Her work as a journalist in the 1990's and early 2000's is, in broad terms, the story of her disillusionment with the course taken by Russian society following the Fall of Communism.

I.

In 1999, *Novaya Gazeta*, the weekly, later biweekly newspaper, for which she worked, assigned her to cover the Second Chechen War. It was her reporting on events in Chechnya which made her known, particularly in the West.

The first Chechen War had started in 1994. On the one side, was the Russian federal government and on the other, Chechen rebels who wanted Chechnya to secede from the Russian Federation.

The first Chechen War received much media coverage and, on the whole, Russian public opinion did not support that war. It ended in a stalemate, and in 1996, a five year truce was concluded. Chechnya was *de facto* enjoying a large autonomy and a President of Chechnya was democratically elected.

However, being riddled with clans and factions, Chechnya could not be governed effectively. At the end of the Summer of 1999, shortly after President Yeltsin had appointed Mr Putin as Prime Minister, the Russian federal government decided to retake control of Chechnya. This followed two dramatic events. First, the invasion of the neighbouring Republic of Daghestan by a group of Chechen rebels. Second, the explosion of bombs in apartment blocks in Moscow and elsewhere, which caused a great many victims and for which Chechen rebels were immediately held responsible although, to this day, the exact perpetrators have not been identified. Russian public opinion on the whole supported the government's decision to send federal troops to Chechnya.

This time, the Russian authorities decided to restrict media coverage of military operations in Chechnya. Anna Politkovskaya was among the few journalists who would report regularly from Chechnya.

Her reports on the Second Chechen War span the period 1999-2002. They are collected in two volumes. "**A Dirty War**" and "**A Small Corner of Hell – Dispatches from Chechnya**". Anna Politkovskaya is not a war correspondent in the traditional sense. She does not write about military operations. Rather, she paints, in graphic details, the dire consequences of the war : for civilians in Chechnya, whether ethnic Chechens or ethnic Russians; for the Russian military stationed in Chechnya; for the neighbouring republics; and for Russian society at large.

Her chronicling of the Chechen War makes bleak reading. Her two books are replete with descriptions of human sufferance, often difficult to bear : indiscriminate killings, abductions, extra-judicial killings, torture, rapes, civilians maimed by the explosion of landmines, the wounded treated in hospitals deprived of the basic necessities, elderly people stranded in besieged Grozny, the harsh life of the young Russian soldier, the gruesome deeds of rebels and paramilitaries, the psychopathic behaviour of warlords,

In this increasingly dehumanised world, typical of all civil wars, if not of all wars, a few unsung heroes emerge : the public official who tries to help refugees, the army officer who behaves humanly towards his subordinates or who tries to spare civilian lives, the rare public prosecutor ready to prosecute war crimes, the judge willing to sanction them, surgeons lacking proper medical equipment and working tirelessly to try to save lives, poor civilians sharing their meagre resources with people even more destitute.

Anna Politkovskaya knew that her reports made uncomfortable reading and she confesses that there were Russian readers who would ask her why she was forcing these awful stories upon them.

Actually, she felt engaged in a moral crusade. As a journalist and as a Russian democrat she thought that she ought to make the Russian citizen and the outside world aware of the real situation in Chechnya. She was neither a supporter of the Chechen armed insurgents, nor of the Chechen authorities put in place by the Russian federal government. Her deep conviction was that the way Russian armed forces, and particularly, the intelligence forces, were operating in Chechnya, could not bring a lasting peace to the region, but rather was more likely to breed a new generation of insurgents and enemies of Russia. She saw the Chechen War as having a harmful effect on the morals of the Russian military and more broadly as acting as a cancer in Russian society.

II.

In addition to the two collections of reports on Chechnya, Anna Politkovskaya published two other books, one titled "**Putin's Russia**", the other "**A Russian Diary**", in which Chechnya often looms in the background.

As she herself readily concedes "**Putin's Russia**" is not an analysis of President Putin's politics, but the expression of "her emotional reactions jotted down in the margins of life as it is lived in Russia today". There, she tackles various aspects of Russian life often using as a starting point the personal stories of ordinary Russian citizens. She depicts the sorry state of the military, the bullying of young conscripts, resulting at times in their death, and how soldiers' mothers decide to react. She sees a society without bearings, where a few succeed through hard work and bribes, where many merely manage to survive and where some unable to adapt sink irremediably. She provides examples of the mounting racism directed towards people from the Caucasus.

She tells tales of corruption and murders in the Urals, retracing in detail how shady deals are made thanks to the collusion between public officials, dubious businessmen, members of the police, the criminal underworld and some judges, all of whom she names.

She also analyses the objective reasons why it is difficult for many judges to remain truly independent, and those who do, get her praise.

Although she has no illusion concerning how oligarchs have made their fortune, she deplores the plight of Mikhail Khodorovsky, whose fate was sealed, she thinks, once he decided to use his considerable wealth to fund political causes.

Her last book, "**A Russian Diary**", is mostly a chronicle of Russian politics between December 2003 and the Summer 2005.

In her opinion, in Russia, democracy, which has never been well entrenched, is now receding. She sees the political system as evolving towards a regime where the mechanisms of democracy are more and more managed from above. She criticises a series of legislative measures which, in her view, are designed to reduce the possibility for the citizens to express themselves freely, such as the appointment of the Provincial governors by the President, instead of them being elected; or provisions tinkering with the federal electoral system. She regrets the gradual taming of the mass media. She would have certainly deplored the fact that the Russian authorities

now want to reduce to ineffectiveness the monitoring of elections in Russia by OSCE observers.

As many would, Anna Politkovskaya considers that democracy cannot thrive in the absence of effective political opposition. Her drama is that she must acknowledge that she does not see a meaningful opposition developing in Russia. She is contemptuous of the squabbling liberal opposition, which has become largely irrelevant because of its failure to take into account the needs of a large part of the Russian population. At times, she expresses greater sympathy for the communists and for the young National Bolsheviks.

The dilemma she faces is that she cannot deny that in their majority people in Russia have become "indifferent to all things political". This, she says, is the sorry result of 13 years of Russian democracy. To quote her

"our people have been exhausted by having political and economic experiments conducted on them".

All the same, she cannot reconcile herself with the idea expressed by some, in Russia and in the West, that the Russian mentality would require a tsar-like leader, or that democracy would need to be adapted to Russian national traditions. Such a view, she finds, demeans the Russian people.

III.

Anna Politkovskaya did not always limit her role to that of a journalist. Where she thought she could help save lives she would not hesitate to intervene.

For example, she participated in the rescuing of a group of elderly people trapped in Grozny.

She was also ready to serve as a mediator in the two major hostage crises which shook Russia in recent years : those which took place in the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow in 2002 and in Beslan in Ingushetia in 2004. Both involved Chechen hostage takers and, in both cases, the rescue operations ended tragically.

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As a journalist, Anna Politkovskaya is at her best when she narrates the story of individuals, particularly the downtrodden, in order to illustrate the larger social and political issues confronting Russia.

However, as remarked by **The Economist**, when she goes into generalisations, she sometimes makes harsh and sweeping statements, which may need to be qualified.

Present day Russia cannot be compared to Stalinist Russia. Despite having to overcome a great many obstacles, she could travel, and publish what she saw and what she thought, including her very severe criticism of President Putin's way of governing Russia. In several instances, she received the help of members of the administration. She could get access to some top officials and military personnel in order to interview them. She even received permission to visit a nuclear submarine, part of the Pacific fleet. But in her work, she faced a major hurdle : she could not reach a mass audience, because she was barred from appearing on television.

Admittedly, a country like Russia cannot be reduced to what Anna Politkovskaya describes in her reports. Indeed, she does not refer to what does work in Russia, such as the improvement of the general economic situation. She deliberately chose to address those unpleasant realities that many would like to overlook. She thought it was her responsibility to make the Russian citizen aware of them.

In pursuing this mission, she showed unusual personal courage and she courted great risks. She was once briefly detained in Chechnya and became subject to abusive behaviour by some army officers. In 2004, she was poisoned, flying to Beslan.

Her unsparing reports on war crimes, unpunished murders, pervasive corruption made her many enemies in Chechnya and in Russia. She was regularly threatened. This did not impede her work. However, on the 7th of October 2006, she was murdered near her apartment in Moscow. She was the 13th journalist to be murdered in Russia since 2000. At the time of her death, none of these contract killings had been solved, an example of the culture of impunity against which she fought so hard.

A few days after her assassination, President Putin, who was on an official visit to Germany, said, in reply to a question from a journalist about Anna Politkovskaya :

“She was well-known in the media community, in human rights circles, and in the West, but her influence on political life within Russia was very minimal (...), in my opinion she was too radical”.

As indicated earlier, Anna Politkovskaya might have, in part, agreed with that matter-of-fact assessment. She was under no illusion regarding her influence in current Russia. Nonetheless, she felt that it was her duty to continue to testify, if only for the future.

Later, President Putin said that she had criticised the authorities fairly acutely, something he found good.

Today, 10 accomplices to her murder are in jail. The murderer may have been identified, but has not yet been found. The person who ordered her murder remains unknown.

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Hrant Dink

A la figure d'Anna Politkovskaya mérite d'être associée celle d'un autre journaliste, Hrant Dink, assassiné à Istanbul au début de cette année, lui aussi parce que ce qu'il disait et écrivait déplaisait à certains.

Hrant Dink était un citoyen turc d'origine arménienne. C'est ainsi qu'il s'identifiait. Ceux qui l'ont connu le décrivent comme un homme juste, courageux, généreux, et comme un « bâtisseur de ponts » entre turcs et arméniens. Après avoir travaillé comme libraire, il avait participé en 1996 à la création d'**Agos**, un journal hebdomadaire bilingue (turc et arménien) dont il était devenu le rédacteur en chef.

Dink voulait attirer l'attention sur les discriminations dont la minorité arménienne faisait l'objet en Turquie, et dont il avait fait personnellement l'expérience. Mais il voulait tout autant œuvrer à la réconciliation des Turcs et des Arméniens. Il luttait tout naturellement pour la défense des Droits de l'Homme et pour le progrès de la démocratie en Turquie.

Il considérait que la réconciliation des Turcs et des Arméniens devait être fondée sur la redécouverte de l'histoire qu'ils avaient partagée pendant près de 1000 ans sur cette terre d'Asie mineure qu'il chérissait. La reconnaissance du massacre des Arméniens en 1915 à la fin de l'Empire ottomane faisait partie intégrante de cette redécouverte. Lui-même voyait dans ce massacre un génocide au vu du résultat, mais il estimait que, plus que le mot, ce qui importait était l'admission de la réalité des faits. Une telle admission par la société turque requerrait une période d'apprentissage de la vérité. Il plaçait ses espoirs dans l'éducation, les progrès de la

démocratie en Turquie sous l'égide du gouvernement actuel et le rapprochement entre la Turquie et l'Union européenne.

D'autre part, il soulignait que les Arméniens eux-mêmes devaient dépasser les événements de 1915, aussi horribles eussent-ils été, et cesser de se définir par opposition à ce qui était turc. Il jugeait que les puissances occidentales avaient une part de responsabilité dans ces événements tragiques, car elles avaient à dessein attisé l'hostilité entre Turcs et Arméniens. Il critiquait aussi l'utilisation politique qui était parfois faite du massacre des Arméniens dans les pays occidentaux. Ainsi, ne se montrait-il pas favorable à l'adoption par des pays étrangers tels la France, de lois relatives au génocide arménien. Il refusait donc d'épouser la position de beaucoup d'Arméniens de la diaspora.

Hrant Dink était un homme d'ouverture et il avait le soutien d'intellectuels turcs. Son journal avait une influence dépassant son tirage limité, car certains de ses articles étaient à l'occasion repris par la presse turque à grand tirage.

Mais ses efforts pour faire reconnaître le fait arménien au sein de la République turque lui attirèrent l'ire de milieux nationalistes et lui valurent des poursuites judiciaires. Les premières se terminèrent par un acquittement, les secondes par une condamnation pour avoir contrevenu à l'article 301 du Code pénal turc qui interdit d'insulter l'identité nationale turque. Cette disposition qui ouvre la porte à toute espèce d'interprétation a été utilisée ces dernières années afin de limiter la liberté d'expression de journalistes, d'écrivains et d'historiens. L'Union européenne a demandé son abolition.

Hrant Dink fut condamné à six mois de prison avec sursis pour des mots qu'il avait utilisés dans un article relatif aux Arméniens. Tirés de leur contexte, les mots en question pouvaient paraître dénigrer le sang turc. Remis dans leur contexte, il en allait tout autrement. Dink, usant d'un langage imagé, essayait simplement de convaincre les Arméniens, en particulier ceux de la diaspora, qu'ils devaient cesser de se définir à partir de leur inimitié vis-à-vis des Turcs.

Malgré un avis du Procureur général en sa faveur, la Cour de Cassation rejeta son pourvoi. Hrant Dink plaça alors ses espoirs dans un recours auprès de la Cour européenne des Droits de l'Homme.

Sa condamnation l'affectait particulièrement comme il l'explique de façon émouvante dans un article rédigé le jour précédant sa mort. Dans cet article, il fait part de son inquiétude face aux insultes et menaces dont il était la cible, et que sa condamnation avait multipliées. Il ne pouvait supporter d'être traité de « traître » à la Turquie. Evoquant les menaces de mort qui lui étaient adressées, il se comparait à une colombe sans cesse aux aguets, tâchant de deviner d'où pourrait venir le danger.

Le 19 janvier 2007, il était abattu par un jeune extrémiste originaire de Trapzon. Il avait 52 ans. L'enquête a révélé que le tueur n'avait pas agi seul, mais avait été soutenu par une organisation, et que des membres de la police étaient au courant de la menace qui pesait sur lui.

L'assassinat de Hrant Dink provoqua une grande indignation en Turquie. Le gouvernement le condamna vigoureusement et il invita des représentants de l'Arménie à assister aux funérailles de Hrant Dink. Lors de celles-ci, 100.000 personnes défilèrent dans les rues d'Istanbul proclamant « Nous sommes tous des Arméniens » et « Nous sommes tous des Hrant Dink ». L'écrivain turc, Orhan Pamuk, récent Prix Nobel, qui avait été poursuivi sur la base de ce même article 301, pour avoir évoqué dans une interview le massacre d'un million d'Arméniens en 1915, dénonça la responsabilité que les partisans de cette disposition avaient dans l'assassinat de Hrant Dink.

Le mois dernier pourtant, le fils de Hrant Dink et un éditeur d'**Agos** étaient condamnés sur la base de cette même disposition en raison de la publication en 2006 d'une interview de Hrant Dink où il avait utilisé le mot génocide.

Last week, under the pressure of the European Union, the Turkish government announced that it was about to submit to the Turkish Parliament a proposal to amend that infamous article 301, which serves as a yoke to stifle freedom of speech. Perhaps Hrant Dink didn't die in vain. Perhaps his death will help Turkey to fulfill the conditions for becoming a member of the European Union, something I personally would welcome.

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Conclusion

Dear students, democracy cannot exist without freedom of expression and, in particular, freedom of the press. Anna Politkovskaya and Hrant Dink exercised their right to free speech despite the many threats they were exposed to. They thought that it was their duty to inform and educate their fellow citizens. They did so at the price of their life. They deserve, I believe, to be the joint Patrons of the 2007-2008 Promotion of the College of Europe and I hope their example may serve as inspiration to you.

Source footnotes will appear later.