

Anna Politkovskaya**No justice**

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Russia is still no closer to finding those who murdered Anna Politkovskaya

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WHO killed Anna Politkovskaya, Russia's best and bravest campaigning journalist? Who organised it? Who were the shadowy figures seen on CCTV footage, tailing her in the days leading up to her murder? And who gave the order? By the time the sometimes-farcical trial of four men charged in connection with the killing ended in an acquittal on Thursday February 19th, few believed that the answer to any of these questions would emerge. The story of Ms Politkovskaya's death in 2006 and the bungling, evasive behaviour of the Russian authorities in dealing with it was just the sort of topic suited for her own fiery pen.

The jury acquitted two brothers, Dzhabrail and Ibragim Makhmudov, who were charged with acting as accomplices in the murder. A former police officer, Sergei Khadzhikurbanov, was found not guilty of organising it. Pavel Ryaguzov, a former agent with the FSB, Russia's domestic-security service, was acquitted of a related extortion charge. But that bare summary does not do justice to the baroque mixture of intrigue, incompetence and official secrecy that followed Ms Politkovskaya's murder.

The official reaction to the killing left many feeling outraged. Vladimir Putin, then the Russian president, issued condolences but described her as a "marginal" figure: that was true, but only in the sense that Russia's slavishly pro-Kremlin mainstream media no longer gave her airtime. Abroad, she was the country's best-known journalist, a prolific author and columnist. It took two years to mount even the most lackadaisical investigation of her murder. The case put by prosecutors was riddled with holes and inconsistencies. For reasons that remain unclear, the case was heard by a military court, where the judge tried to hold the trial in private, claiming that the jury was afraid of being seen on television. One brave juror phoned Russia's main surviving independent radio station to say that this was a lie. The rest

of the trial proceeded mostly in public.

Only a handful of the people that prosecutors believe were involved in the crime were put on trial. They include a rum, and now squabbling, mix of serving and retired law-enforcement officers and organised criminals. The evidence against those in the dock was largely circumstantial and packed full of inconsistencies. The man said by police to have been the assassin, Rustam Makhmudov (brother to the other Makhmudovs), was not found. The prosecution tiptoed round the clear evidence of FSB involvement—for example in supplying the alleged murderers with Ms Politkovskaya's address and other details from official databases, or providing fake papers for the alleged assassin himself. That may have been the result of corrupt, freelance behaviour by rogue officers, or it may reflect sinister official backing for the murder. Neither hypothesis is comforting. The only glimmer of hope is that the jury refused to accept the shambolic official version of events at face value, and threw it out.

How much the events of the past months represent a cover-up, and how much is genuine confusion, is impossible to work out. It is abundantly clear that the FSB obstructed attempts to shed light on its own connection with the murder. The details of what happened on October 7th 2006 are reasonably clear: Ms Politkovskaya was shot in her apartment building, as she returned home, bringing shopping for her pregnant daughter. But the much bigger question is who ordered the killing. Among the suspects—all of whom vehemently deny involvement—are pro-Kremlin politicians in Chechnya, who were the subject of some of Ms Politkovskaya's most damning reporting. The Kremlin line is that she was murdered by people trying to discredit the Russian authorities. Anyone following the trial might feel that they were doing a pretty good job of discrediting themselves.

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