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## [Anna Politkovskaya still wages peace](#)

- Swanee Hunt

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Worldwide, at least 81 journalists were killed in 2006 -- the highest annual toll in more than a decade -- and murder was the leading cause of death, according to two organizations that promote freedom of the press, Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Among the murdered was Anna Politkovskaya, who was shot point blank in the head with a revolver in the elevator outside her Moscow apartment.

Anna was special -- the Kremlin says it has assembled 150 investigators to look into her killing. But sadly she wasn't so special -- 21 journalists have been killed in Russia since Vladimir Putin took power in March 2000.

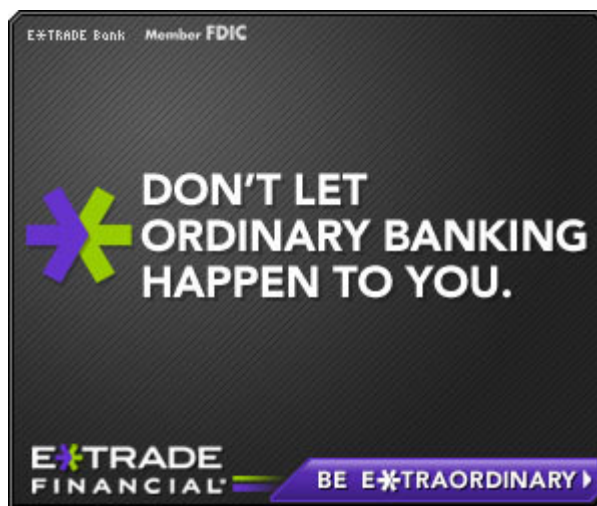
That's the year Politkovskaya came to Harvard University for a two-week conference I hosted. For years thereafter, I knew her as the world's strongest voice describing the plight of Chechnya's civilian population, under military assault by the Russian government since 1994. Her death has stayed in the news, in part, because she was a winsome 48-year-old, in part because the former spy who set out to find her killer died a gruesome and high-profile death in London from polonium-210 poisoning.

The Russian government tried to suppress the impact of her death. One of Politkovskaya's colleagues told me that the media reported that hundreds of people came to her memorial, but one very old woman said there were many more, as many as at Stalin's. The colleague also said the American ambassador deeply moved the audience, especially because there was no official Russian representative.

High-level Western diplomats ascribe even more meaning to her murder, explaining that a dense chill has spread over the Russian public space. The cycle is pernicious: Independent media fights the corruption that is saturating government, security forces and courts. But even more than formal censorship, nervous reporters are self-censoring. And without their unfettered speech, the system becomes still more dangerous for their profession. It's a circle common in dysfunctional lands. As Baroness May Blood from Northern Ireland warns from her own experience of The Troubles, "We do not dare because it is difficult; and it is difficult because we do not dare."

Russian independent media has been mostly bought up by the state. All the TV stations have been taken over by the government, and Novaya Gazeta, the paper for which Politkovskaya wrote, is purportedly the last independent publication in the Russian Federation. It's almost impossible now for reporters to get to Anna's Chechen beat, where the Russian army is accused of massive human rights abuses.

Politkovskaya was one of several hundred leaders from conflicts as far flung as Colombia, Congo and Cambodia who have been meeting to share strategies and strength. Like Anna, who told a



friend that every morning she awoke thinking that day might be her last, these women face daily danger. But in her death, instead of invoking fear, "Politkovskaya" has become a rallying whisper not only for Russians, but also for these "women waging peace."

Many have sent me their thoughts about Anna. One is Sue Britton, who endured solitary confinement during South Africa's apartheid era. She called Chechnya "a current microcosm of the oppression that seems to have been going on forever. Always an enemy must be found, to justify greed and lust for power. Always the truth must be covered up. And always, thank God, people like Anna have the courage to go on and speak the truth. Such people are considered 'dangerous.' The Church burned witches for 300 years. We're more civilized now. But are we? No, just more sophisticated at hiding our oppression. Let us not fall into a dream and think it never happened, or that it is not happening at this moment, somewhere in the world."

Another note came from a Kenyan leader who does not allow her name to be used because her brother and father were murdered after she spoke on radio. She wrote about Anna, "The old fearful story always sounds new when you hear it again. Yet we will not be afraid, even as we are raped, beaten, imprisoned and assassinated. We will shake the soil of our graves until the whole world hears our voices."

This month, women government leaders gathered once again to build coalitions to stop bloodshed in their homelands. I was struck with how in her death as in her life, Politkovskaya has galvanized those who understand that, with liberty, comes responsibility to work for those denied liberty. Across cultures and circumstance, women from Sudan to Nepal were united around the sentiment of Iraqi judge Zakia Hakki: "As long as we stand firm on the front line, working for justice, equality, and freedom, Anna is alive in our minds and souls."

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Page E - 5

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