



A RUSSIAN DIARY

ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

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About the Book

A Russian Diary is the book that Anna Politkovskaya had recently completed when she was murdered in a contract killing in Moscow. Covering the period from the Russian parliamentary elections of December 2003 to the tragic aftermath of the Beslan school siege in late 2005, *A Russian Diary* is an unflinching record of the plight of millions of Russians and a pitiless report on the cynicism and corruption of Vladimir Putin's presidency.

She interviews people whose lives have been devastated by Putin's policies, including the mothers of children who died in the Beslan siege, those of Russian soldiers maimed in Chechnya then abandoned by the state, and of 'disappeared' young men and women. Elsewhere she meets traumatised and dangerous veterans of the Chechen wars and a notorious Chechen warlord in his heavily fortified lair.

Putin is re-elected as president in farcically undemocratic circumstances and yet Western leaders, reliant on Russia's oil and gas reserves, continue to pay him homage. Politkovskaya, however, offers a chilling account of his dismantling of the democratic reforms made in the 1990s. Independent television, radio and print media are suppressed, opposition parties are forcibly and illegally marginalised, and electoral law is changed to facilitate ballot-rigging. Yet she also criticises the inability of liberals and democrats to provide a united, effective opposition and a population slow to protest against government legislative outrages.

Clear-sighted, passionate and marked with the humanity that made Anna Politkovskaya a heroine to readers

throughout the world, *A Russian Diary* is a devastating portrait of contemporary Russia by a great and brave writer.

About the Author

Known to many as 'Russia's lost moral conscience', Anna Politkovskaya was a special correspondent for the Russian newspaper *Novaya gazeta* and the recipient of many honours for her writing.

She is the author of *A Dirty War* and *Putin's Russia*. Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in Moscow in October 2006.

ALSO BY ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

A Dirty War: a Russian Reporter in Chechnya
Putin's Russia

A Russian Diary

Anna Politkovskaya

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY
Arch Tait

WITH A FOREWORD BY
Jon Snow

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Foreword

Reading Anna Politkovskaya's *A Russian Diary* in the knowledge of her terrible end – at the hand of an assassin in the stairwell of her Moscow apartment block – it seems to foretell that she could not possibly be allowed to live. What she reveals here, and demonstrated in her earlier writings, are such wounding and devastating truths about the regime of President Vladimir Putin that someone, sooner rather than later, was bound to kill her. In some ways it is miraculous that she lived as long as she did.

More miraculous is that amid the post-Soviet upheavals a journalist arose who almost single-handedly brought to the world's attention the scandalous tragedy of Chechnya and so many more of modern Russia's misdeeds. The behaviour she exposed, and continues to expose in this record, represents a vast body of systemic political and human rights abuse. For this is the diary she kept during the period from the corrupted parliamentary elections of December 2003 to the end of 2005 and the aftermath of the Beslan school siege.

As I read *A Russian Diary* I wondered what on earth we have embassies in Russia for. How did it happen that our leaders so steadfastly ignored what they knew Putin was up to? Was it the hunger for gas? For the riches of the outrageous post-Communist sell-off of Russian state assets and manufacturing resources, through which our financial institutions participated in the rise of the thieving oligarchs? Or was it the blind desire to keep Russia 'on side', whatever the cost to her own impoverished people?

It was those people that Anna Politkovskaya travelled huge distances to talk to, and to represent. The risks she took were terrifying but the intense reality she portrays is breathtaking. After the 2004 bombing of the Moscow Metro in which thirty-nine people were killed, she visits some of the victims' homes. She discovers that 'cause of death' on a number of the death certificates is simply crossed out - even in death, she writes, 'the Russian state can't refrain from dishonesty. Not a word about terrorism.'

Anna's journalism meant that she very quickly became a rallying point for those the state made suffer. One night, after 11.00 p.m., she takes an anguished call from Ingushetia. "Something terrible is going on here! It's a war", women were screaming into the telephone, "Help us! Do something! We are lying on the floor with the children!"

Anna's formative years as a journalist were lived under the yoke of Communism. She came of radical campaigning age as, in 1991, the USSR transmogrified into the Russian Federation, led by President Boris Yeltsin. As the new countries of the former Soviet Union began to stand on their own feet a number of internal wars broke out. One of the most serious was the First Chechen War (1994-6) when predominantly Islamic Chechen rebels sought to found a breakaway, independent state. Anna was one of those whose reporting created the circumstances which made possible the eventual peace settlement and Russian troop withdrawal. Indeed, she identifies stopping that war as the media's greatest achievement during the relatively free Yeltsin years.

Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin and his initiation of the Second Chechen War in 1999 raised both the military and the journalistic stakes. Drawing on his secret service background, Putin took measures to ensure that the media would not be able to embarrass him with reports of Russia's brutal activities in Chechnya. Anna was to visit Chechnya on more than fifty occasions. The newspaper for which she

worked, *Novaya gazeta*, remained one of the very few publications which would not bow to Kremlin pressure to reduce or tone down their coverage.

By 2002, Putin was taking full advantage of the Bush-Blair 'war on terror' as cover for Moscow's wholesale crackdown in Chechnya. Anna became increasingly isolated. She reported the extra-judicial killings, kidnappings, rapes, torture and disappearances that characterised the Russian forces' methods as they struggled to contain the Chechen War, and she often reported these alone. Increasingly Anna felt, and wrote publicly, that Putin's policies actively nurtured the very terrorists they were supposedly designed to defeat. Threaded through these accounts is her deep conviction that Putin's path to the presidency was shaped around, and dependent upon, his pursuit of the Chechen conflict. She even links some of the specific torture practices that she uncovers in Chechnya to those extolled by the KGB and its successor the FSB in their training manuals.

Her account of Putin's re-election in 2003 is astonishing both for her own bravery and for the facts she discloses. The disappearance of Ivan Rybkin, one of the candidates challenging Putin, could read like fiction were it not so serious. Having disappeared from Moscow, where he says he was drugged, Rybkin surfaces in London. As Anna observes, 'a defecting presidential candidate is a first in our history'. But she is in no doubt that it is the political culture engendered by Putin's camp that has led to this state of affairs.

Shortly after the election, a young activist lawyer, Stanislav Markelov, is beaten up on the Moscow Metro by five youths. Anna describes them shouting at him, "'You've made a few speeches too many! . . . You had this coming'". It was to prove a nasty foretaste of things to come. Needless to say, as Anna reports, the police refused to open a

criminal case, and we still do not know who attacked Markelov nor who ordered them to.

In September 2004 Anna fell victim to poison introduced into a cup of tea aboard the plane she was taking to Rostov. She was making her way to the school siege at Beslan. Thereafter, the combination of her isolation and the increasing pressure upon her from the 'authorities' served to push Anna beyond reporting into campaigning and fighting for the rights of those she perceived to be victims of the Kremlin's policies.

During the Moscow theatre siege in October 2002, Anna had taken an active role as an intermediary between the authorities and the kidnappers. Her intention was to do the same at Beslan. It is at this point that some journalists might judge that she had crossed the Rubicon from objective reporter to partisan. But Russia was in a state of post-Communist evolution, if not revolution. Anna regarded respect for human rights as the Rubicon. Once, as she saw it, the Putin regime committed itself to a wholesale disregard for human rights in Chechnya, she felt she had no alternative but to oppose it.

Anna will, however, be judged on the full body of her work. That includes this remarkable book. In this, as in all her writing, her tireless commitment to getting at the truth shines through, but so do the eventually fatal risks she took in order to report.

For many of us who continue to aspire to the highest standards of journalism, Anna Politkovskaya will remain a beacon burning bright, a yardstick by which integrity, courage and commitment will be measured. Those who met her over the years can testify that she never allowed her feet to leave the ground, never basked in fame or celebrity. She remained modest and unassuming to the end.

Who killed Anna and who lay beyond her killer remain unknown. Her murder robbed too many of us of absolutely vital sources of information and contact. Yet it may,

ultimately, be seen to have at least helped prepare the way for the unmasking of the dark forces at the heart of Russia's current being.

I must confess that I finished reading *A Russian Diary* feeling that it should be taken up and dropped from the air in vast quantities throughout the length and breadth of Mother Russia, for all her people to read.

Jon Snow
February 2007

Translator's Note

Some of Anna's diary entries include comments which she added at a later date, and these are separated by a centred asterisk. Comments in round brackets are her own. Her murder just as the translation was being completed meant that final editing had to go ahead without her help. Information added by the translator is enclosed in square brackets. An asterisk in the text indicates an entry in the glossary.

PART ONE

The Death of Russian Parliamentary Democracy

December 2003–March 2004

How Did Putin Get Re-Elected?

ACCORDING TO THE census of October 2002, there are 145.2 million people living in Russia, making us the seventh most populous country in the world. Just under 116 million people, 79.8 per cent of the population, describe themselves as ethnically Russian. We have an electorate of 109 million voters.

7 December 2003

The day of the parliamentary elections to the Duma, the day Putin began his campaign for re-election as President. In the morning he manifested himself to the peoples of Russia at a polling station. He was cheerful, elated even, and a little nervous. This was unusual: as a rule he is sullen. With a broad smile, he informed those assembled that his beloved Labrador, Connie, had had puppies during the night. 'Vladimir Vladimirovich was so very worried,' Mme Putina intoned from behind her husband. 'We are in a hurry to get home,' she added, anxious to return to the bitch whose impeccable political timing had presented this gift to the United Russia party.

That same morning in Yessentuki, a small resort in the North Caucasus, the first 13 victims of a terrorist attack on a local train were being buried. It had been the morning train, known as the student train, and young people were on their way to college.

When, after voting, Putin went over to the journalists, it seemed he would surely express his condolences to the families of the dead. Perhaps even apologise for the fact

that the Government had once again failed to protect its citizens. Instead he told them how pleased he was about his Labrador's new puppies.

My friends phoned me. 'He's really put his foot in it this time. Russian people are never going to vote for United Russia now.'

Around midnight, however, when the results started coming in, initially from the Far East, then from Siberia, the Urals and so on westwards, many people were in a state of shock. All my pro-democracy friends and acquaintances were again calling each other and saying, 'It can't be true. We voted for Yavlinsky*', even though . . .' Some had voted for Khakamada*.

By morning there was no more incredulity. Russia, rejecting the lies and arrogance of the democrats, had mutely surrendered herself to Putin*. A majority had voted for the phantom United Russia party, whose sole political programme was to support Putin. United Russia had rallied Russia's bureaucrats to its banner - all the former Soviet Communist Party and Young Communist League functionaries now employed by myriad government agencies - and they had jointly allocated huge sums of money to promote its electoral deceptions.

Reports we received from the regions show how this was done. Outside one of the polling stations in Saratov, a lady was dispensing free vodka at a table with a banner reading 'Vote for Tretiak', the United Russia candidate. Tretiak won. The Duma* Deputies from the entire province were swept away by United Russia candidates, except for a few who switched to the party shortly before the elections. The Saratov election campaign was marked by violence, with candidates not approved of by United Russia being beaten up by 'unidentified assailants' and choosing to pull out of the race. One, who continued to campaign against a prominent United Russia candidate, twice had plastic bags

containing body parts thrown through his window: somebody's ears and a human heart. The province's electoral commission had a hotline to take reports of irregularities during the campaign and the voting, but 80 per cent of the calls were simply attempts to blackmail the local utility companies. People threatened not to vote unless their leaking pipes were mended or their radiators repaired. This worked very well. The inhabitants of the Zavod and Lenin Districts had their heating and mains water supply restored. A number of villages in the Atkar District finally had their electricity and telephones reconnected after several years of waiting. The people were seduced. More than 60 per cent of the electorate in the city voted, and in the province the turnout was 53 per cent. More than enough for the elections to be valid.

One of the democrats' observers at a polling station in Arkadak noticed people voting twice, once in the booth and a second time by filling out a ballot slip under the direction of the chairman of the local electoral commission. She ran to phone the hotline, but was pulled away from the telephone by her hair.

Vyacheslav Volodin, one of the main United Russia functionaries who was standing in Balakov, won by a landslide, with 82.9 per cent of the vote; an unprecedented victory for a politician devoid of charisma who is renowned only for his incoherent speeches on television in support of Putin. He had announced no specific policies to promote the interests of local people. Overall in Saratov Province, United Russia gained 48.2 per cent of the vote without feeling the need to publish or defend a manifesto. The Communists got 15.7 per cent, the Liberal Democrats* (Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's* party) 8.9 per cent, the nationalistic Rodina (Motherland) Party* 5.7 per cent. The only embarrassment was that more than 10 per cent of the votes cast were for 'None of the above'. One-tenth of the voters had come to

the polling station, drunk the vodka and told the lot of them to go to hell.

According to the National Electoral Commission's figures, over 10 per cent more votes were cast in Chechnya*, a territory totally under military control, than there are registered voters.

St Petersburg held on to its reputation as Russia's most progressive and democratically inclined city. Even there, though, United Russia gained 31 per cent of the vote, Rodina about 14 per cent. The democratic Union of Right Forces* and Yabloko* (Apple) Party got only 9 per cent each, the Communists 8.5 and the Liberal Democrats 8 per cent. Irina Khakamada, Alexander Golov, Igor Artemiev and Grigorii Tomchin, democrats and liberals well known throughout Russia, went down to ignominious defeat.

Why? The state authorities are rubbing their hands with glee, tuttutting and saying that 'the democrats have only themselves to blame' for having lost their link with the people. The authorities suppose that, on the contrary, they now have the people on their side.

Here are some excerpts from essays written by St Petersburg school students on the topics of 'How my family views the elections' and 'Will the election of a new Duma help the President in his work?':

My family has given up voting. They don't believe in elections any more. The elections will not help the President. All the politicians promise to make life better, but unfortunately . . . I would like more truthfulness . . .

The elections are rubbish. It doesn't matter who gets elected to the Duma because nothing will change, because we don't elect people who are going to improve things in the country, but people who thieves. These elections will help no one - neither the President nor ordinary mortals.

Our Government is just ridiculous. I wish people weren't so crazy about money, that there was at least some sign of moral principle in our Government, and that they would cheat the people as little as possible. The Government is the servant of the people. We elect it, not the other way round. To tell the truth, I don't know why we have been asked to write this essay. It has only interrupted our lessons. The Government isn't going to read this anyway.

How my family views the elections is they aren't interested in them. All the laws the Duma adopted were senseless and did nothing useful for the people. If all this is not for the people, who is it for?

Will the elections help? It is an interesting question. We will have to wait and see. Most likely they won't help in the slightest. I am not a politician, I don't have the education you need for that, but the main thing is that we need to fight corruption. For as long as we have gangsters in the state institutions of our country, life will not get better. Do you know what is going on now in the Army? It is just endless bullying. If in the past people used to say that the Army made boys into men, now it makes them into cripples. My father says he refuses to let his son go into an Army like that. 'For my son to be a cripple after the Army, or even worse - to be dead in a ditch somewhere in Chechnya, fighting for who knows what, so that somebody can gain power over this republic?' For as long as the present Government is in power I can see no way out of the present situation. I do not thank it for my unhappy childhood.

These read like the thoughts of old people, not the future citizens of New Russia. Here is the real cost of political cynicism - rejection by the younger generation.

8 December

By morning it is finally clear that while the left wing has more or less survived, the liberal and democratic 'right wing' has been routed. The Yabloko party and Grigorii Yavlinsky himself have not made it into the Duma, neither has the Union of Right Forces with Boris Nemtsov and Irina Khakamada, nor any of the independent candidates. There is now almost nobody in the Russian Parliament capable of lobbying for democratic ideals and providing constructive, intelligent opposition to the Kremlin.

The triumph of the United Russia party is not the worst of it, however. By the end of the day, with more or less all the votes counted, it is evident that for the first time since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has particularly favoured the extreme nationalists, who promised the voters they would hang all the 'enemies of Russia'.

This is dreadful, of course, but perhaps only to be expected in a country where 40 per cent of the population

live below even our dire official poverty line. It was clear that the democrats had no interest in establishing contact with this section of the population. They preferred to concentrate on addressing themselves to the rich and to members of the emerging middle class, defending private property and the interests of the new property owners. The poor are not property owners, so the democrats ignored them. The nationalists did not.

Not surprisingly, this segment of the electorate duly turned away from the democrats, while the new property owners jumped ship from Yabloko and the Union of Right Forces to United Russia just as soon as they noticed that Yavlinsky, Nemtsov and Khakamada seemed to be losing their clout with the Kremlin. The rich decamped to where there was a concentration of the officials without whom Russian business, which is mostly corrupt and supports and feeds official corruption, cannot thrive.

Just before these elections, the senior officials of United Russia were saying openly, 'We have so much money! Business has donated so much we don't know what to do with it all!' They weren't boasting. These were bribes that meant, 'Don't forget us after the elections, will you?' In a corrupt country, business is even more unscrupulous than in countries where corruption has at least been reduced to a tolerable level and where it is not regarded as socially acceptable.

What further need had they of Yavlinsky or the Union of Right Forces? For our new rich, freedom has nothing to do with political parties. Freedom is the freedom to go on great holidays. The richer they are, the more often they can fly away, and not to Antalya in Turkey, but to Tahiti or Acapulco. For the majority of them, freedom equals access to luxury. They find it more convenient now to lobby for their interests through the pro-Kremlin parties and movements, most of which are primitively corrupt. For those parties every problem has its price; you pay the money and you get the

legislation you need, or the question put by a Duma Deputy to the Procurator-General's Office. People have even started talking about 'Deputies' denunciations'. Nowadays these are a cost-effective means of putting your competitors out of business.

Corruption also explains the growth of the chauvinistic 'Liberal Democratic Party', led by Zhirinovskiy. This is a populist 'opposition', which is not really an opposition at all because, despite their propensity for hysterical outbursts on all sorts of issues, they always support the Kremlin line. They receive substantial donations from our completely cynical and apolitical medium-sized businesses by lobbying for private interests in the Kremlin and adjacent territories such as the Procurator-General's Office, the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Bureau, the Ministry of Justice and the courts. They use the technique of Deputies' denunciations.

That is how Zhirinovskiy got into the Duma both last time and this. Now he has an enviable 38 seats.

The Rodina party is another chauvinistic organisation, led by Dmitry Rogozin* and created by the Kremlin's spin doctors specifically for this election. The aim was to draw moderately nationalist voters away from the more extreme National Bolsheviks. Rodina has done well too, with 37 seats.

*

Ideologically, the new Duma was orientated towards Russian traditionalism rather than towards the West. All the pro-Putin candidates had pushed this line relentlessly. United Russia encouraged the view that the Russian people had been humiliated by the West, with openly anti-Western and anti-capitalist propaganda. In the pre-electoral brainwashing there was no mention of 'hard work', 'competition' or 'initiative' unless in a pejorative context. On the other hand,

there was a great deal of talk of 'indigenous Russian traditions'.

The electorate was offered a variety of patriotism to suit every taste. Rodina offered rather heroic patriotism; United Russia, moderate patriotism; and the Liberal Democrat Party, outright chauvinism. All the pro-Putin candidates made a great show of praying and crossing themselves whenever they spotted a television camera, kissing the Cross and the hands of Orthodox priests.

It was laughable, but the people blithely fell for it. The pro-Putin parties now had an absolute majority in the Duma. United Russia, the party created by the Kremlin, took 212 seats. Another 65 'independents' were to all intents and purposes also pro-Kremlin. The result was the advent of a one-and-a-half party system, a large party of government plus several small 'barnacle' parties of similar persuasion.

The democrats talked so much about the importance of establishing a genuine multi-party system in Russia. It was something in which Yeltsin* took a personal interest, but now all that was lost. The new configuration in the Duma excluded the possibility of significant disagreement.

Shortly after the elections, Putin went so far as to inform us that Parliament was a place not for debate, but for legislative tidying up. He was pleased that the new Duma would not be given to debating.

The Communists won 41 seats as a party, plus a further 12 through individual Communists standing independently. It pains me to say that today it is the Communist Deputies who are the most moderate and sensible voices in the Fourth Duma. They were overthrown only 12 years ago, yet by late 2003 they had been transfigured into the great white hope of Russia's democrats.

In the months that followed, the arithmetic in the Duma changed somewhat, with Deputies migrating from one party to another. Absolutely everything the Presidential

Administration wanted passed got approved by a majority vote. Although in December 2003 United Russia had not obtained a sufficient majority large enough to change the Constitution (for which 301 votes are required), this was not to prove a problem. In practical terms, the Kremlin 'engineered' a constitutional majority.

I choose the word advisedly. The elections were carefully designed and executed. They were conducted with numerous violations of electoral law and, to that extent, they were rigged. There was no possibility of legally challenging any aspect of them because the bureaucrats had already taken control of the judiciary. There was not a single ruling against the results by any legal institution, from the Supreme Court down, no matter how indisputable the evidence. This judicial sanctioning of the Big Lie was justified as being 'in order to avoid destabilising the situation in the country'.

The state's administrative resources swung into action in these elections in just the same way as in the Soviet period. This was also true in no small measure of the elections in 1996 and 2000 in order to get Yeltsin elected, even though he was ill and decrepit. This time, however, there was no holding back the Presidential Administration. Officialdom merged with the United Russia party as enthusiastically as it used to with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the CPSU). Putin revived the Soviet system as neither Gorbachev* nor Yeltsin had done. His unique achievement was the establishment of United Russia, to the cheers of officials who were only too glad to become members of the new CPSU. They had plainly been missing Big Brother, who always did their thinking for them.

The Russian electorate, however, was also missing Big Brother, having heard no words of comfort from the democrats. There were no protests. United Russia's election slogans were stolen from the Communists and were all

about rich bloodsuckers stealing our national wealth and leaving us in rags. The slogans proved so popular precisely because it was now not the Communists proclaiming them.

It has also to be said that in 2003 a majority of our citizens heartily supported the imprisonment, through the efforts of members of United Russia, of the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky*, head of the Yukos oil company. Accordingly, although manipulating the state's administrative resources for political ends is no doubt an abuse, the politicians had public support. It was just a matter of the Administration leaving nothing to chance.

8 December

Early in the morning, political analysts assembled on the *Free Speech* programme to discuss the results as they came in. They were jittery. Igor Bunin talked of a crisis of Russian liberalism, about how the Yukos affair had suddenly aroused a wave of anti-oligarchic feeling in the middle of the campaign. They talked about the hatred that had accumulated in the hearts of many people, 'especially decent people who could not bring themselves to support Zhirinovsky', and the fact that the eclectic United Russia party had managed to unite everybody, from the most liberal to the most reactionary. He predicted that the President would now stand in for the liberals in the ruling elite.

On the same programme, Vyacheslav Nikonov, the grandson of Molotov, suggested that young people had not turned out to vote and this was the main reason for the democrats' defeat. 'Ivan the Terrible and Stalin are more to the taste of the Russian people.'

The evening's television continued. The programme was funereal, with an added sense of impending stormy weather. Those in the studio seemed more inclined to take shelter than to fight. Georgii Satarov, a former adviser to President

Yeltsin, insisted that the outcome had been decided by the 'nostalgia vote' of those who pined for the USSR. The democrats came in for a lot of flak. The writer Vasilii Aksyonov complained that the liberals had failed to exploit the unsavouriness of the Yukos affair. He was quite right. The democrats failed to take a stand one way or the other over the issue of Khodorkovsky's treatment.

*

Free Speech was shortly to be taken off the air by its parent company, NTV, to which Putin commented, 'Who needs a talk show for political losers?' He was referring, no doubt, to Yavlinsky, Nemtsov and the other defeated liberals and democrats.

Vyacheslav Nikonov was to transform himself a few months later into a raging apologist for Putin. There were to be many such conversions among political analysts.

So, where would we go from here? Our freedoms were bestowed upon us from above, and the democrats kept running to the Kremlin for guarantees that they would not be revoked, in effect accepting the state's right to regulate liberalism. They kept compromising, and now had nowhere left to run to.

On 25 November, 13 days before the elections, a number of us journalists had talked for five hours or so to Grigorii Yavlinsky of the Yabloko party. He seemed very calm and confident, to the point of arrogance, that he would make it into the Duma. We suspected some bargain had been struck with the Presidential Administration; provision of administrative resources to support Yabloko in return for 'burying' a number of issues during the campaign. For me and many others who used to vote for Yabloko, this made our flesh creep.

Yavlinsky had no time for the idea of an alliance between Yabloko and the democratic Union of Right Forces party.

'I consider that the Union of Right Forces played an enormous part in unleashing the Chechen war. It was the only party which could in any way be described as democratic and in favour of civil society, yet they chose to say that the Russian Army was being reborn in Chechnya, and that anybody who thought otherwise was a traitor who was stabbing the Russian troops in the back.'

'So who else could Yabloko now unite with against the war in Chechnya?'

'Now? I don't know. If the Union of Right Forces were to admit that they had been wrong, we could discuss the possibility of an alliance with them. But while Nemtsov is pretending to be a dove of peace and Chubais* is talking about the liberal ideal, you'll have to forgive me, I'm not prepared to discuss that possibility. Whom else we could unite with I don't know.'

'But it was not the Union of Right Forces who began the Second Chechen War.'

'No, it was Putin, but they supported him as a candidate for the presidency and, incidentally, legitimised him as a war leader in the eyes of the intelligentsia and the entire middle class.'

'You are at daggers drawn with the Union of Right Forces. You don't want an alliance with them, but you have embarked on a number of compromises with the President and his Administration in order to obtain some degree of administrative support for your campaign. As I understand it, and there have been many rumours to this effect, the war in Chechnya is precisely the compromise in question. You have agreed not to make too much noise about the Chechen issue, and in return you have been guaranteed the necessary percentage of votes to get you into the Duma.'

'Don't rely on rumours. That is a completely wrong approach. There are rumours about your own newspaper too. No other paper is allowed to write about Chechnya, but

you are not shut down for doing so. The rumour is that they give you that leeway so they can go to Strasbourg and wave your newspaper about to show what a free press we have. See what is being written about Chechnya in *Novaya gazeta*! I don't suppose for a moment that is really the way things are . . .'

'All the same, please give a straight answer.'

'I never struck any such deal or agreed any such compromise. It is out of the question.'

'But you did have talks with the Administration?'

'No, never. They talked about giving us money back in September 1999.'

'Where was that money coming from?'

'We didn't get down to that kind of detail, because I said it was unacceptable. I said I was not against Putin - I had only just set eyes on the man - but to say I would endorse everything he was going to do six months in advance was impossible. I was told, "Then in that case we cannot reach agreement with you, either." Later, after the elections, when the leaders of the parties were invited to the Kremlin and seated in accordance with their percentage of the vote, one of the most highly placed officials in the land said, "And you could have been sitting here . . ." I replied, "Well, that's just the way it is." This time they didn't even offer.'

'When did you last speak to Putin?'

'On 11 July, about the Khodorkovsky affair and the searches at Yukos.'

'At your request?'

'Yes. They assembled the entire State Council and the leaders of the political parties at the Kremlin to discuss economic programmes, etc. The meeting ended at half-past ten at night and I told Putin I needed to talk to him urgently. At half-past eleven I met him at his home. We discussed various problems, but the main one was Khodorkovsky.'

'Did you realise that Khodorkovsky would be imprisoned?'

'There was no knowing that in advance, but it was clear that the affair was being taken very seriously. I realised something bad would happen to Khodorkovsky when the *Financial Times* in London published an enormous article with photographs of Khodorkovsky, Mikhail Fridman* and Roman Abramovich, under a very large headline, which they don't usually do. The story was to the effect that those oligarchs were transferring their wealth to the West and preparing to sell everything here. There were quotes from Fridman saying it was impossible to create modern businesses in Russia, that although they themselves were really pretty good managers, there was no way, in the midst of all the corruption, you could establish proper companies in our country.'

'Have you already reconciled yourself to the fact that Putin will win a second term?'

'Even if I don't reconcile myself to that, he will get it.'

'How do you realistically assess your chances?'

'How should I know? Our own research tells us we have eight or nine per cent, but we are talking about elections where votes get added here, added there, and they call it "managed democracy". People just give up.'

'I have the impression that you are giving up too. After all, people in Georgia* rejected the results of rigged elections and used extra-parliamentary methods to alter the situation. Perhaps you should do the same? Perhaps we all should? Are you prepared to resort to extra-parliamentary methods?'

'No, I'm not going down that path, because I know that in Russia it would end with the spilling of blood, and not mine, either.'

'What about the Communists? Do you think they might take to the streets?'

'Everybody is gradually being fed the information that they are going to get twelve to thirteen per cent. It has

already become the conventional wisdom. I don't rule that out, because politically Putin has very successfully stolen their clothes. United Russia is hardly going to take to the streets because it's been awarded thirty-five per cent and not thirty-eight, and there are no other mass parties. They simply don't exist. Forming a political opposition in Russia became a practical impossibility after 1996. Firstly, we lack an independent judiciary. An opposition has to be able to appeal to an independent legal system. Secondly, we lack independent national mass media. I mean television, of course, and primarily Channel One and Channel Two. Thirdly, there are no independent sources of finance for anything substantial. In the absence of these three fundamentals it is impossible to create a viable political opposition in Russia.

'There is no democracy now in Russia, because democracy without an opposition is impossible. All the prerequisites for a political opposition were destroyed when Yeltsin beat the Communists in 1996, and to a large extent we allowed them to be destroyed. There isn't even the theoretical possibility of a 100,000-strong demonstration anywhere in Russia today.

'It is a peculiarity of the present regime that it doesn't just brutishly crush opposition, as was done in the era of totalitarianism. Then the system simply destroyed democratic institutions. Now all manner of civil and public institutions are being adapted by the state authorities to their own purposes. If anyone tries to resist, they are simply replaced. If they don't want to be replaced, well then, they'd better look out. Ninety-five per cent of all problems are resolved using these techniques of adaptation or substitution. If we don't like the Union of Journalists, we will create Mediasoyuz. If we don't like NTV with this owner, we will reinvent NTV with a different owner.

'If they began taking an unwelcome interest in your newspaper, I know perfectly well what would happen. They

would start buying up your people, they would create an internal rebellion. It wouldn't happen quickly, you have a good team, but gradually, using money and other methods, inviting people to come closer to power, turning the screws, cosyng up, everything would start to fall apart. That's how they dealt with NTV. Gleb Pavlovsky stated openly that they had murdered public politics. It was no more than the truth. The authorities also deliberately create pairings, so that everybody has someone to shadow. Rodina can take on the Communists; the Union of Right Forces can take on Yabloko; the People's Party can take on United Russia.'

'But if they are up to all this trickery, what are they afraid of?'

'Change. The state authorities act in their corporate interests. They don't want to lose power. That would put them in a very dangerous situation, and they know it.'

Yavlinsky was not to make it into the Duma.

Were we seeing a crisis of Russian parliamentary democracy in the Putin era? No, we were witnessing its death. In the first place, as Lilia Shevtsova, our best political analyst, accurately put it, the legislative and executive branches of government had merged and this had meant the rebirth of the Soviet system. As a result, the Duma was purely decorative, a forum for rubber-stamping Putin's decisions.

In the second place - and this is why this was the end and not merely a crisis - the Russian people gave its consent. Nobody stood up. There were no demonstrations, mass protests, acts of civil disobedience. The electorate took it lying down and agreed to live, not only without Yavlinsky, but without democracy. It agreed to be treated like an idiot. According to an official opinion poll, 12 per cent of Russians thought United Russia representatives gave the best account of themselves in the pre-election television debates. This despite the fact that the representatives of United Russia flatly refused to take part in any television