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Journalists walk dangerous line in Russia

Skeptics doubt authorities will solve latest killing

By Judith Ingram

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MOSCOW — Russia has become a deadly place for journalists who run afoul of government officials or their business and political partners.

Those behind the killings, though, are rarely brought to justice, reinforcing a sense of impunity that may have encouraged the killers of Anna Politkovskaya, a fierce critic of the war in Chechnya.

As the European Union and the U.S. demanded a thorough probe into Saturday's contract-style killing, there was skepticism that the authorities would ever uncover the culprits of the latest in a series of killings of journalists in Russia under President Vladimir Putin, who has been increasingly accused of rolling back post-Soviet freedoms since coming to power in 2000.

The skepticism was underlined by the \$929,700 reward for information that Novaya Gazeta has offered, signaling stronger faith in their own investigative efforts than those promised by the government, which has produced so few prosecutions before.

"Russia is a uniquely hostile place for the execution of independent journalism. It is both violent and repressive," said Joel Simon, executive director of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Politkovskaya's editors said she had been due to publish an investigative article today about torture and kidnappings in Chechnya based on witness accounts and photos of tortured bodies.

She was at least the 43rd journalist killed for her work in Russia since 1993, according to CPJ, which has ranked Russia the third-most-deadly country for journalists, after Iraq and Algeria. Many were killed while reporting on the two wars in Chechnya, and six were caught up in fighting between government and opposition forces in Moscow in 1993.

Many more appear to have been targeted because of their attempts to dig into allegations of corruption. The killers have rarely been found.

Dmitry Kholodov, a reporter who investigated military corruption, was killed in October 1994 when a briefcase he had picked up at a Moscow train station following an anonymous call blew up in his office. Colleagues said he had been told it contained evidence.

Six men charged in the killing, including four former members of an elite paratroops unit, were acquitted in two separate trials, in 2002 and 2004; the Russian Supreme Court upheld those rulings in June 2005.

Natalya Skryl, a business reporter for Nashe Vremya in Rostov-on-Don, was beaten over the head in March 2002 and died the next day. Colleagues said she had been investigating a dispute over control of a metals plant, and that was the most probable reason for her murder.

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Suspicion in the killing of Politkovskaya, whose body was found in the elevator in her apartment building on Saturday, has fallen on the Moscow-backed Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov.

Politkovskaya, one of the few Russian journalists writing about widespread human- rights abuses in Chechnya, had been a persistent critic of Kadyrov, whose security forces are alleged to be involved in widespread abductions and torture.

Politkovskaya also angered other powerful people — including the Russian military — with her investigative reporting and human-rights advocacy.

Novaya Gazeta said Sunday its reporters would conduct their own investigation.

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