

# Disarray in Putin regime's cover-up of murder of Anna Politkovskaya

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On August 27, Russian General Prosecutor Yuri Chaika announced the detention of 10 people for the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, insisting that the case had been “solved.” In his statement about the arrests, Chaika repeated the position taken by the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin in the immediate aftermath of Politkovskaya’s murder—that the mastermind behind the slaying was someone overseas, who commissioned the crime in order to discredit Putin.

While he did not mention this individual by name, the target of Chaika’s comments was clearly Boris Berezovsky, the Russian oligarch and opponent of the Putin regime who is living in exile in London. “The person who ordered this murder,” stated Chaika, is trying to “destabilize the situation in this country ... bringing us back to a previous system of governance, when money and the oligarchs decided everything.”

Chaika also indicated that those responsible for the murder had ties to the Chechen criminal underworld.

Anna Politkovskaya achieved fame as a critic of the brutal policies of the Putin regime in Chechnya, where the military and its backers within the local government have been waging a campaign to suppress an armed separatist movement. Politkovskaya’s exposés in the Russian weekly *Novaya Gazeta* were well known for uncovering the horrific violence meted out against the local Chechen population and the corruption that pervades all aspects of life in this small, but strategically located republic in the Caucasus.

Politkovskaya was shot to death by a gunman in the entryway to her Moscow apartment on October 7, 2006. She was the thirteenth journalist to be murdered in Russia since Putin’s ascension to power in 2000.

In recent days, the investigation has shown signs of falling into disarray. Some suspects have been released, another appears to have a strong alibi, and one more seems to have been arrested for crimes completely unconnected to the journalist’s murder. In addition, contradictory information about the accused and the state of the investigation is cropping up in the Russian media, in part the result of press leaks.

On September 4, the government announced the replacement of the lead investigator in the case, Pyotr Garibyan, with the head of the serious cases directorate at the general prosecutor’s office, Sergey Ivanov. The government denies that this was a political move, claiming that it just wanted to add more people to the investigation team.

The crisis plaguing the Politkovskaya investigation began shortly after Chaika’s announcement about the resolution of the case. This set off a firestorm of media coverage, in which the Russian press, citing sources close to the general prosecutor’s office, published the names of the accused prior to any official statement by the government. According to early reports, at least five of the ten people implicated in the murder have ties to the police and security services, a fact acknowledged by Chaika in his initial statement.

In addition, media reports, which were later confirmed by sources within the Federal Security Service (FSB), stated that an eleventh person, FSB

agent Pavel Ryaguzov, had also been arrested in conjunction with Politkovskaya’s murder.

On August 29, the government finally confirmed the list of arrested people that had been circulating in the media.

In the ensuing days, the government’s case seemed to unravel even more. Two suspects, Aleksey Berkin and Oleg Alimov, the former a private security guard (who had initially been identified as a police officer) and the latter a police officer, were released on August 31 due to lack of evidence. Of the other three arrestees with links to the police—Dmitiry Lebedev, Dmitiry Grachev, and police major Sergei Khadzhikurbanov—only the case against Lebedev, about whom little is known, remains thus far untouched by questions.

According to information first uncovered by *Kommersant*, a Russian business daily, Khadzhikurbanov has an “iron-clad” alibi due to the fact that at the time of Politkovskaya’s murder he was in prison on charges of planting evidence in a police abuse case stemming from 2004. The Moscow City Court, which had initially sanctioned his arrest in the Politkovskaya case, eventually ordered his release upon learning of his imprisonment at the time of her murder. While Khadzhikurbanov’s imprisonment does not rule out the possibility that he somehow played a role in the murder, his release may indicate that the general prosecutor’s office does not have sufficient evidence to make such a claim.

The identity of Dmitiry Grachev, who still remains in custody, has also been called into question. According to an article in the online newspaper *Gazeta.ru* on September 4, Grachev is neither a police officer nor a security guard, as initially claimed by the general prosecutor’s office, but a driver at the Institute of the Problems of Ceramics in Moscow. He got drawn into the case because he uses the institute’s auto shop to repair cars on the side. According to Grachev, he knew Khadzhikurbanov only because he had repaired his car at various times over the past several years.

The situation surrounding FSB agent Ryaguzov is also unclear. Over the course of two days last week his arrest was overturned and then upheld again by the Moscow District Military Court. Within days of news of Ryaguzov’s arrest in the Politkovskaya murder, information was circulating within the media that he had actually been detained for crimes committed in 2002 that bear no relationship to the Politkovskaya affair.

However, after ruling on September 3 that Ryaguzov’s arrest was illegal, the Moscow District Military court issued a decision on September 4 that Ryaguzov remain in custody. His lawyer continues to maintain that the charges against him have nothing to do with the Politkovskaya murder and that he was never informed of any connection between his client and the journalist’s murder.

In addition to these six men, five Chechens were taken into custody by Chaika in connection with the Politkovskaya investigation. Three of these men—the brothers Tamerlan, Dzhabrail and Ibragim Makhmudov—are accused of being contract killers and members of the Lazanskaya Chechen crime group, which supposedly played a role in organizing

Politkovskaya's murder. However, as reported by *Kommersant* and maintained by their lawyer, the three men could not have been part of this affair as the Lazanskaya gang was broken up by police many years ago when they were still children. The Makhmudovs deny their guilt in the slaying.

According to the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya*, which is supportive of the government's claim that Politkovskaya was murdered by an overseas cabal of foreign interests opposed to Putin, in alliance with the Chechen criminal underworld, Akhmed Isayev, another Chechen detained by Chaika, has ties to a Chechen crime group with major investments in the gambling industry. Little information has surfaced about the fifth of the accused Chechens, Magomed Dimilkhanov.

The way in which the investigation has been handled has evoked the criticism of Politkovskaya's son, Ilya Politkovsky, and her former employer, *Novaya Gazeta*, which has been conducting its own investigation into the murder.

The editorial board of *Novaya Gazeta* issued a statement on August 30 that made a series of careful criticisms of the government investigation. The newspaper raised the question of who orchestrated the press leaks about the investigation, insisting that it was in the interests of those within the administration who wanted to hamper the investigation, as it would effectively tip off suspects to the direction of the government's inquiry.

"For someone, this was about the desire to make money. For someone, this was purely to meddle with the consequences of a full revelation of all the circumstances surrounding the contract killing of a journalist and a whole series of other crimes," stated *Novaya Gazeta*. Politkovsky echoed the newspaper's criticisms, describing the handling of the investigation and the press leaks as a "betrayal."

In addition, *Novaya Gazeta* wrote that while it believes that those who were arrested played a part in the slaying, they by no means represent all of those involved, thus rejecting Chaika's implication that the case was closed. *Novaya Gazeta* insisted that the central issue of who ordered Politkovskaya's murder is still an open question, expressing extreme skepticism of the government's claim that the murder was orchestrated overseas, i.e., by Berezovsky.

Over the course of the last several years, Berezovsky, who was initially a strong supporter of the Putin regime, has assumed a central role among the community of Russian oligarchs and other exiles from the Russian ruling elite who have transformed themselves into opponents of the Russian president. From London, Berezovsky openly calls for the overthrow of the Putin regime.

The Putin administration's claim that Berezovsky ordered the killing of Politkovskaya is highly suspect. It is difficult to accept the argument that it would be to Berezovsky's advantage to orchestrate the slaying of a famous journalist whose work continuously exposed the crimes of the Putin regime.

The same can be said about the recent poisoning of former FSB agent Alkesandr Litvienko, another opponent of Putin regime, who died in exile in London after ingesting the radioactive substance Polonium 210. The Kremlin insists that Berezovsky was the hand behind this murder as well.

On August 22, just one week prior to the announcement that the Politkovskaya murder had been solved and that dark forces from overseas had masterminded the crime, Berezovsky issued an Open Letter to Putin. In it, he maintained that the Russian president is leading a counterrevolution against the supposedly progressive forces unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and realized in the policies of the Yeltsin era.

Berezovsky went on to insist that the Putin regime, which according to him has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of world public opinion, is inevitably doomed. Although "we have not won yet," Berezovsky stated, "you have already lost." The Open Letter concluded with a promise to write the Russian president more often.

In order to understand the political significance of the developments in the Politkovskaya investigation and the insinuated claim by the general prosecutor's office that Berezovsky was involved in the journalist's murder, it is important to bear in mind the growing tensions within the Russian political establishment.

In 2008 there will be presidential elections in Russia. Putin is expected to leave office, as he will have reached the term limit set down in the Russian constitution. While previously there was some speculation that Putin might attempt to remain in office by changing the constitutional terms limit, it is now expected that he will relinquish the presidency next year.

The question of who will take Putin's place has become an enormously contentious political issue. Despite Putin's authoritarian hold on power, his administration sits atop a vast array of conflicting interests within the ruling elite and criminal world, all of which are competing with one another to gain an edge as the political brawl in the Kremlin intensifies in advance of next year's election.

The attacks on Berezovsky are not simply an attempt to pin on him responsibility for crimes that likely originated in the Kremlin, but also an attempt to neutralize his ability to play a role in these political struggles through his ties with the so-called "liberal" opponents of the Putin regime.

The fact that Berezovsky does not have any mass support within the Russian population itself, which generally despises the multibillionaire for his role in raping the country of its wealth and resources, does not mean that the oligarch will be unable to forge a political opposition to Putin among layers within the ruling elite. The political confusion and alienation of the Russian masses from political life only makes it easier for cliques from various sides of the political spectrum to advance their interests.

The Kremlin's claims about foreign interference in domestic affairs are entirely in keeping with Putin's efforts to appeal to Russian nationalist sentiments as a prop for his authoritarian political role. Over the course of his presidency, Putin has proven himself to be fairly skilled in tapping into the sense of humiliation and despair among ordinary Russians over the socioeconomic and cultural collapse of their country and diverting it into the safer channels of Russian nationalism.

In a recent interview with the radio station *Eko Moskvi*, the editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitry Muratov, indicated that the newspaper believes that the government is self-sabotaging its case against the alleged killers of Politkovskaya in order to keep the investigation from uncovering the truth about the murder. Muratov expressed this opinion after news broke that the lead investigator, Gabriyan, had been demoted. Other media reports, which are unconfirmed, have stated that the work of certain detectives assigned to the investigation team has been blocked by those in charge of the process.

"The siloviki are achieving what they set out to achieve," according to Muratov. "They wanted to ruin the case, and now they will remove Gabriyan and finish that process." The Russian word "siloviki" is a term used to describe the security apparatus that dominates all levels of political life in the Kremlin and of which Putin himself, as a former FSB agent, stands at the head.

However, particularly given the political turmoil within the Kremlin, it is also possible that the chaos in the Politkovskaya murder investigation was not Putin's intention. Had the general prosecutor's office been able to maintain the position that the case was solved with the arrest of the 10 suspects, proving the existence of ties to the Chechen criminal underworld, rogue elements within the police and security services, and ultimately Berezovsky, this would have been a boon for the Putin administration.

The current state of the Politkovskaya case may be the product of machinations within the police and security apparatuses, all of which have extensive and complex ties to the criminal world, in pursuit of their own aims, as various cliques within the government vie for positions of power

and attempt to undermine their opponents in advance of the Duma (Russian parliament) elections this winter and the presidential elections next year.



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