

Lawyer and human rights activist Stanislav Markelov murdered in Moscow

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On January 19, Stanislav Markelov was shot in the head and killed in central Moscow by a masked man using a silencer. The assassination took place in broad daylight not far from the Kremlin. The 34-year-old lawyer and human rights activist was president of the Institute for the Supremacy of Law.

Anastasia Baburova, a 25-year-old student in the journalism department at Moscow State University and correspondent for the liberal opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* (*New Gazette*), tried to shield Markelov from the killer but was also shot in the head. Later that evening, she died in the hospital.

The specific reason for the murder of Markelov and who ordered it have not yet been established. But it is clear that this savage and cold-blooded killing is bound up with efforts to eliminate those who, regardless of their views and political connections, have sought to shed light on the many murky aspects of the actions of the Russian authorities in the Caucasus and in Russia itself. Both victims of this assassination were open opponents of the Russian nationalists.

The attack on Markelov occurred after a press conference in which he spoke about the case of Colonel Yuri Budanov. Markelov had filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation over Budanov's early release from prison.

Budanov was released from prison on January 15, having served eight-and-a-half years of a ten-year sentence. His parole caused outrage in Chechnya, where the Budanov case had become a symbol of the tyranny and violence inflicted by the Russian army in the province.

In March 2000, a few months after the start of the Second Chechen War, Budanov kidnapped from her home and then killed the 18-year-old Chechen girl Elsa Kungayeva. After he killed her, he ordered his subordinates to bury her body. After an autopsy was performed on the girl's corpse, it was established that she had been raped and severely tortured.

As in many similar instances, Budanov would certainly

have gotten away with his crime if it had not been the object of wide publicity. Nevertheless, the Russian authorities did everything possible to prevent his conviction. At first, the court exonerated him, and only under public pressure both in Chechnya and Russia did Budanov finally end up in prison.

Budanov is the kind of professional killer, sadist and rapist often found in the Russian army. But among Russian nationalists, the colonel in the tank corps was glorified as a "hero of Russia."

Visa Kungayev, the father of the girl Budanov killed, reported that Markelov had been threatened shortly before his murder. In one text message that the lawyer received, Budanov was directly named and Markelov was told to stop defending the Kungayev family.

Izvestia, which is de facto the official organ of the Kremlin, was forced to acknowledge that "The version that the lawyer's murder is connected with the release of Colonel Budanov comes quickly to mind. In actual fact, various forces who sympathise with the convicted colonel (and there are many) could have thereby tried to block the appeal of the decision to free him."

Nurdi Nukhazhiev, human rights representative in Chechnya, insists on the "Budanov version" of Markelov's murder. "With this shooting, the defenders of former Colonel Budanov celebrated the release of their idol," said the Chechen ombudsman on January 20 in the newspaper *Kommersant*.

Other explanations of the motives behind the murder of Markelov have been offered.

Frederika Beyer, representative of Amnesty International, suggested in *Kommersant* that Chechen authorities may also have taken part in eliminating Markelov, since clients of the murdered lawyer include residents of Chechnya who have disappeared, becoming victims of the authoritarian, pro-Moscow regime of Ramzan Kadyrov.

This version is supported by Vyacheslav Izmailov, a reporter for *Novaya Gazeta*. He recalled the case of the Chechen Magomedsalikh Masayev, who told Russian journalists that Ramzan Kadyrov's people had kidnapped

him. Soon after, he disappeared. Markelov took up his case and tried to reveal the fate of the missing man.

Markelov also worked with the journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed in Moscow on October 7, 2006, in investigating the case of Sergei Lapin, who was in the OMON (military police).

Lapin, whose nickname was Cadet, was a senior lieutenant from Khanty-Mansiisk who tortured to death the 26-year-old resident of Grozny, Zelimkhan Murdalov. Anna Politkovskaya wrote about this incident in *Novaya Gazeta*, and Markelov defended the parents of Murdalov. As a result, Lapin was sentenced to eight years in prison.

One of Markelov's clients was Mikhail Beketov, chief editor of the newspaper *Khimkinskaya Pravda*. Beketov criticised the administration of the Moscow region of Khimki. In particular, he fought to preserve the Khimki forest, which was about to be cut down in order to build a road. In November 2008, Beketov was severely beaten by unknown persons and remains to this day in serious condition in a hospital.

Markelov represented Beketov in a slander case connected with the journalist that was launched by the head of the Khimki administration, Vladimir Strelchenko.

It has also been noted that Markelov defended members of the left-radical movement "Antifa," one of whom, Aleksei Olesin, has been charged by the authorities with hooliganism.

On January 20, the day after the lawyer's murder, meetings in his memory were held in three cities: Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. About 150 people gathered on Prechistenka Street in Moscow. Among them was Vladimir Lukin, representative of Human Rights in Russia. People decorated the site of the murder with flowers, candles and photographs of Markelov and Baburova. The action had not been approved by the authorities, but the police did not prevent it from occurring.

That evening in Moscow, there was one other unsanctioned meeting in which about 200 young leftists who consider themselves anti-fascists participated. Their banners and slogans proclaimed, "Fascists Kill—the Authorities Cover Up." After being dispersed by the OMON, they regrouped at another location and engaged in acts of vandalism. They smashed the windows of several stores and banks, as well as the McDonald's near the metro station Tretiakovskaya.

In Petersburg, about 100 people gathered at the site where the student Timur Kacharava had been killed. He was the victim of an attack by members of a nationalist group on November 1, 2005.

In Grozny, about 3,000 people gathered and demanded that the authorities find and punish Markelov's killers. They

adopted an appeal to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, demanding "an objective investigation of all crimes committed on the territory of the Chechen Republic, including war crimes."

Markelov's death is being compared to the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, which caused an international uproar and has not been solved to this day. There was also the murder on July 10, 2004, in Moscow, of the American journalist Paul Khlebnikov, and the death in November 2006 of the former Russian special services officer Alexander Litvinenko. The latter was the co-author of a book that linked the explosions in apartment buildings in Moscow and Volgograd in the fall of 1999 (which killed about 300 people and served as the pretext for launching the Second Chechen War) with activities of the FSB, successor to the KGB.

Russia has one of the highest levels in the world of murdered journalists. In the last several years, their number has reached into the dozens.

The Russian Internet is filled with speculation about the participation of the Kremlin in encouraging and supporting ultra-right nationalist movements. Such theories are advanced, for instance, with regard to the DPNI (Movement Against Illegal Immigrants). This movement calls for the expulsion from Russian territory of all guest workers from Central Asia, the Caucasus and other republics of the former USSR. Russian businessmen use these workers as a source of cheap labor.

Today's Russian authorities openly preach Russian nationalism. An illustration of this is what Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said at the beginning of March last year, soon after the election of the new president, Dmitry Medvedev, who had been handpicked by Putin. In describing the views of the newly elected president, Putin said that he is "no less a Russian nationalist, in the best sense of the word, than I am."

One can anticipate that as the economic crisis deepens in Russia, the burden will fall on the broad layers of the working population and deepen the mood of social protest. Under these conditions, the Kremlin will encourage an atmosphere of nationalist hysteria in order to frighten and persecute people who oppose its policies.



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