



THE CRIME OF RUSSIAN LAW ENFORCEMENT

By David Satter



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As the Putin regime faces its first serious political challenge in more than twelve years, two recent developments have cast an ominous light on the criminal nature of the highest levels of Russian law enforcement.

The first involves Alexander Bastrykin, Russia’s chief investigator, who threatened to kill a Russian journalist. The second involves Lt. Col. Dmitri Pavlyuchenkov, the head of the Operational Surveillance Department of the Russian Interior Ministry for the city of Moscow; he has been indicted for complicity in the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, Russia’s most famous investigative journalist.

Bastrykin is a former university classmate of Putin. He is involved in the criminal inquiry opened against the main organizers of anti-Putin demonstrations May 6 in which scores of protestors were beaten and 600 were detained. The demonstration was officially sanctioned but riot police blocked access to the agreed meeting place, causing the marchers who kept arriving in a continuous stream to press up against police lines. The police responded by attacking the demonstrators with batons. Scores of demonstrators were beaten and 600 were detained.

On June 13, the chief editor of the opposition newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Dmitri Muratov, in an open letter to Bastrykin asked him to guarantee the safety of Sergei Sokolov, the deputy editor of the paper. He also asked him to instruct his subordinates not to treat the paper’s correspondents in the Caucasus as persons on whom there had been opened a long-awaited hunting season.

The events that inspired Muratov’s letter took place two weeks earlier. Bastrykin invited Sokolov to join him for a June 4 meeting in Nalchik in the North Caucasus. Once there, Bastrykin demanded an apology for Sokolov’s criticism of the government’s handling of the case of Sergei Tsepovyaz, accused of concealing the murder of 12 people in the village of Kushchyovskaya in December 2010 in southern Russia but freed after paying a 150,000 ruble (\$4,500) fine. Sokolov had criticized investigators for allowing Tsepovyaz to get off so lightly.

Sokolov apologized to Bastrykin but, according to Muratov, when they returned to Moscow, Bastrykin had Sokolov driven to a forest by security guards where the two were left alone. Bastrykin then threatened to kill Sokolov and joked about how he would personally take charge of the investigation into his death. Shortly after the conversation, Sokolov fled abroad in fear for his life.

In the wake of Muratov's letter, journalists began picketing the headquarters of the Russian Investigative Committee. Bastrykin reacted with an interview in the newspaper *Izvestiya* in which he ridiculed Sokolov's accusations. But the situation then sharply changed and Bastrykin in a hastily called meeting with leading journalists apologized to Muratov and shook hands with him, in effect, disavowing his interview with *Izvestiya*. Threatening another person's life, however, is a criminal offense. But no legal action was taken against Bastrykin, who reports directly to Putin.

At the same time, according to a report in the monthly *Sovershenno Sekretno*, based on information from reliable sources, Putin has issued orders to investigate businessmen who have donated money to the opposition. They reportedly can expect tax audits and other investigations in the near future.

Another situation which gives a chilling picture of Russian law enforcement is that around Pavlyuchenkov who was indicted July 16 in the Politkovskaya case.

The surveillance department which Pavlyuchenko heads is one of the most secretive branches of the Russian Interior Ministry. In his capacity as head of the Moscow branch, Pavlyuchenko, according to the indictment, ordered his subordinates to shadow Politkovskaya and identify her schedule and usual routes of travel. This information was then shared with the killers, members of a gang specifically formed to kill Politkovskaya. According to the indictment, Pavlyuchenko also acquired the murder weapon and bullets that were used in the crime.

The killers included three Chechen brothers: the suspected trigger man, Rustam Makhmudov, and his brothers, Ibragim, and Dzhabrail. *Novaya Gazeta* carried out its own independent investigation in the case. According to Sergei Sokolov (who was threatened last month by Bastrykin), the brothers were recruited by their uncle, Lom-Ali Gaitukayev, who is now serving a life sentence for murder in an unrelated case. Gaitukayev is a self-confessed agent of the Federal Security Service (FSB).

As if this web of criminality was not enough, Gaitukayev, according to Sokolov, also was in contact with Kazbek Dukuzov, who, along with another Chechen, Musa Vakhayev, was tried in 2006 for the murder of Paul Klebnikov, the American editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes* magazine. He and Vakhayev were acquitted of the murder of Klebnikov but the Russian Supreme Court overturned the acquittal and a new trial was ordered. In the meantime, Dukuzov fled.

The killings of journalists are rarely solved in Russia. In addition to Politkovskaya, 18 Russian journalists since 2000 have been killed because of their work according to the New York based Committee to Protect Journalists. Only once were the executors discovered and convicted but, even in that case, the mastermind was never found.

Pavlyuchenkov's alleged role in the murder of Politkovskaya has changed several times. He was, at first, described as a witness in the case. In August, he was declared an organizer before finally being indicted this month as an accomplice. Even in that capacity, he could face life in prison which gives the authorities considerable leverage in extracting his "cooperation."

After Politkovskaya was murdered, suspicion focused on Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of Chechnya. He has since become a suspect in the murder of Natalya Estemirova, a human rights defender in Chechnya, who was abducted and executed July 15, 2010. In her last meeting with Kadyrov, he said, according to her account, "I'm up to my elbows in blood. But I'm not ashamed of this. I murdered and will murder bad people. We're fighting with enemies of the republic."

Politkovskaya had also reported on torture, abductions and summary executions in Chechnya. After Politkovskaya's murder, Russian investigators, apparently aware of Kadyrov's close ties to Putin, were afraid to interrogate Kadyrov personally. Vyacheslav Izmailov, a special *Novaya Gazeta* correspondent who has covered the North Caucasus, said that the investigators suggested that Izmailov meet with Kadyrov. "Petros Garibyan [who continues to head the Politkovskaya investigation] was asking that I find out what Kadyrov thought about Politkovskaya's killing," Izmailov said.

In fact, Kadyrov did express himself on the Politkovskaya murder a short time after she was killed. In what may have been a ghoulish attempt at humor, he said that he would never kill a woman.

It is possible that Pavlyuchenkov will be now be used to implicate a mastermind in the Politkovskaya killing. The “mastermind,” however, is unlikely to be Kadyrov. The overwhelming likelihood is that any “breakthrough” in identifying the mastermind of a crime against a Russian journalist will serve the political purposes of the regime. According to RIA Novosti, Pavlyuchenkov said that the killing of Politkovskaya was ordered by two of the Kremlin’s arch enemies, the London-based Chechen separatist envoy Akhmed Zakayev and dissident oligarch Boris Berezovsky.

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