

Journalist critical of government killed in Chechnya

By Niall Green
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Human rights activist Natalia Estemirova, a prominent critic of the pro-Kremlin government in Chechnya, was abducted and shot Wednesday while investigating alleged abuses by government-backed militias in the province.

Estemirova was abducted as she left her home in Grozny, the Chechen capital. Witnesses described four men bundling her into a white Lada car. Her body was found several hours later in the neighboring province of Ingushetia.

Aged 50, she was the single mother of a teenaged daughter. Of Russian and Chechen heritage, Estemirova had investigated human rights abuses against the civilians since the outbreak of the second Chechen War in 1999.

At the time of her death Estemirova was investigating the suspicious deaths of a husband and wife who had been accused of plotting against the Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov.

Colleagues of Estemirova have blamed Kadyrov for her death. Kadyrov has denied responsibility and stated that the activist's killers will be brought to justice. A Chechen government spokesperson told press that an official investigation would be launched.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also condemned the killing and ordered an additional inquiry.

Kadyrov's government has been heavily criticized by Russian and international journalists and human rights groups for corruption, intimidation and violence. Estemirova was in charge of the Grozny office of the human rights group Memorial, and had been investigating hundreds of cases of alleged kidnapping, torture and murder by Chechen government and Russian federal forces in Chechnya.

The Chechen president is head of a large militia known as the "kadyrovsty" that have been linked to

numerous criminal cases and political assassinations. The militia is given significant leeway by Moscow as it is engaged in a conflict with separatist Islamist groups in the province.

Kadyrov rules Chechnya as a personal fiefdom. Political opposition is restricted and corruption is rife. In March the head of the opposition in Chechnya's parliament, Sulim Yamadayev, was assassinated while on a trip to Dubai.

The head of Memorial, Oleg Orlov, issued a statement dismissing Kadyrov's claims of innocence. Orlov alleged that Chechen authorities were linked to the murder of Estemirova, who, he claimed, had been threatened repeatedly by Kadyrov's militiamen.

International human rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch both condemned the killing and raised concerns about the ability of activists and journalists to operate freely in the region.

"It seems to be open season on anyone trying to highlight the appalling human rights abuses in Chechnya," said Kenneth Roth, director of US-based Human Rights Watch.

Kadyrov became president of the Chechen Republic in 2007. He is the son of Akhmad Kadyrov, a former Chechen rebel leader turned Kremlin ally who also served as president before being assassinated in 2004. Kadyrov has faced repeated accusations that he was responsible for the 2006 murder of Russian investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Estemirova had worked closely with Politkovskaya and the human rights activist Stanislav Markelov, who this year was killed in Moscow. These individuals had investigated some of the examples of wholesale terror against civilians used by Russian forces, and their local proxies, in Chechnya since separatists in the province

attempted to split from the Russian Federation in the 1990s.

In 1994 the first Chechen War broke out, with mass casualties and displacement suffered by the civilian population as Russian forces attempted to crush the rebellion. In 1996 the conflict ended in a cease-fire and a high degree of de facto independence for Chechnya, a tiny statelet with a population of just over one million. However, Russian armed forces launched a fresh offensive in 1999, justified by terrorist attacks in several Russian cities that were blamed on Chechen separatists. The second war ended the following year, with the fall of the pro-independence government in Grozny and the restoration of the Kremlin's authority.

The republic was, and remains, vital to Moscow's energy interests in the Caucasus region. Oil and gas pipelines transit the Northern Caucasus region en route to the main markets of Western Europe, providing billions of dollars for the Russian business elite and the Kremlin.

In addition, Chechen independence threatened to spark a series of secessions across Russia's nationally and ethnically heterogeneous republics, such as Dagestan and Tatarstan. Under Stalinism, none of these historic disputes were resolved; instead the minorities faced oppression while divisions were maintained. The new Russian bourgeoisie, many of whom are ex-Stalinists, have proved equally unable to address these historic disputes, instead relying on violence to maintain their economic and strategic interests.

The importance of the region to the Kremlin's interests was underscored last week when President Medvedev visited South Ossetia, a breakaway province of the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia that is close to Chechnya. South Ossetia was the focus of a war between Georgia and Russia last year in which the United States backed the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili.

Medvedev's recent visit was seen as confirmation that during recent talks between the Russian leader and US President Barack Obama Moscow had been able to assert its authority, at least temporarily, in the region in exchange for aiding the US occupation of Afghanistan.

The anti-democratic and brutal methods of the Kremlin and its local henchmen in Chechnya, seeking to profit from the rich natural resources of the region, provide a tragic confirmation of the reactionary

character of the restoration of capitalism in the USSR.

For their part, the US and the European powers, which backed the break-up of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to aggressively pursue their economic interests, are very active in the Caucasus region. Washington and the European Union are developing alternative energy routes in the area in order to undermine Russia's control over oil and gas transit, setting the stage for further conflicts.

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