

Yet another murder that wasn't: The Perepilichny case and the anti-Russia campaign

By Clara Weiss
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The past few days have seen the unravelling of one of the many alleged “murders” that Russian president Vladimir Putin has been accused of by the media and the intelligence agencies: after an investigation into the November 2012 death of the multi-millionaire Alexander Perepilichny, the coroner found that he “more likely than not” died of natural causes.

This conclusion comes after years in which the media have treated his death as a “killing” and “murder,” ascribed to the Kremlin and even Putin himself, without any kind of factual substantiation.

As recently as August 8, 2018, the *New York Times* cited his death as one of several for whom Putin was probably responsible, falsely writing that “the police were left scratching their heads over the body... It was not until 2015 that a botanist was able to identify the presumptive cause of Perepilichny’s death: His stomach held traces of gelsemium, a rare, poisonous plant grown in the Himalayas and known to have been used in Chinese assassinations.”

In fact, the Surrey police at the time did not believe that his death was suspicious in any way, and concluded that he died of a heart attack. Perepilichny, a Russian nouveau riche who was involved in numerous money-laundering schemes in Russia before leaving the country in 2009 for the UK, died on November 10, 2012, after he had collapsed while jogging. Struggling with obesity (he peaked at around 238 lbs), Perepilichny reportedly worked out a lot shortly before his death and had lost some 40 lbs. Symptoms he exhibited on the day before he died also suggested that he had suffered food poisoning.

The first to raise any kind of suspicion was Bill Browder, the CEO of the Heritage hedge fund, who contacted the police suggesting that Perepilichny was murdered because he had been a “whistleblower.” Browder told the inquest, “We believe there is a strong possibility that Alexander Perepilichny was murdered.”

Yet examinations into the initial finding of an “unknown

compound” in Perepilichny’s body by experts at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Kew had already proved “beyond reasonable doubt” that there had been no plant toxin. According to Kew botanist Dr. Geoff Kite, it is not uncommon to find an “unknown compound” in a body, and that the one deemed suspicious was one of 300 found in Perepilichny. In other words, there was absolutely nothing to suggest that Perepilichny had been poisoned.

Other reports alleged that Perepilichny felt “threatened,” yet his wife said that he never even felt the need to hire a bodyguard.

In 2017, the *Atlantic* ran a story entitled “Who killed Alexander Perepilichny.” The story contained not a shred of evidence justifying the title. The only basis for the assumption that Perepilichny had been killed was testimony by a friend who claimed that Perepilichny did not partake “vices that could stop the heart of a healthy man.” the *Atlantic* also offered a list of alleged killings by poison by the KGB, several of which are unproven to this day.

In 2017, BuzzFeed reported breathlessly in an “investigation” that, “The British government is suppressing explosive intelligence that Alexander Perepilichny, a financier who exposed a vast financial crime by Russian government officials, was likely assassinated on the direct orders of Vladimir Putin.” That same year, a US intelligence report asserted with “high confidence” that he had been assassinated on the orders of Russian officials. Chris Phillips, the former head of Britain’s National Counter Terrorism Security Office, said: “It’s so obvious that it’s an assassination. There’s no way it wasn’t a hit.”

Literally all of the contents of these “reports” have turned out to be false.

Two post-mortem examinations of the body failed to find a definite cause of death. However, one doctor concluded that there was no evidence of third-party involvement and found an anomaly in Perepilichny’s heart which “could explain his sudden death.” Another one told the BBC that

Perepilichny's food poisoning in Paris had triggered a cardiac arrhythmia which could in turn have caused a fatal heart attack while he was jogging.

Much about the case remains murky. As in the case of Skripal, there have been reports of possible ties between Perepilichny and British intelligence. The coroner who reviewed MI5 and MI6 files said that their reports on his alleged involvement would remain secret.

However, if there is one thing that is certain, it is that the "killing" of Perepilichny was "fake news." It is the latest in a series of similar media hoaxes, including the alleged murder of the Russian journalist Arkady Babchenko, who staged his own death in Kiev last year, and the alleged poisoning of the Skripals.

The Perepilichny case is symptomatic of the torrent of "fake news" that has dominated the anti-Russia campaign: concocted by the US state apparatus and intelligence, its media lackeys and oligarchs who have been deprived of money and opportunities to enrich themselves by the Putin-regime and the oligarchs around it, this campaign is built on nothing but lies, half-truths and fabrications, aimed at creating the climate of confusion and reaction necessary for settling issues over foreign policy within the ruling elites in the US themselves, preparing a violent removal of Putin, and escalating military aggression against Russia.

One of the main figures driving the investigation into Perepilichny's death, Bill Browder, has for years played a central role in the anti-Russia campaign. Browder was among the Western financiers who exploited the restoration of capitalism in Poland and Russia to massively enrich themselves. His hedge fund, Hermitage, was the fastest growing hedge fund in the world in the early 2000s, and Russia's largest foreign investor, with some \$4.5 billion in funds in 2004. At that time, Browder took home well over \$100 million dollars a year.

Throughout the early 2000s, Browder was an outspoken supporter of President Putin, endorsing the latter's jailing of the oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky (a former adversary of Browder's) with the words, "We want an authoritarian—one who is exercising authority over mafia and oligarchs."

It was not until disputes arose over Browder's involvement in Gazprom and the Kremlin started cracking down on his own companies, that Browder changed his mind about Putin. In 2005, he was expelled from Russia. In 2007, he hired the Moscow lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, who had worked for Hermitage for about a decade, to help him get back his remaining assets in Russia and develop a new business.

The *Atlantic* reported that Alexander Perepilichny was involved in an alleged massive fraud involving Hermitage's remaining assets in Russia involving some \$230 million.

Working together with Vladlen Stepanov, an individual with alleged ties to a Russian crime syndicate, Perepilichny reportedly channeled the money out of Russia to the British Virgin Islands. In 2009, Magnitsky died in a Russian prison, a death that Browder blamed on the Putin regime. According to the magazine, after Magnitsky's death Perepilichny told Browder about his own involvement in and other details of the fraud.

As in all cases involving warfare over money within the Russian mafia-oligarchy, the Hermitage case is extremely murky. While Browder claims Magnitsky was killed by Putin for having uncovered a major fraud involving the Kremlin, Browder himself has been accused of being linked to this fraud and Putin has accused him of having been involved in the murder of at least three people.

Browder used Magnitsky's death to lobby for aggressive legislation in the US Congress, the so-called Magnitsky Act, which was passed in 2012 and has since formed the basis for the sanctioning of various officials and oligarchs close to Putin.

Browder maintains the closest ties to US intelligence and sections of the state apparatus and the media. In 2016, a leaked cable by a high-ranking US State Department official said, "I am beginning to feel we are all just part of the Browder P.R. machine." Over the past two years, Browder has been intimately involved in the "Russiagate" campaign by the Democratic Party and intelligence apparatus against Trump. There has been hardly any major "news story," i.e., fake news item, about Putin and the "Russia gate" hoax which did not prominently feature a quote by Browder.

Browder was close to the late John McCain, a central figure in the US elites' advocating for an aggressive stance toward Russia, and works together with Vladimir Kara-Murza, a leader of the Russian liberal opposition, who recently openly acknowledged at an event at Columbia University that preparations for a "color revolution" type movement in Russia were underway to remove the Putin regime.

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