



Written by [William F. Jasper](#) on July 21, 2009

Natalya Estemirova Murder: Another Putin Victim?

Human rights campaigner Natalya Estemirova was kidnapped on July 15 outside her home in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. Her bullet-riddled body was found several hours later in neighboring Ingushetia.



Russian President Dmitry Medvedev interrupted his meetings in Munich (where he engaged in a gregarious beer-drinking photo-op with German Chancellor Angela Merkel) to vow that he would carry out a full investigation into the murder. Likewise, Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov denounced the "cynical" killing and announced that he would personally take charge of the investigation to bring the killers to justice. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the murder "terrible" and [told the Daily Telegraph](#), "We do share this pain and sorrow because of the murder."

However, many observers in Russia and throughout the world view Kadyrov as the prime suspect and see his pledge to investigate as being on par with O. J. Simpson's vow to find the killer of his wife. Kadyrov, who was installed in 2005 by then-President Vladimir Putin, has operated with impunity in Chechnya, the Kremlin turning a blind eye to his brutal repression.

Estemirova, who worked for Memorial, the Russian human rights organization, was one of Kadyrov's strongest critics, and one of the best known internationally. Her violent death is but the latest in a litany of murdered journalists, lawyers, activists, and political opponents who have challenged Kadyrov's tyrannical rule:

- * Anna Politkovskaya, an investigative journalist, was gunned down in the elevator of her Moscow apartment in 2006;
- * Stanislav Markelov, was shot and killed (along with journalist Anastasia Baburova) while leaving a Moscow press conference only a few blocks from the Kremlin, in January 2009;
- * Umar Israilov, a former Kadyrov bodyguard who defected and testified against Kadyrov's atrocities, was shot and killed January 2009 in Vienna, where he had fled with his wife and children;
- * Sulim Yamadayev, a former Chechen military competitor of Kadyrov, was slain on March 29, 2009 in Dubai, where he had fled for safety;
- * Musa Atayev, a former Chechen mujahedin, was murdered in Istanbul, Turkey, on February 26, 2009, the third Chechen exile to be slain in Istanbul in five months;
- * In Norway, earlier this year, a man named Ruslan Khalidov claimed he was given orders by Kadyrov to kill Magomed Ocherhadji, a leader of the large Chechen exile community in Norway. In this particular case, the assassination was not carried out.



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The cases cited above, all of which were outside of Chechnya, point toward Kadyrov and his Moscow handlers as the culpable parties. Many reporters and commentators have attempted to exculpate Putin and Medvedev by claiming they are "helpless" against the "maverick" Kadyrov, who is "out of control." But there is no question that Kadyrov is serving at the pleasure of Putin and Medvedev, and he would not last more than a few hours if he were genuinely causing them the heartburn various reports suggest.

Moreover, the ongoing spate of killings, particularly the ones on foreign soil, bear the markings KGB/FSB involvement. This was especially evident in the cases of the 2004 car-bomb murder in Qatar of former Chechen separatist leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and the famous 2006 poison execution of former KGB/FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London.

Russian human rights activists are pointing directly at Kadyrov and Putin. "I blame both of them for the killing — for involvement in the killing," said Lyudmila Alexeyeva, head of the Moscow Helsinki Group at a news conference in Moscow. "The impunity and omnipotence of Ramzan Kadyrov depends on the support of ... Putin," Alexeyeva, 82, said. "As long as Putin supports him nobody will touch a hair on Kadyrov's head, even if he kills us all."

"We know who is responsible," said Oleg Orlov, head of the Memorial human rights organization, at a Moscow press conference after the Estemirova murder. "We know what position he occupies. His job is Chechen president." Orlov said Kadyrov had threatened Estemirova last year, and aides had warned her to stop her human rights work or face the consequences.

Russian President Medvedev called Orlov's accusation against Kayrov "primitive and unacceptable" and has stated he believes the assassination was a "provocation" to discredit Kadyrov's government. Kadyrov has said the same thing; it has become a standard line of the Grozny regime and its Kremlin overlords to invoke the "provocation" defense every time one of its opponents is assassinated. Kadyrov has also threatened to sue Orlov for defamation. However, Orlov said on July 18 he would not retract his words. "I am ready to appear before the court, if there is a trial and to answer for the words I spoke," he told the Russian news agency Interfax.

On the same day, *Novaya Gazeta* published a lengthy article on the Estemirova's kidnapping/assassination, noting that the car used to abduct her — a white Lada — had been waved through several police checkpoints. That's a pretty good clue her murderers had government IDs, and probably a safe bet they were following orders from Moscow's viceroy in Grozny.

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