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## Contract Murders Are on the Rise

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

The apparent contract killing of American journalist Paul Klebnikov shattered the illusions of many who shared his belief that Russia had moved beyond the days when scores were settled with a spray of bullets.

Yet police estimates indicate that in some ways, little has changed since the Wild West years of Russian capitalism in the early and mid-1990s.

Contrary to popular perceptions, even more contract killings are committed in Russia today than were committed 10 years ago, said Leonid Kondratyuk, a top crime expert at the Interior Ministry's Scientific Research Institute.

"We're seeing somewhere between 500 and 700 such killings annually," Kondratyuk said. "But those are just the murders we know for sure were contract killings. In reality, it's probably two to three times higher."

Kondratyuk's estimate is conservative compared to that of Valentin Stepankov, who until June was deputy secretary of the Security Council.

At a January conference in Moscow held by the World Community Against the Globalization of Crime and Terrorism, Stepankov said organized criminal groups were responsible for 26,000 crimes in 2003, up from 3,300 in 1999. He said around 5,000 of those crimes were contract killings.

Stepankov was Russia's first prosecutor general, serving until he was fired by former President Boris Yeltsin after parliament's revolt in October 1993. He is now a deputy natural resources minister.

The Interior Ministry's main criminal investigations department said fewer than 100 contract killings were registered in Russia last year. "But those are cases where we can say for sure it was a contract murder and where a criminal case has been initiated against a known suspect," spokesman Denis Strukov said. "Those "Those are the only objective numbers we have."



Ivan Sekretarev / AP  
Magadan Governor Valentin Tsvetkov was gunned down on Novy Arbat in fall 2002.

The discrepancy in the figures reflects a lack of police data and the difficulty of classifying some murders.

"Who's to say that someone who gets knocked over the head and his briefcase stolen wasn't the target of a contract murder?" Strukov said.

Contract killings continue to swell because of a weak judicial system and a low probability that those ordering the hits will ever be punished. There also appears to be no shortage of those willing to kill for money, from drug addicts to former military men profiting from their professional training.

The price of a hit varies from a couple hundred dollars to a couple hundred thousand dollars, the experts say, with one singling out the 1998 killing of State Duma Deputy Galina Starovoitova as the most expensive he had come across.

Kondratyuk said the weak judicial system often makes it easier to order a hit than to settle a dispute in court.

"Often a court case will be more expensive than just killing someone," Kondratyuk said. "Especially since rampant corruption in the justice system means no one can be sure they would win in court."

"Usually there's nothing personal about it," Yakov Kostyukovsky, an organized crime expert from the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg, said about contract killings in the business world.

"Unfortunately it's still a typical instrument in dealing with the competition. Al Capone-style."

### **Hits Solved 'Unofficially'**

Like Chicago police before Capone went down, Russian police have gained a reputation of being chronically ineffective in tackling organized crime and solving contract killings.

But Andrei Konstantinov, who heads the Agency of Journalistic Investigations in St. Petersburg and has a reputation as the most knowledgeable chronicler of Russia's criminal underworld, said police are not as hapless as they are often portrayed.

"In many cases police investigators find out, or already know, who organized the hit," Konstantinov said. "But they can't gather quite enough information for a conviction."

Kostyukovsky put a different twist on what he called a "misconception," delineating between contract murders that are solved on "official" and "unofficial" levels.

The number of contract killings "officially" solved, that is, when enough evidence is passed on to prosecutors to try a suspect, may be low. Far more are solved unofficially, he said.

"If one group of criminals orders a hit on a member of another criminal group, the police might pass on information to the victim's cohorts about who was behind the killing," Kostyukovsky said. "If rival bandits are killing each other off, it might be advantageous for the police."

It might not raise the number of officially solved contract killings, he said, but it is less work for the police.

A retired chief detective, who worked in the St. Petersburg police force for most of the 1990s, said such police tactics are common.

"It happens very often," said the former detective, who asked to remain anonymous. "It's called 'realization of operational information.'

"In most cases everyone understands that if the case is turned over to the courts, it will take them three years to get to it, and in the end decide no one is guilty of anything. But if you give the information to a rival group, the issue will be solved very quickly and radically. It's rarely done out of 'noble intentions.' Almost always it's out of hatred."

The former detective added that the main reason police have a reputation for being unable to solve contract killings is that small-time hits, which are more likely to be solved, get little media attention.

"If an owner of a small store has another owner of a small store knocked off, no journalists are going to write about it," he said. "But if someone like Starovoitova is murdered, the media coverage is enormous, and if the killers aren't found, the impression is that no contract killings are ever solved.

"It's definitely harder to solve a contract killing than a drunken domestic killing, but things aren't as bad as the press makes it out to be."

Most high-profile contract killings in Russia, however, are never solved.

Klebnikov, the editor of Forbes Russia, was shot several times from a passing car after leaving work the night of July 9. Prosecutors have said only that an investigation is underway; there has been no information about possible suspects or any other progress in solving the case.

## The Price of a Hit



Alexander Demianchuk / Reuters

Contract killings can run anywhere from a couple hundred to a couple hundred thousand dollars, said Konstantinov, bestselling author of the seminal Russian gangster book "Banditsky Peterburg."

"Take, for example, someone living in a communal apartment with an old lady who just won't seem to die," he said. "So he goes and finds a drug addict and pays him \$300 to kill her."

In one low-budget incident in October, police in the Moscow region town of Zhukovsky arrested two Ukrainian nationals on suspicion of knifing to death a 23-year-old Zhukovsky man a month earlier. The two men claimed the victim's mother had paid them \$300 for the

The 1998 hit on Deputy Galina Starovoitova was one of the more expensive contract killings, likely costing about \$150,000.

job.

Lieutenant Mikhail Voronin of the Interior Ministry's Scientific Research Institute was even more blunt in describing some killers' bottom dollar.

"For a bottle of vodka, some homeless guys find they can get the job done with a kitchen knife," Voronin said.

Having a high-profile businessman or politician killed, however, is a much pricier affair.

Konstantinov said the 1998 hit on Starovoitova is most expensive contract killing he has come across, likely costing around \$150,000 because of the number of organizers involved. She was shot in the stairwell of her St. Petersburg apartment building.

It is often difficult to gauge how much was paid for a contract killing, Konstantinov said, due to a long chain of middlemen between the hit man and the person who ordered the hit. The two rarely, if ever, know each other.

"It's the hit man who usually ends up getting caught, and only he knows how much money he got," Konstantinov said. "A killing might have been ordered for \$20,000, and the hit man only got \$5,000. All of the middlemen in between took their cut."

The alleged chain in the Starovoitova murder involves 11 people, most of whom come from the Bryansk region. Seven are currently on trial in St. Petersburg, and one has testified that the murder was ordered by former Duma Deputy Mikhail Glushchenko.

The whereabouts of Glushchenko, who served in parliament as a member of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party and was reputedly a leader of the Tambov group, the most notorious St. Petersburg crime syndicate, are unknown. He is thought to be living abroad.

According to Konstantinov, it is common for killers to be hired from poorer regions -- like Bryansk -- and brought in to do a job in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

"You can hire someone from Kazan to come in, kill someone and leave quickly, and you're paying them based on Kazan prices," he said.

Prosecutors have identified Vitaly Akishin and Oleg Fedosov as Starovoitova's killers. Akishin is one of the defendants currently on trial. The other six are alleged to have carried out various tasks, including taping Starovoitova's phone calls, dumping the killers' clothing in a river and driving the hit men from the crime scene.

Fedosov and three other suspects are still at large. Prosecutors are seeking the extradition of two of the suspects from Europe.

"There may have been more expensive hits [than the one on Starovoitova], but I haven't heard of any," Konstantinov said.

## Sasha Makedonsky

A majority of Russia's professional hit men are former secret service officers, military veterans and ex-convicts, according to Kondratyuk. "Of course people who know how to handle a gun are in demand," he said.

One of the most notorious -- and notoriously expensive -- hired killers of the 1990s was Alexander Solonik, a former soldier and policeman nicknamed Sasha Makedonsky for his deftness at simultaneously firing pistols in both hands, or "Macedonian-style." Solonik was said to have demanded tens of thousands of dollars for his services, Konstantinov said.

"I don't really believe it, though," he said. "It's more likely just part of the mythology of the criminal world."

Solonik, the only man ever to escape from Moscow's Matrosskaya Tishina prison and remain at large, managed to flee to Greece after the jailbreak in 1995. But his body was found on Feb. 2, 1997, about 20 kilometers north of Athens. He had been strangled and wrapped in plastic bags.

Three months later, a suitcase, bag and towel containing the dismembered body of Russian model Svetlana Kotova were found near Solonik's villa in Athens. Kotova and Solonik were romantically linked, according to Russian media reports.

In 2003, five suspected members of the infamous Orekhovskaya crime group were charged with the two slayings. One of them, Alexander Pustovalov, another notorious hit man, was accused of strangling Solonik. Pustovalov was known as Sasha Soldat because of his military background.

## Hiring a Hit Man

But how are killers hired?

"That was a big problem for some businessmen in the 1990s," Kondratyuk said. "They wanted to have someone killed but couldn't find a killer. It's not like you can go ask someone, 'How much will it cost to have you kill someone?' and then, after they answer, tell them, 'Sorry, that's too expensive. I think I'll take my business elsewhere.'"

Kostyukovsky concurred that hiring a professional hit man requires some extra considerations. "Business in Moscow and St. Petersburg is a small world," he said. "Everybody knows everybody else."

But he said almost every successful businessman knows someone in the security services that can find someone to do the job.

Several factors other than the credentials of the hit man can determine the price of a contract murder, he said. These are the number of bodyguards a target has, the financial windfall from the death of a competitor and the style of the killing, to name a few.

"A contract murder arranged to look like an accident or a coincidence is going to be a lot more

expensive than a standard shooting," Kostyukovsky said.

Kostyukovsky said he believes the mysterious death of anti-corruption journalist and Yabloko Duma Deputy Yury Shchekochikhin to be a contract killing that could only have been arranged by a very expensive "high-class specialist."

Shchekochikhin died in a Moscow hospital at the age of 52 in July 2003 after suffering a severe allergic reaction. People who saw his body said that his hair had fallen out, a symptom consistent with thallium poisoning.

"He was obviously a very dangerous journalist for someone," Kostyukovsky said.

Above all, someone ordering a hit has to be able to trust the people he hires to organize and carry out the killing, Kostyukovsky said. "Either that or you have to pay enough money to where you're sure the job will get done right," he said.

The case of Moscow resident Milovan Ristic is a prime example of a hit man turning against his employer.

In March, police arrested Ristic in a sting operation and charged him with offering an acquaintance \$50,000 in exchange for a photograph of the severed heads of his wife and mother-in-law in an alleged scheme to obtain ownership of his wife's pharmacy and the apartment where the couple lived. The hired killer backed out of the deal and notified police.

After Ristic's arrest, police said another man came to them saying Ristic had offered him \$25,000 to kill the original hit man, but since the two hired killers turned out to be friends, the man decided to go to the police.

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