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2 Bloody Weeks of Beatings, Killings and Raids

By Vladimir Ryzhkov

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Demonstrators holding photographs of journalist Mikhail Beketov and environmental activist Konstantin Fetisov during a rally in central Moscow on Sunday. **Mikhail Metzel**

During the past two weeks, Russia was shaken by a whole string of horrible events that has once again clearly shown the extent to which the Russian state has become criminalized under Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's power vertical.

On Nov. 5, an extended family of 12 people, including four children, were stabbed to death by a local gang in the village of Kushchyovskaya in the Krasnodar region. This is just the latest demonstration of how criminal groups, which enjoy close ties to large businesses and law enforcement agencies, are capable of terrorizing people and how they can apply force and violence with full impunity.

Village residents are scared to cooperate with investigators. They are afraid that the local head of the criminal syndicate, who is also the most powerful businessman in the region, will seek

revenge. They remember only too well how for years the police have overlooked all the crimes he and his clan members have committed and how all of the previous beatings and murders have gone unpunished. The villagers are fully justified in fearing reprisals from the killers — or even from the police, who offer protection to criminals.

The Nov. 6 brutal attack on Kommersant journalist Oleg Kashin is the latest in a long series of beatings and murders of journalists that have become commonplace in Russia. Moreover, only one in every 10 of these kinds of attacks are ever brought to court.

In Khimki, a suburb of Moscow, a gang war is being waged openly against activists and journalists. Journalist Mikhail Beketov, who was convicted for defamation against Khimki Mayor Vladimir Strelchenko, had been brutally beaten and crippled. On Nov. 4, activist Konstantin Fetisov was attacked with a baseball bat just outside his home and has remained in a coma ever since. Already, dozens of activists and journalists have been beaten or arrested in Khimki, and the police have not investigated a single crime. Does it surprise anyone that Strelchenko is still in power in this highly criminalized town?

In the past five years, 350 journalists in Russia have been beaten and 41 killed. The overwhelming majority of those cases have not been solved, including the high-profile murders of Novaya Gazeta reporters Anna Politkovskaya, Igor Domnikov and Yury Shchekochikhin, Forbes Russia editor Paul Klebnikov and others. Of the 31 reported cases this year of attacks against journalists, not a single one has gone to trial. In addition to using violence against journalists, the authorities also bring criminal charges against them. Last week, the prosecutor's office in the Altai region charged local journalist and politician Sergei Mikhailov with defamation for the "crime" of reporting the government abuses in the region.

One year after lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died in prison after authorities refused to provide him medical care, the investigators and prosecutors who were effectively responsible for his death were given promotions and honors. Meanwhile, the question of who in the Interior Ministry may have organized the seizure of companies belonging to Hermitage Capital — which Magnitsky was defending — that allowed the ministry officials to purportedly steal $230 million from the country's federal budget remains unsolved. No one has been charged in the case, even though Magnitsky and his former colleagues at Hermitage and law firm Firestone Duncan, where Magnitsky worked, has submitted strong evidence implicating top Interior Ministry officials. It has been known for a long time that Russia's law enforcement agencies run their own businesses, making hundreds of millions of dollars by raiding private businesses and extorting payments for protection and other "services."

No business is safe in Russia. On Nov. 2, police wearing masks and toting automatic weapons raided the head office of National Reserve Bank, owned by billionaire Alexander Lebedev, and conducted a search on the absurd allegation that the bank embezzled government funds while rescuing Rossiisky Kapital at the request of the Central Bank and the Finance Ministry. The National Reserve Bank's bailout was in accordance with the law and under the supervision of state authorities, returning the credit to the Central Bank in full and on time. At the same time, Lebedev repeatedly reported to law enforcement agencies that the former owners and directors of Rossiisky Kapital had removed more than 5 billion rubles ($162 million) from the institution after its assets had been frozen. Rather than investigate the criminal actions that led to the collapse of Rossiisky Kapital, the police came after National Reserve Bank. All of this

creates the impression that the guilty parties used the search as a diversion tactic to focus attention away from their own crimes and to try to frame Lebedev's bank on trumped-up charges.

There may also be a political motive. After all, Lebedev, together with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, own 49 percent of opposition newspaper Novaya Gazeta, known for its investigative reports on corruption and government abuse.

Kremlin deputy chief of staff Vladislav Surkov has helped create an atmosphere of hatred and violence in the country by serving as the ideological patron for extremist youth groups, such as United Russia's youth movement Young Guard. In addition, Surkov has supported siloviki structures that have become the largest extortionists in the country.

Putin, Surkov and others in the Kremlin are leading the country to moral and economic ruin. Against this backdrop of rampant violence and corruption, Russia's best and brightest citizens continue to abandon the country in droves, choosing to contribute their talents and skills in the West.

It is urgent that Russia make the transition from a state run by siloviki and organized crime to one in which the country is managed and kept in check by democratic institutions and civil society. Otherwise, the mere survival of Russia as a country will be in jeopardy.

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