

Orlov Slams Kadyrov on Eve of Trial

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Oleg Orlov, head of the Memorial human rights group, has accused Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov of running a "totalitarian" regime as he prepares to take the stand in a trial that tests Russia's tolerance for criticism of the way Chechnya is run.

Kadyrov claims he was slandered by Orlov when the activist said he was "guilty" in a co-worker's murder. The case has moved along in fits and starts for months, but a session Thursday will be the first in which Orlov takes the stand. Kadyrov's lawyer Andrei Krasnenikov said the strongman would attend the session in person, but his spokesman, Alvi Karimov, said Wednesday that he would not. There was no explanation for the discrepancy.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Orlov refused to back down on his claim that Kadyrov was ultimately responsible for the slaying, whether or not Kadyrov personally ordered the 2009 hit on Natalya Estemirova, who directed Memorial's Chechnya office.

"When I talked about his guilt, I didn't say he was directly complicit in the crime," Orlov said in his Moscow office.

"I said that his direct complicity ... is possible, even one of the most probable versions

of events, and that this probable version has to be investigated," said the white-haired and mustachioed Orlov.

Estemirova was abducted in Grozny and found shot to death along a roadside hours later. Orlov said at a news conference: "People ask me, who is guilty of this murder? ... I know the name of this person. ... His name is Ramzan Kadyrov."

The trial pits a Kremlin-backed leader accused of using kidnap and torture to maintain stability in the volatile region against an activist trying to hold him accountable for those crimes. Orlov could be sentenced to three years in prison if found guilty.

Kadyrov at first shrugged off the accusation. "Why would Kadyrov kill a woman whom no one cared about?" he said in an August 2009 interview with Radio Free Europe. "She never had any honor, dignity or a conscience. Never."

But later he took the matter to court. Last year he won a civil judgment against Orlov and then brought it to criminal court. In the wake of the civil judgment, Orlov said he was resigned to losing the criminal case but hopes to escape with a fine rather than jail.

Orlov said Kadyrov has set up a regime in which the state controls every aspect of life, where henchmen carry out torture and even killings at the whim of the leadership.

"A totalitarian society has been built. Not authoritarian rule, but totalitarian," he said. "The authorities are omnipresent in all aspects of a person's life and want to control a person, and do exert control."

He said the conditions have been created where any public desire, opinion, displeasure by someone in power is taken as a directive, as a law that must be carried out unconditionally. Any such directive finds "masses of volunteers" among law enforcement agencies, Orlov said. He said this was to blame for Estemirova's murder. "I don't know if he gave the order himself or if it was his close associates," Orlov said.

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