

Justice for Budanov Is Justice for All

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Yury Budanov was an odious man. But he didn't deserve to be killed with four bullets to the head.

Budanov epitomized everything that was wrong with the second Chechen conflict, which human rights activists say was exacerbated by rape, kidnapping and murder of civilians by federal forces.

Budanov, a tank commander decorated with the Order of Courage, was the highest-level military official ever brought to trial over those atrocities. He admitted to strangling Elza Kungayeva, an 18-year-old Chechen girl, to death with his bare hands in 2000. His excuse: a fit of temporary insanity because he thought she was a dangerous sniper.

A military court convicted Budanov in 2003 and sentenced him to 10 years in prison. Budanov, stripped of his rank of colonel, was freed on parole in 2009 for good behavior.

The irony is heavy that Budanov — who tried, convicted and executed Kungayeva in his

quarters — was himself summarily tried, convicted and executed by unknown attackers in central Moscow 11 years later.

It might be tempting to say Budanov got what he deserved. But there is a reason that countries have courts and justice systems, no matter how weak and corrupt they might be.

Kungayeva never got a fair trial on charges that she, acting as a sniper, had killed or intended to kill federal soldiers.

But the government did put Budanov on trial for killing Kungayeva. The fairness of the trial and verdict might be questionable. And it would be easy to criticize the authorities for granting early release to Budanov, who likely oversaw and sanctioned many atrocities in Chechnya, while denying the same treatment to Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who has been jailed in connection with white-collar crimes since 2003.

But the fact remains that Budanov was charged, convicted and incarcerated for a crime that prosecutors concluded he committed. In the eyes of the law, he paid his debt to society.

If someone had a problem with Budanov, the proper venue for the grievance would have been with the police or the courts. When the justice system fails to respond, the government should have been alerted through the ballot box, public demonstrations or other forms of democratic protest that society will not tolerate the status quo. But vigilante justice has no place in civilized society.

Investigators must find and punish those responsible for Budanov's killing, whether the guilty party is involved in a blood vendetta linked to the Chechen conflict, is keen to stir up nationalist tensions or is acting on some other motive.

Budanov hardly seems worthy of joining the ranks of Anna Politkovskaya and Paul Klebnikov, whose slayings are still crying out for justice. Budanov participated in the very atrocities that those two courageous journalists exposed.

But if vigilante justice is swept under the carpet for a man like Budanov, what's to stop other killers from taking the law into their own hands with the rest of us?

President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have courted investors with promises of rule of law. That means Budanov's killers must be found and convicted in court, sending a clear signal to all that justice in Russia can only be meted out by the courts or by the Divine. Whoever cracks this case will truly deserve the Order of Courage.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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