

No Lack of Suspects in Budanov Killing

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Kungayeva's father and brother holding photos of her at Budanov's trial in 2001. **Igor Tabakov**

It remained a mystery Monday who brazenly killed former tank commander Yury Budanov by pumping four bullets into his head as he left a downtown Moscow building for a smoke.

But one thing is clear: Investigators have their work cut out for them because Budanov had a lot of enemies.

Initial fears proved unfounded that the killing would spark ethnic rioting by ultranationalists, who see Budanov as a hero for killing a Chechen girl whom he suspected of being a rebel sniper in 2000.

But ethnic tensions have been simmering for months, and Budanov's killing on Friday threatens to shatter the fragile ethnic peace in the country.

Two senior United Russia members and Public Chamber member Nikolai Svanidze speculated that nationalists were looking to disrupt stability before December's State Duma vote and the

presidential election next March. Others said the killing gave the Kremlin a chance to score with the voters ahead of the elections.

Budanov, 47, was shot dead in broad daylight as he came out of a notary's office on Komsomolsky Prospekt. He wanted to smoke, Gazeta.ru [said](#).

The unidentified assailant fired four gunshots to his head in front of his wife and walked away, RIA-Novosti [said](#). Svetlana Budanova was unharmed but required psychological help to deal with the shock, Gazeta.ru said.

Television [footage](#) showed Budanov's crumpled body lying facedown on the sidewalk as people walked by indifferently or watched from the balconies of nearby apartment buildings.

The gunman had two accomplices, one of whom, a man of Slavic appearance, drove him away in a Mitsubishi Lancer, the Investigative Committee said in a statement. The car was later found half-burned on a nearby street along with the handgun and silencer used in the shooting.

Investigators provided city police with a composite picture of the killer but did not make it public or provide any details about his identity, including his ethnicity.

Anyone charged and convicted over the killing faces up to life in prison, investigators said.

Budanov became one of the most divisive figures in recent Russian history after being arrested in 2000 for strangling to death Elza Kungayeva, 18. He was also accused of raping her, but the court cleared him on that count despite protests from her relatives.

Budanov pleaded guilty to murder but said he believed that Kungayeva was a sniper for the insurgents and said he had strangled her in a fit of rage during interrogations.

Budanov, who sustained brain injuries during his service in Chechnya from 1998 to 2000, was handed a 10-year prison term for murder and stripped of his rank of colonel by the North Caucasus District Military Court.

He walked free on parole in 2009. Although he served a total of eight years behind bars, including pretrial detention, his release angered Chechen officials and was criticized by the Kungayevs, who moved to Norway in 2003.

Investigators were inclined to see Budanov's killing as a "provocation," Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said, Interfax reported. He did not name the provocateurs but added that "the investigators have no information about ethnic groups being behind the killing."

Not everyone was convinced. Yabloko party head Sergei Mitrokhin and Chechnya's representative in the Federation Council, Aslanbek Aslakhonov, among others, said the murder might be revenge by Chechens or possibly Kungayeva's relatives.

Kungayeva's father, Visa Kungayev, denied involvement and said the killing, although well-deserved, was not masterminded by Chechens.

"A dog deserves a dog's death, that's what I think," Kungayev [told](#) Lifenews.ru in one of several interviews he gave Friday.

He could not be reached for further comment, not returning repeated calls on Monday, said rights champion Svetlana Gannushkina, who refused to provide a reporter with Kungayev's contacts without his permission.

Gennady Gudkov, deputy head of the State Duma's Security Committee, said the killing might have been Chechen revenge or "mock revenge" staged by nationalists to provoke ethnic hatred, Dozhd radio [reported](#).

The mention of a Slavic accomplice seemed to lend weight to the "nationalist" version, but Anton Tsvetkov of the Officers of Russia army veterans group said the suspect could have been a supporter of the North Caucasus insurgency who converted to radical Islam, Gazeta.ru reported. One such convert, Vitaly Razdobdko, has been linked by investigators to the suicide attack at Moscow's Domodedovo Airport that killed 37 in January.

Chechen authorities never hid their dislike of Budanov, who is viewed in the republic as a war criminal. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov in a 2004 interview with Izvestia vowed to "give his due" to Budanov should he be freed. He also criticized his 2009 release, but has not commented on Budanov's death.

Shortly after his release, Budanov was questioned in connection with the kidnapping of 18 Chechens, three of whom were killed. He was not charged, and the stage of the investigation was not immediately clear Monday.

Budanov [told](#) Izvestia shortly after his release that he expected to be murdered "not for revenge but for political goals."

He said he was prepared to die "for Russia," adding that he only wished his future killers would spare his family. In addition to his wife, Budanov is survived by an 11-year-old daughter and a 23-year-old son, Izvestia said.

Budanov never said who might be behind his death.

Prominent journalist Alexander Minkin said the killing might be used by the Kremlin to its advantage before the elections, Radio Liberty reported. He did not elaborate, but some authorities pointed to a threat of ultranationalism during the last election season of 2007 and 2008 as a reason to keep Vladimir Putin in the Kremlin for a third term.

More murder theories were also raised, with Chechen ombudsman Nurdi Nukhazhiyev saying Budanov might have been killed by other army officers who served in Chechnya to keep him from testifying about their crimes, including the theft of army funds, Interfax said.

Liberal Democratic Party head Vladimir Zhirinovskiy [said](#) Monday that he could not rule out "the London angle" — an apparent reference to self-exiled Kremlin critic Boris Berezovsky who has been accused by Kremlin supporters in previous high-profile killings, including the poisoning of former security service officer Alexander Litvinenko in 2006.

Investigators will no doubt also revisit the 2009 killing of human rights lawyer Stanislav

Markelov, who represented Kungayev's family during Budanov's trial. While initial suspicion fell on Budanov's supporters after the lawyer's death, two nationalists were convicted of killing him last month.

Some critics said the Kremlin must shoulder part of the blame for Budanov's death because of its policy in Chechnya, where the government headed by Kadyrov is given complete free reign by Moscow in exchange for suppressing open insurgency.

Zhirinovsky, who attended Budanov's funeral, said the former colonel "paid with his life for wrong state policies."

Budanov's death prompted fears of nationalist rioting similar to December's event on Manezh Square, where more than 5,500 people clashed with police after the killing of football fan Yegor Sviridov by North Caucasus natives.

Indeed, nationalists voiced online calls for a new rally on Manezh Square on Saturday, Ekho Moskvyy reported. Dozens of police vans and a water cannon were dispatched to the site, where 12 people were briefly detained, the report said.

Police also prepared for Budanov's funeral, assigning some 200 officers to guard the cemetery, which was first searched by police dogs for bombs.

In addition, Interior Ministry troops and traffic police were deployed to Leningradskoye Shosse to supervise the funeral procession as it traveled from a church in Khimki just north of Moscow to a local cemetery.

The funeral ended without any incidents. The crowd numbered 300 to 600 people, including military veterans and nationalists, Interfax said. A military band played, and soldiers fired automatic rifles into the air as Budanov's coffin was lowered into the grave.

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