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Estemirova Killing Investigated

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The Investigative Committee said Thursday that it would look into suspicions that Chechen security forces were involved in the murder rights campaigner Natalya Estemirova.

Estemirova, 50, was found shot dead in July 2009 after being kidnapped in Chechnya. Her killing triggered an international outcry and increased scrutiny of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov.

Two years after the murder, her colleagues at rights group Memorial published a report accusing investigators of failing to open a serious investigation or examine suspicions that local security officials were involved.

Investigative Committee chief Alexander Bastrykin said Thursday that he had "given instructions to check all potential scenarios of Estemirova's murder, including those which Memorial has presented," according to the committee's web site.

A committee spokesman said the order included looking into the possible "involvement of Chechen authorities." He added that investigators would discuss the case "soon" with rights activists.

There is no direct evidence implicating Kadyrov himself. But activists accuse him of ruling in a climate of fear and impunity in which security forces are accused of kidnapping and killing civilians suspected of any links to an Islamist insurgency.

Kadyrov has described activists employed by Memorial, which has exposed a string of abuses by security forces in the region, as "enemies of the people."

Memorial hailed Thursday's news as a sign that the investigation could start in earnest and that investigators were ready to cooperate with lawyers for Estemirova's family, who have appealed to the France-based European Court of Human Rights to gain access to case material.

"If now the evidence we gathered in our report is handed to investigators and the guidelines for the probe have changed then we can hope it will move forward," Memorial activist Alexander Cherkassov said in an interview.

Last year, President Dmitry Medvedev said Estemirova's killer had been identified, and investigators named Islamist militant Alkazhur Bashayev, said to have been killed subsequently, and his brother Anzor, who is now living in France, as the main suspects.

France has turned down repeated requests for Anzor's extradition. Memorial said DNA tests from Anzor did not match evidence found on Estemirova's clothes and said he had no plausible motive for the murder of the rights worker.

The Federal Security Service says Bashayev was killed four months after Estemirova's murder in a counter-terrorism operation. But an Investigative Committee source has since said he is alive and he is still being hunted.

Cherkassov said that "alive or dead, Bashayev has nothing to do with this case."

Earlier this year a statue of the rights campaigner was unveiled in downtown Grozny by the local branch of Memorial.

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