

'Secret Witness' Detained in Politkovskaya Killing

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

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Politkovskaya, seen in 2004, was known for her criticism of the Kremlin. **Igor Tabakov**

Investigators have detained the suspected organizer of the murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 — who, it turns out, was a mumbling secret witness for prosecutors at a failed trial into her killing.

Politkovskaya's family and colleagues welcomed the development but said it should have come years ago. They also voiced fears that the suspect, retired senior Moscow police investigator Dmitry Pavlyuchenkov, would be made a scapegoat, allowing the still-unknown mastermind of the killing to evade justice.

Pavlyuchenkov was detained late Tuesday, and a Moscow district court is expected to authorize his arrest Thursday, the Investigative Committee said.

Investigators believe that Pavlyuchenkov arranged the murder of Politkovskaya, a Novaya

Gazeta reporter who was shot dead in her apartment building in downtown Moscow, after being contacted by the mastermind, the committee said in a [statement](#) Wednesday.

The committee did not specify the price of the contract killing but said it "has information about the alleged mastermind of the crime." No details were available.

The committee said Pavlyuchenkov assembled a team to carry out the killing. Earlier reports said the team comprised three Chechen brothers with the surname Makhmudov — Rustam, Ibragim and Dzhabrail — and a former officer with Moscow police's anti-mafia department, Sergei Khadzhikurbanov.

Pavlyuchenkov, who served as chief of a Moscow police investigative unit at the time, ordered his police subordinates to trail Politkovskaya to "determine her daily routes around the city," it said.

He is also suspected of procuring the gun used by the suspected triggerman, Rustam Makhmudov, who spent five years on the run in Europe but was arrested in May upon his return to Chechnya.

The other two Makhmudovs are accused of helping track Politkovskaya, while Khadzhikurbanov is considered a middleman in the case.

The case against the three fell apart when a jury acquitted them in 2009. But the Supreme Court overturned the verdict, prompting a new investigation, which is in progress.

Pavlyuchenkov tried to pin the blame on the team after the killing, testifying against them at the 2009 trial, Novaya Gazeta [said](#) Wednesday.

He was known as a "secret witness" at the time, speaking to the court from behind closed doors amid fears for his safety. His identity, however, was known to the press from numerous leaks, including by lawyers.

Pavlyuchenkov also implicated Khadzhikurbanov in a separate case, accusing the former officer in 2008 of extorting \$350,000 from him, the report said.

Khadzhikurbanov was sentenced to eight years in prison in that case in 2010. Novaya Gazeta speculated that the money might have been payment for Politkovskaya's killing.

Anna Stavitskaya, a lawyer for Politkovskaya's son and daughter, praised the latest development Wednesday but said "it could have been done years before."

She said Pavlyuchenkov had cut a suspicious figure back at the 2009 trial. "He was presented as the main witness who could sway the whole jury, but everyone, myself included, was very surprised and disappointed ... by his mumbling," she told The Moscow Times by telephone.

Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief, Dmitry Muratov, also backed Pavlyuchenkov's arrest, saying an independent investigation by the paper had linked him to the killing.

"Pavlyuchenkov set up a business under the former police leadership; anyone could book police surveillance for \$100 an hour," Muratov said in an interview with the Kommersant

radio station.

Reporters Without Borders welcomed Pavlyuchenkov's detention as "a major step that is long overdue."

"We are pleased that after four years of foot-dragging there now seems to be a real determination to press ahead with the investigation," the group said in an e-mailed statement.

But both Muratov and Stavitskaya remained skeptical about a smattering of reports Wednesday that investigators were closing in on Pavlyuchenkov's employer.

"As of now, I regard it as a PR stunt by the investigators," Stavitskaya said. "Let them find and jail [the mastermind]. Then I'll reconsider."

Reporters Without Borders voiced worries that the case might not be seen through to the end. "As it advances, the security services will be strongly tempted to restrict blame to a few people who have already been identified and to close the case as soon as possible," it said, calling for the investigation to press on and expose the mastermind behind the killing.

Politkovskaya, 48, was known for her biting criticism of the Kremlin, including in the Western media, and her investigative reporting on rights abuses in the country, especially in the North Caucasus.

International human rights groups have championed her killing as a prime example of rampant rights abuse in Russia that they say are condoned by the Kremlin.

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