

Ex-Ukrainian President Accused of Role in Reporter's Killing

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KIEV — The main suspect in the brutal slaying of an investigative reporter in Ukraine more than 10 years ago claims that former President Leonid Kuchma played a role in the killing, a lawyer said. ☒

Olexiy Pukach, a former senior police official charged in the killing of Heorhiy Gongadze in 2000, testified in court that Kuchma ordered the slaying together with other top officials, according to Valentyna Telychenko, a lawyer representing Gongadze's widow, Myroslava. ☒

The lawyer said that when Pukach was asked in court who had commissioned the killing, he named Kuchma and other senior Ukrainian officials. ☒ The trial is closed to the public, so Telychenko's account of Tuesday's testimony could not be confirmed. ☒

In a separate investigation, Kuchma has been charged with abuse of office in Gongadze's death. Prosecutors suspect he gave illegal orders to his subordinates that eventually led to Gongadze's killing.

✘Kuchma has denied all accusations, and his office declined to comment about Pukach's testimony at the police official's trial. ✘Gongadze, who wrote about corruption among Ukraine's political elite, was kidnapped in September 2000. His decapitated body was found outside Kiev several months later.

✘Opponents and rights groups accused Kuchma of involvement in the slaying. It sparked months of protests against Kuchma after a key witness released tape recordings in which a voice that sounded like Kuchma's is heard complaining about the journalist and suggesting that subordinates deal with the problem. ✘

The criminal investigation against Kuchma, 73, was initiated unexpectedly in March. Kuchma, who served as Ukraine's president from 1994 to 2005, had been questioned in the case in the past but not as a suspect. ✘

Telychenko claimed that Pukach has confessed to killing Gongadze but said he was trying to prevent a government coup that Gongadze was preparing with colleagues. ✘

Three former police officers were convicted of involvement in Gongadze's killing and sentenced to lengthy prison terms in 2008. Prosecutors have concluded the murder was ordered by former Interior Minister Yury Kravchenko, who was shot dead in 2005 in what authorities ruled to be a suicide. ✘

The Gongadze case is regarded as a litmus test of Ukraine's commitment to rule of law. His family has been urging Ukrainian authorities to pursue the investigation further and bring to justice those who ordered the slaying.

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