

Bastrykin Ate His Words

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Novaya Gazeta deputy editor-in-chief Sergei Sokolov wrote a scathing article against the Investigative Committee and its chief, Alexander Bastrykin, after shamefully light verdicts were handed down against members of the Kushchyovskaya gang, which murdered 12 people, including small children, in 2011.

Bastrykin became enraged when he saw the article. He invited Sokolov to accompany him to a meeting in Nalchik, the capital of the North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. There, according to Sokolov, Bastrykin introduced him to some gun-bearing, hot-tempered locals and told them that Sokolov is an enemy of Russia.

On the return trip from Nalchik, Sokolov claimed that Bastrykin drove him into the forest and said he would be wiped out if he didn't tone down his articles. Bastrykin added with a sinister smile that he would love to head the investigation into Sokolov's murder case.

After several days of fruitless attempts to obtain a guarantee of Sokolov's safety from the Investigative Committee, Novaya Gazeta editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov published an open letter directed at Bastrykin. Fellow journalists responded by picketing outside Investigative Committee headquarters.

Bastrykin maintained silence for 24 hours but then gave an interview with Izvestia the following day in which he claimed that the entire story was nonsense and that he had never driven Sokolov into the forest.

While Bastrykin was giving that interview, Muratov was on a flight to Simferopol. No sooner had he landed than he learned that the Investigative Committee was urgently looking for him.✘Muratov immediately purchased a return ticket and flew back to Moscow.

There he met with Bastrykin, and the two resolved their differences. Muratov then called Sokolov and handed the telephone to Bastrykin, who, in the presence of three other journalists, said: "I offer you my sincere apologies. I am glad that you behaved like a real man and that you listened to everything I said without losing your temper."

In the end, Bastrykin, Muratov and Sokolov all apologized to one another and agreed to cooperate with each other in the future. Leaning over to the Izvestia journalist present who had conducted the interview with Bastrykin, Muratov whispered: "I guess you'll have to eat those words now."

I am guessing that there would never have been this reconciliation meeting if angry journalists had not picketed the Investigative Committee building. I also have a hunch that President Vladimir Putin spoke with Bastrykin following the publication of the Izvestia interview and strongly suggested that he meet with Muratov.

Some hardened bloggers were quick to criticize Muratov, complaining that he should have demanded that Bastrykin answer to the law for his death threats and his attempts to obstruct a journalist from performing his professional duties. In any event, Novaya Gazeta got exactly what it wanted: a guarantee that Sokolov would not be harmed.

The argument could be made that if U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder had driven, let's say, Fox News political commentator Bill O'Reilly out to the forest and threatened to rip his head off and to personally lead the investigation into his murder, Holder would clearly not have gotten off with only an apology. Obviously, such an incident would have ended with an immediate dismissal, followed by a lawsuit and perhaps a prison sentence.

The Bastrykin incident proves once again that we don't live in the United States.

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