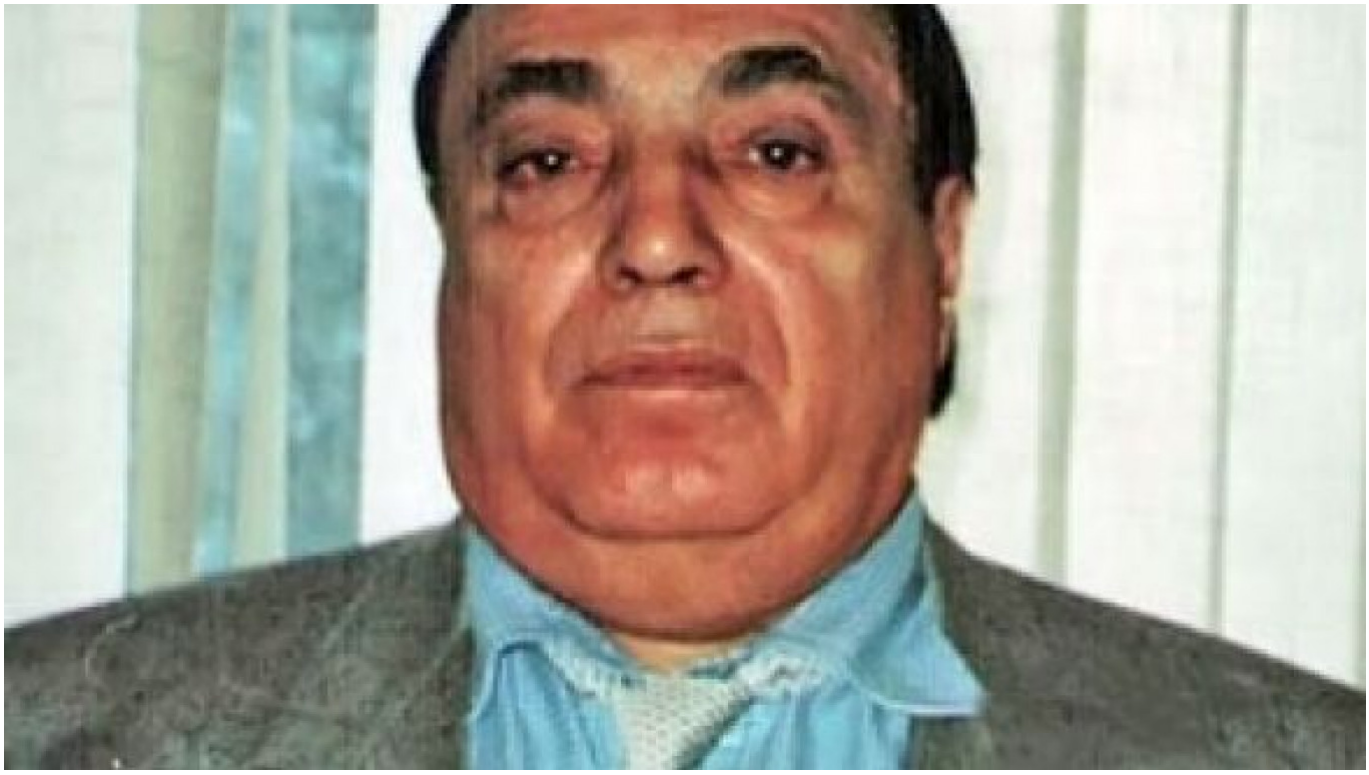
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Mafia War Brewing After Killing of Usoyan

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Aslan Usoyan, better known as Grandpa Khasan

Less than a month after the violent death of legendary crime boss Aslan Usoyan, better known as Grandpa Khasan, there is growing evidence that a bloody hunt is on to avenge the killing.

National media reported last week that Rovshan Dzhaniyev, a reputed mobster from Azerbaijan who was widely blamed for Usoyan's killing, was shot in Istanbul on Feb. 1 and died of his wounds in a hospital in the Turkish city four days later.

But the reports, by Izvestia and the LifeNews tabloid website, have not been confirmed by Turkish police, leading to speculation that they were fabricated by the purported victim.

"Half the gangsters confirm that Rovshan was killed, [while] the other half are convinced that Dzhaniyev spread the rumor about his death so the hunt for him stops for a while," a law enforcement official told the Rosbalt news site in a report published Thursday.

The report also said that Usoyan's clan had issued a $5 million reward for the killing of Dzhaniyev and that the money had not yet been paid.

The Azerbaijan-based Vesti.az news portal even quoted Dzhaniyev's brother Namik as saying that Rovshan was alive and well and based in Dubai.

Last month, two other mid-ranking crime figures thought to be Usoyan's enemies were killed.

On Jan. 18, Astamir Gulia was gunned down in Sukhumi, Abkhazia, and died of his wounds one day later, reported Apsnypress, the breakaway Georgian region's official news agency.

Gulia, who was better-known as Astik Sukhumsky, was shot in the parking lot of a restaurant where he had just had dinner, just two days after Usoyan was killed by a sniper after leaving his favorite downtown Moscow restaurant, Stary Phaeton.

Rossia 1 state television reported that Gulia was prominent among a group that had challenged Usoyan's authority.

Also killed was Rufat Nasibov, an Azeri who went by the underworld nickname of Rufo Gandzhansky, who was shot to death outside his Moscow apartment on Jan. 28, Rosbalt reported.

Days later, another reputed mobster said to be an Usoyan rival, Dzhemal Mikeladze, was detained by police in the Moscow region on drug trafficking charges, Itar-Tass reported, quoting local law enforcement.

Usoyan's killer remains at large, and police have not named any suspects in the case. On Friday, a law enforcement source told Interfax that the Federal Security Service had joined the investigation.

"Currently, a number of suspects are being checked," the source was quoted as saying.

The report added that the murder was most likely connected to the victim's criminal activities.

Experts say both authorities and crime lords are keen to prevent an escalation of the violence. An indication of this is reports from late January that police had broken up a Moscow region gathering of bosses from the network of Tariel Oniani, thought to be Usoyan's main rival, and that Dzhaniyev had been arrested in Baku.

"Many of the grandees of the Russian underworld are keenly aware of the many dangers which could follow if a new mob war erupts, from the way it would spread to the likelihood that it may force the state to crack down," Mark Galeotti, a professor at New York University and a leading researcher on Russian crime, wrote on his blog.

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