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# Putin Hints at 'Terrorism,' Media at ISIS as Roadside Killers 'Caught'

By Allison Quinn

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On Saturday, Putin appeared to confirm the rampant media reports of the group's capture, expressing gratitude to Interior Ministry head Vladimir Kolokoltsev for his efforts in uncovering the crimes attributed to the group.

Amid reports that investigators in Moscow had finally caught a gang of roadside killers believed to be responsible for at least 14 recent grisly murders, Russian media outlets were quick to point to Islamic extremism, and — in an unprecedented move — President Vladimir Putin appeared to describe the group's actions as a "terrorist crime."

The Investigative Committee, however, has remained mum on the details and cautioned the public in a statement issued Saturday against drawing any premature conclusions.

The group, dubbed the "GTA gang" for exhibiting similarities to the popular video game "Grand Theft Auto," has featured in dozens of media reports since May, when the first killing was reported, but pieces of official information have been few and far between, leaving

Russian media outlets to connect the dots with often questionable theories, including one involving the Ukrainian security services.

On Saturday, Putin appeared to confirm the rampant media reports of the group's capture, expressing gratitude to Interior Ministry head Vladimir Kolokoltsev for his efforts in uncovering the crimes attributed to the group.

"Special thanks for the latest major event, when you solved a crime committed by a group of people. This was in fact a terrorist crime. I know you work jointly with special services and the Federal Security Service. I expect to see this case closed," Putin said at his meeting with Kolkoltsev, as transcribed by the Kremlin press service.

Although Putin did not specify which group or crimes he was referring to, Russian media widely reported that his comments concerned the so-called GTA gang.

News that members of the gang were detained on Thursday triggered a flurry of dramatic news reports over the weekend, with many Russian media outlets connecting the group to the Islamic State — a theory that contradicts earlier news reports citing survivors describing the killers as having Slavic appearances.

The Islamic extremism link has gained momentum with the help of official state newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta, which on Thursday cited unidentified law enforcement sources as saying the suspects were not a gang of maniacal sadists as earlier believed, but Islamic extremists who had been targeting infidels.

"The scariest part is that the suspects had been shooting people and killing them, but not for money. They call themselves a 'jamaat.' That is how radical groups identify themselves. The criminals killed complete strangers for ideological reasons, as infidels. That is how they see their mission in this world," the daily wrote.

Most of the killings have taken place along the M-4 highway on the outskirts of Moscow. The killers gained their "GTA" nickname because they appeared to target drivers at random, like in the popular "Grand Theft Auto" video game. They would place a chain of iron spikes on the road to puncture the tires of their unsuspecting victims, forcing the driver to pull over to change the tire. They would then shoot the driver and any passengers.

The first such killing occurred in early May, when the bodies of a married couple were found near the M-4 highway. The two pensioners had been shot dead after they stopped to change a flat tire. The murders have continued sporadically since then, always with the same modus operandi, but investigators have remained mostly silent about the gang, which has quickly acquired urban-legend status.

As news circulates of the group's alleged motives, law enforcement sources have warned that some members of the gang remain on the loose, Rossiiskaya Gazeta reported.

Sergei Goncharov, an expert on terrorism and veteran of the Federal Security Service's Alfa division, said that there was no doubt that the members of the group were Islamic extremists, but that it was too early to comment on whether they belonged to any specific militant group.

"We can say with 100 percent certainty that these criminals belong to an Islamic extremist

cell, but to say that they are members of the Islamic State — I think it's still way too early for that," Goncharov said.

Georgy Engelhardt, an independent expert on Islam, said that while the group's methods may seem different from those employed by suicide bombers or other groups that orchestrate massive terrorist attacks, the incident is not unprecedented.

"In Russia, outside of the North Caucasus, there have been instances of Islamists acting like 'typical gangsters' since 2003 — there was a group of jihadists in Ulyanovsk that was robbing truck drivers and killing them, and a similar group around Moscow in 2012 or 2013," Engelhardt told The Moscow Times, adding that such groups were not unlike the Boston bombers in the sense that they don't have any particular training or belong to any major terrorist group.

The group mentioned by Engelhardt, which simply called itself "Jamaat," saw 10 of its members sent to prison in 2005 for various acts of violence against "infidels."

Engelhardt said the group currently described in Russian media reports as the GTA gang had all the hallmarks of an Islamist religious sect that had successfully radicalized its members.

"This is how it works: The disciples are told that they are surrounded by infidels or 'bad' Muslims who aren't adhering to the requirements of their religion, and attacks on and robberies of infidels are then considered part of fulfilling their religious duty," Engelhardt said.

As for the earlier reports of the so-called GTA killers stealing objects from their victims, Engelhardt said this was also typical of such groups.

"The activities of the group are considered jihad, and the spoils are their battle trophies," he said.

Russian media reports have identified the suspects who have been detained as migrants from Central Asia, along with one Russian female who was reportedly converted to Islam.

The Kommersant business daily identified the leader of the group as Kyrgyzstan native Rustam Usmanov, who was fatally gunned down by police in the village of Udelnaya after throwing a grenade at them when they attempted to take him into custody.

In another strange twist, Ren-TV cited residents of Udelnaya as saying that 32-year-old Usmanov had been working as a servant in the home of a top official in the federal Prosecutor General's Office. Usmanov's mother also reportedly worked in the official's home.

On Friday, RIA Novosti reported that a court sanctioned the arrest of a man believed to be somehow involved with the GTA gang — identified as Tajikistan native Abdumukim Mamachdonov — until Dec. 5.

Mamachdonov has only been charged for illegal weapons possession, however, and investigators have not accused him of involvement in the killings.

Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin stopped short of confirming

the suspects' arrest on Saturday, saying in a statement on the agency's website that investigators were still working together with the Federal Security Service on the matter.

Markin also warned that "making any more detailed comments on the group's involvement in specific crimes" would be premature.

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