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Senior Prosecutor Questioned Over Link to Motorway Murders

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Prosecutor General Yury Chaika

A top official in the Prosecutor General's Office has been suspended and questioned over his links to a series of motorway murders outside Moscow after it emerged that the alleged ringleader of the killers had been living in the prosecutor's house.

Alexei Staroverov, head of the Prosecutor General's Office administration, has been suspended while an internal investigation is carried out, his office said Thursday. Earlier the same day, a spokesman for the Investigative Committee — Russia's version of the FBI — told Interfax that Staroverov had given "exhaustive answers" during an interrogation.

The murderous gang is believed to have killed at least 14 people in the Moscow region from May until police made a series of arrests last week. It has since emerged that Rustam Usmanov, the alleged leader of the gang who was killed while reportedly resisting arrest during the police operation, was living with other gang members in a house belonging to

Staroverov, the Investigative Committee confirmed Thursday. The gang was also storing its weapons there, the Kommersant newspaper reported.

Staroverov claimed that he had rented out the house to an unidentified entrepreneur, who had in turn employed Kyrgyz national Usmanov and his associates to service it, Kommersant said. The internal investigation conducted by the Prosecutor General's Office has not found evidence of any contact between Staroverov and Usmanov, Interfax reported Thursday, citing an unnamed source familiar with the situation.

After talking to Staroverov's neighbors and flying a video drone over the mansion, LifeNews, a news channel widely believed to have ties to the security services, reported that he had rented out a smaller wooden house on the grounds to Usmanov and several other people from Central Asia, including children.

Jealous Rivals

While the Investigative Committee said Staroverov was being questioned as a witness, the Znak.com news site reported that a criminal case had been opened against him, and that Deputy Prosecutor General Viktor Grin had already intervened, issuing a personal order to close the case in what analysts said was likely the latest incident in a long-running conflict between the Investigative Committee and Prosecutor General's Office.

"The Prosecutor General's Office still resents the way the Investigative Committee essentially forced its way to becoming independent. The committee likewise is constantly locked in a struggle for power and precedence with the Prosecutor General's Office," Mark Galeotti, an expert in Russian security affairs, told The Moscow Times said in e-mailed comments.

Andrei Soldatov, another prominent security expert, said in a phone interview that "[Investigative Committee head Alexander] Bastrykin's people would never pass up the opportunity to smack the prosecutors on the nose."

The Investigative Committee reports directly to President Vladimir Putin, having been made an independent agency from the Prosecutor General's Office in 2011, curtailing the powers of the latter. Since then investigators have clashed with prosecutors in a number of high-profile cases.

The fact that a high-ranking official is involved in the case means that the investigation could degenerate into bulldogs fighting under the rug, which would allow the public to find out more than it would otherwise, Georgy Engelgardt, an independent Islam expert, told The Moscow Times.

"Prosecutors will attempt to prove that their colleague is simply a humble gardening enthusiast, while the Investigative Committee will say that he is nothing short of a Bluebeard," Engelgardt said in a phone interview, referring to a murderous aristocrat from a French fairy tale.

According to Staroverov's 2014 income declaration published on the Prosecutor General Office's website, his underage son owns a 273-square-meter house and a 1,110-square-meter plot of land. The Russian edition of Forbes magazine ranked the prosecutor Russia's fourth-

richest security service official last year.

Theft or Jihad?

The group, dubbed the "GTA gang" for its apparent similarities to the popular video game "Grand Theft Auto," had been targeting random drivers, mostly along the M-4 highway in the Moscow region. They would place a chain of iron spikes on the road to puncture the tires of their unsuspecting victims, forcing the driver to stop in order to change the tire. They would then shoot the driver and any passengers.

The spikes and weapons used in the killings were found in Staroverov's house, along with extremist Islamist literature, Kommersant reported.

Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said Wednesday that the gang had been pursuing "mercenary ends, stealing victims' money."

Earlier reports about the killings had said the criminals did not take their victims' money and personal belongings.

Multiple news reports had claimed that the gang's motives were religious and that its members saw the killings as a form of Islamic jihad. During a meeting with Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev on Saturday, Putin spoke of a "terrorist crime" in an apparent reference to the motorway murders.

"Considering that many Central Asians do face regular and sustained racism in Moscow, it is not at all inconceivable that there was an overlay of jihad, a rationalization of the attacks as somehow fighting back against their 'oppressors,'" Galeotti said.

He expressed doubt, however, that religion was a major factor in the crimes. "A combination of cash and kicks is the most likely motivation," he said.

According to Engelgardt, the case could represent the ongoing "radicalization of migrants" in Russia.

"It is very likely that these people have simply reacted to the mistreatment and marginalization they have to deal with in Russia," he said.

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