

# Two Suspected Snipers Nabbed Over Maidan Protest Killings

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Many Berkut officers fled Ukraine in the aftermath of the Maidan protests.

Ukrainian prosecutors said Tuesday that two law enforcement officers have been detained on suspicion of having gunned down protesters in Kiev during last year's violent Maidan protests, a day after President Vladimir Putin dismissed as "absolute nonsense" accusations of Kremlin involvement in the killings.

A total of 22 officers had been identified as suspects, the prosecutors said. Each of the accused faces charges of murder, attempted murder and abuse of power resulting in bodily harm, as well as lesser related charges.

"All fighters of the special 'Berkut' division of police in Kiev who took part in the shooting of protesters ... have been identified," the statement said. Two of the officers were detained Monday, and the remaining 20 men were placed on a wanted list.

The shootings occurred at the height of the Maidan protests in Kiev, after Kremlin-backed former President Viktor Yanukovich's backtracking on a trade deal with the European Union sparked outrage.

Though the protests endured for weeks, scuffles between police and protesters were sporadic at first, and generally involved small-scale actions, such as police spraying cold water on the protesters in the middle of winter and protesters hurling Molotov cocktails at police.

In late February, the standoff took a tragic turn when snipers began firing into the crowd in the city center. Between February 18-20, more than 70 people — protesters and police alike — were killed by gunfire, Human Rights Watch reported at the time.

Video footage of the violence sent shockwaves. One video showed a group of protesters, all equipped with improvised shields, dragging the body of a fellow protester after he'd been shot dead.

The unresolved question of who bears responsibility for the attacks continues to cause controversy. Protesters and their supporters blamed Berkut snipers, while the movement's detractors blamed the Maidan organizers themselves.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian authorities have accused the Kremlin of having masterminded the operation, though Russia has adamantly denied the allegations.

Last week, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko said Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov had overseen the snipers' actions, saying Ukraine's state security apparatus had strong evidence of direct Russian involvement.

In an interview with Channel One over the weekend, Putin called the allegations "complete, utter nonsense," saying the claim was "so far from reality that I have no idea where it would come from."

Many Berkut officers fled Ukraine in the aftermath of the Maidan protests, and Russia's Interior Ministry offered to employ them among the ranks of Russian police.

Russia's Foreign Ministry also offered the former Berkut officers a warm welcome, ordering the consulate in Crimea to expedite the procedure for granting them Russian passports.

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