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Russian Ultranationalists Get Life Sentences for Slew of Hate Killings

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A member of a nationalist group raises his fist during a rally in Moscow

Three members of the Militant Organization of Russian Nationalists (BORN), whose members committed a series of shocking high-profile hate murders in Russia during the last decade, were given lengthy prison terms by a Moscow region court Tuesday.

The ultranationalist group murdered at least 10 people, including a federal judge, a human rights lawyer, a journalist, a migrant and three anti-fascist activists. They committed the crimes on the basis of their victims' ethnicity or public position. Now some of them claim that they have been framed by high-ranking Kremlin officials.

"I don't deny that I am a Russian nationalist. Nationalism, in my case, is love for people, defense of people and their interests, not hatred toward others. Radical nationalism is a response to excess and lack of order," Vyacheslav Isayev, one of the members of the BORN group sentenced Tuesday, said during his closing testimony at a court hearing in March,

Novaya Gazeta newspaper reported.

Together with Maxim Baklagin and Alexei Korshunov, Isayev carried out the murder of federal judge Eduard Chuvashov in 2010 in revenge for the judge's rulings in a number of high-profile hate crime cases.

Korshunov, a former FSB officer who shot Chuvashov in the stairwell of his apartment building, died in 2011 after a grenade he was carrying exploded.

In 2010, Baklagin and Isayev killed a taxi driver, Soso Khachikyan, after hearing in the media that he had beaten up the manager of a phone store, causing her to miscarry a child. It later emerged that the LifeNews sensationalist television channel, which had reported the story, had made a mistake and no miscarriage had occurred.

Both Baklagin and Isayev were sentenced to life imprisonment Tuesday.

Another member of the group, Mikhail Volkov, who stabbed to death anti-fascist activist Fyodor Filatov in 2008 and fatally shot suspected Islamist nationalist Rasul Khalilov in 2009, was sentenced to 25 years in prison. The fourth defendant in the trial, Yury Tikhomirov, was acquitted by the jury of being part of an extremist group and illegal possession of firearms, but will go back to jail, having been sentenced back in 2012 to 10 years in prison for murdering another anti-fascist activist, Ilya Dzhaparidze, in 2009.

Other suspected members of the group are wanted by police.

Kremlin Connection?

In an earlier high-profile trial in 2011, two other members of BORN, Yevgenia Khasis and Nikita Tikhonov, were sentenced to 18 years and life imprisonment respectively for killing prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova, a journalist for the liberal-leaning Novaya Gazeta, in central Moscow in 2009.

Tikhonov and Khasis are now key witnesses in the case of Ilya Goryachev, who is accused of being the organization's main ideologist. Goryachev is currently in custody after being extradited from Serbia. His case was sent to court Friday, the Vedomosti business daily reported.

According to Khasis, Goryachev was closely connected to the Kremlin administration and its deputy head at the time, Vladislav Surkov. In particular, Goryachev took orders from Leonid Simunin, an alleged member of the administration, Khasis has claimed.

Dmitry Peskov, President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, declined to comment on the story for The Moscow Times on Tuesday. Novaya Gazeta reported last year that the presidential administration had never employed an individual by the name of Leonid Simunin, citing an official comment.

Goryachev's lawyer, Mark Feigin, said the defense is planning to call Surkov as a witness in the trial. Surkov is currently Putin's aide for relations with the breakaway Georgian republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"When Khasis and Goryachev were questioned together, she claimed outright — and I have this on record — that Surkov, [another man named] Karpov and Simunin ordered the murders, and that Goryachev allegedly told her that in person," Feigin told The Moscow Times.

According to Khasis' testimony in court, Goryachev masterminded the murders in order to blackmail Surkov into giving him money to establish a nationalist organization in exchange for halting the spree of killings.

"Whenever we needed money, an artificial problem was created by people like Goryachev and Simunin with the use of Tikhonov and other radical groups — people who are fanatically devoted to certain ideas. Then taxpayers' money was allocated to extinguish the 'flames of revolution' that without these people would never have flared up in the first place," Khasis said during a court hearing, according to the Mediazona news website.

At the same time, according to Goryachev's lawyer Feigin, Khasis said during a questioning that it was Surkov who ordered the murders.

Goryachev has repeatedly denied involvement in the murders and maintains that the criminal case against him was fabricated by the FSB after its attempts to recruit him as an agent failed.

"There are two possibilities: Either Khasis is delusional, or she wants to trade her testimony to gain something within her own case," Feigin said.

Dangerous Flirtation

Speaking at his annual call-in show Thursday, Putin said that patriotism and xenophobia are two very different things that are "worlds apart."

"I always say that nationalism is a very dangerous phenomenon that can have a destructive effect on the integrity of the Russian state, which has developed as a multinational and multiconfessional society," Putin said.

Radical nationalism has been identified as one of the biggest threats to Russia's national security by experts and government officials. Several large-scale underground groups that demonstrate the power of the movement and its ideas have been crushed by law enforcement officers in the last decade. In 2006, members of another nationalist organization, Spas, bombed the sprawling Cherkizovsky market in eastern Moscow, killing 14 people. The main organizer, chemist Oleg Kostaryov, was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2008.

At the same time, some analysts have warned that the Kremlin is flirting dangerously with nationalists by allowing them to hold large-scale rallies in downtown Moscow and staging publicity stunts in which Putin has ridden with nationalist biker gang the Night Wolves, and that its attempts to co-opt the nationalists could unleash a force the authorities will then struggle to contain.

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