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Russian Soldier's Funeral Does Not Stop Questions Over Syria Death

By Eva Hartog

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Russian servicemen carry the coffin of Vadim Kostenko, one of the Russian air force's support staff in Syria, during his funeral in the village of Grechnaya Balka, north-west of Krasnodar, Russia, Oct. 28, 2015.

A funeral was held in a small village in southern Russia on Wednesday for Vadim Kostenko, the first Russian contract soldier to die in Syria since Russia launched a military offensive there, as his relatives continued to dispute the official version that he killed himself.

Roughly 300 people, including 15 soldiers, attended Kostenko's funeral in Grechanaya Balka in the Krasnodar region, where he was buried with military honors, the Gazeta.ru news website reported Wednesday.

See the photo gallery: Teenage Vadim Kostenko: Russia's First Syrian Casualty

Local residents said a priest had visited the family home but had refused to carry out a blessing because the official cause of death was suicide, Reuters reported — a theory hotly

contested by Kostenko's relatives.

A man who identified himself as Kostenko's uncle told the Novaya Gazeta newspaper on Wednesday that the boy's relatives did not believe official reports he had died of asphyxiation.

"What is this about a 'hanging'?" the uncle was cited as saying. "He had a broken jaw and the back of his head was bashed in. And his neck was broken."

Kostenko's parents have appealed to the police, demanding a second autopsy, a separate Novaya Gazeta report said Wednesday.

But asked for comment by the Gazeta.ru news website, the Defense Ministry and Krasnodar regional police said they knew nothing about the request.

The ministry also said there had been no indication that Kostenko had had suicidal tendencies, describing the living conditions at the Hmeimim airbase in Latakia where Kostenko had been stationed as an air force technician, as comfortable, the report said.

Russia's Chief Military Prosecutor's Office on Wednesday said in an online statement that a medical examination of Kostenko's body had confirmed the cause of death as suicide, but said an investigation had been opened to determine “all the circumstances surrounding his death.”

Russia's human rights ombudswoman Ella Pamfilova on Wednesday demanded an inquest into the death, saying she would not “stand on the sidelines of the situation,” Russian media reported.

A spokesman for the Russian Defense Ministry, Igor Konashenkov, lashed out at the skepticism surrounding Kostenko's death, state-run RIA Novosti reported.

“All the supposed 'versions' ... are deliberate insinuations that absolutely do not conform to reality,” he was cited as saying.

Konashenkov described the death as “tragic” but said such casualties also happened in the military elsewhere since they “are not connected with the activities of the military, but with the age and personal characteristics of specific young people,” he said.

Russia's Defense Ministry on Tuesday confirmed Kostenko had died in Syria following a report on his death by the activist group Conflict Intelligence Team, but said he had killed himself while off duty after falling out with his girlfriend.

The death is the first casualty since Russia deployed about 2,000 personnel and 50 aircraft to fight the Islamic State and other rebel groups in Syria in late September.

Contact the author at e.hartog@imedia.ru

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