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Ukrainian 'Vikings' Go on Trial Accused of Fighting in Chechen War

By Howard Amos

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Stanislav Klykh and Nikolai Karpyuk

Ukrainian history teacher Stanislav Klykh told his mother he could be released in a few days during a phone call after his arrest on a trip to Russia in August last year. Then he disappeared.

“For 10 months we did not know where he was,” Tamara Klykha, 71, said by telephone from Kiev.

When a lawyer hired by his family finally located Klykh, 41, he was facing up to 20 years in prison on accusations that he fought with Chechen rebels against Russian soldiers in the 1990s during a bloody war for independence that convulsed the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Public sessions in Klykh's trial in the Chechen capital of Grozny began this week. He is in the

defendant's box with Ukrainian nationalist Nikolai Karpyuk — who is accused of the same charges and whose family spent a similar amount of time trying to locate him in Russia's prison system.

Both men have said they were physically abused in pretrial detention and both have recently disavowed statements they said were extracted under torture.

The trial is one of several high-profile criminal cases involving Ukrainian nationals that have emerged in Russia since relations between Moscow and Kiev deteriorated dramatically last year following the annexation of Crimea and the Russian backing for rebels in eastern Ukraine.

The Vikings

Klykh and Karpyuk are both charged with murder, attempted murder and being a member of an illegal armed group, according to Russia's Investigative Committee.

They are supposed to have fought Russian soldiers in Chechnya as members of a Ukrainian nationalist group known as the Vikings led by extreme Ukrainian nationalist Oleksandr Muzychko.

"They took active part in battles against soldiers of the Russian armed forces on the territory of the presidential palace, Minutka Ploshchad and the railway station in Grozny in which more than 30 soldiers were killed," the Investigative Committee said in an August statement.

Muzychko, a member of the extreme Ukrainian nationalist organization Right Sector who openly admitted he had fought in Chechnya, was killed in a shootout with Ukrainian police officers last year.

Klykh, a resident of Kiev arrested during a trip to see a female acquaintance in the western Russian city of Oryol, denies any involvement with Right Sector. His mother said he had not even taken part in the protests on Kiev's Maidan Square last year.

In contrast, Karpyuk, who was arrested at a Russian-Ukrainian border crossing on March 17 last year, is a senior member of Right Sector. He maintains he tried to enter Russia to speak to top Russian officials in Moscow to solve the growing conflict over the southern Ukrainian region of Crimea.

Both Karpyuk and Klykh deny they had ever set foot in Chechnya before the start of their trial, according to their lawyers.

Torture and Disappearance

"I have never seen anyone in that condition," Klykh's lawyer Marina Dubrovina said of the moment in June when she gained access to her client in a prison in the southern Russian city of Pyatigorsk.

Klykh was severely tortured after his arrest with electric shocks, being hung from his handcuffs and long periods in solitary confinement until he gave "fantastical evidence," Dubrovina said. Ukrainian diplomats reportedly made at least seven unsuccessful attempts to

visit him while he was in pretrial detention.

Karpyuk's lawyer, Dokka Itslayev, said his client was tortured intensively for four nights after his arrest and subjected to electric shocks to his arms, legs and genitalia — as well as being kept in a metal cage measuring one meter by one meter. Karpyuk said he was told his wife and 9-year-old son would be kidnapped and abused if he did not confess to fighting in Chechnya, according to Itslayev.

For many months, both Karpyuk and Klykh were represented by state-appointed lawyers who did not communicate any information to the men's families.

In May this year, lawyer Ilya Novikov, who tried and failed to gain access to Karpyuk in prison, wrote on Facebook that Karpyuk might be dead. Itslayev, hired by Karpyuk's wife Yelena Karpyuka, said he saw Karpyuk for the first time in September — 18 months after his arrest.

At one point Karpyuk was moved hundreds of kilometers from a prison in southern Russia to a detention facility in the Urals city of Chelyabinsk to dodge a visit from the Ukrainian consul, Itslayev said.

Heroin and Hepatitis

Aside from statements by Karpyuk and Klykh, which they have both publicly disavowed, much of the evidence against the two men is based on testimony given by Alexander Malofeyev, a Ukrainian national sentenced by a Russian court to 23 years in 2009 for murder and robbery.

Malofeyev concluded a plea bargain with investigators and was sentenced to an additional 24 1/2 years by a Chechen court in September on charges similar to those facing Klykh and Karpyuk.

Investigative Committee spokesman Vladimir Markin said last month that Malofeyev fought in Chechnya in 1994, 1995 and 2000 when he was under the command of rebel leader Shamil Basayev and fought in a battle at Ulus-Kert when a unit of Russia's elite 76th Airborne Division was overrun at the cost of 84 lives.

“Malofeyev took part in torture sessions with other Ukrainian nationalists in which one soldier had his nails ripped out with pliers and his throat cut,” Markin was cited by the Interfax news agency as saying.

Malofeyev identified Klykh and Karpyuk as among those who fought in Chechnya in the 1990s, but only after the two men were arrested in Russia, according to lawyers Itslayev and Dubrovina.

"There is no other evidence [against Karpyuk and Klykh]," lawyer Itslayev said.

Itslayev and Dubrovina dismiss Malofeyev as an unreliable witness, pointing out he is a heroin addict, is covered in Nazi tattoos and suffers from hepatitis B, hepatitis C and tuberculosis.

“It would be very easy to get evidence from him by withholding medicine,” said Dubrovina. "They put photos in front of him and he said yes.”

Yatsenyuk Link

As well as naming Klykh and Karpyuk, Malofeyev also reportedly identified high-level Ukrainian officials as participants in the Chechen war — including Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

Klykh told investigators under torture that Yatsenyuk had taken part in the fighting, according to lawyer Dubrovina.

The testimonies of the two men were apparently the basis for a September interview given by the powerful head of the Investigative Committee, Alexander Bastrykin, to government newspaper Rossiiskaya Gazeta in which he publicly accused Yatsenyuk of abusing and executing Russian soldiers.

"Under questioning, close allies of Yatsenyuk characterized him as an educated and intelligent person but also cunning and devious," Bastrykin said.

The accusations against the bookish-looking Yatsenyuk provoked amazement, and Yatsenyuk's spokesman advised Bastrykin to see a psychiatrist. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, himself a former rebel, said Yatsenyuk could not have fought on the side of the insurgents.

Political Prisoners

Klykh and Karpyuk are among 11 Ukrainians in Russian jails that Kiev considers to be political prisoners, according to a statement by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavel Klimkin on Aug. 4.

Many claim they have been tortured and most are facing long sentences.

Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov was sentenced to 20 years behind bars in August, accused of masterminding a terrorist group in Crimea, while 73-year-old Yury Soloshenko, a retired factory director from Ukraine, was sentenced to six years in prison for espionage earlier this month.

The high-profile trial of Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko is currently under way in southern Russia. Savchenko is facing up to 25 years in jail on murder charges.

All the arrests of those involved have taken place since demonstrations in Kiev overthrew the Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovych and swept a pro-Europe government to power in February 2014. Ukraine has since accused Russia of backing separatist rebels fighting in eastern Ukraine and providing them with troops and equipment, but Moscow rejects the charges, alleging Ukraine is ruled by a fascist regime.

'Gross Injustice'

Both Klykh and Karpyuk have urged their friends and relatives not to come and visit them in prison because they fear they could also be jailed, according to their lawyers.

"He is completely opposed to his wife and son coming to Russia and is afraid for their lives," said Karpyuk's lawyer, Itslayev, who predicted the trial would last until mid-December.

Tamara Klykha sobbed as she recalled how her son, who graduated from the medical faculty of Ukraine's Taras Shevchenko National University, loved visiting his aunt in Moscow as a child and going to museums.

“It's a gross injustice,” she said. “They are putting anyone who falls into their hands on trial.”

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