

North Ossetia Rocked by Killings

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Several high-profile murders are seen as having political motives.

A spate of killings in North Ossetia are thought to be part of a murky power struggle for wealth and political influence ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for this autumn.

The murder that has caused the greatest public stir has also shaken the local government, following the detention of one of its ministers.

Marat Jibilov, 30, the son of a well-known local businessman, disappeared on March 13. Several days later, his body was found outside Vladikavkaz.

Four people, including the minister of youth affairs and sports, Rustem Kelekhsayev, and his former deputy, Alan Bagiev, were then detained following the murder, provoking huge public interest in the case.

Both the minister and Bagiev have been released from custody on condition that they do not leave the city. Both are being investigated on charges of having concealed information about the murder.

The two others - Nodar Kelekshayev (no relation to the minister) and Pavel Nugradze - are still in detention and are being investigated for abduction and murder.

District Prosecutor Oleg Oziev, who took the decision to detain them, told a local newspaper that they had made confessions, shedding light on "how the abduction and murder were planned and carried out".

Neither the detained men nor their lawyers have issued any public statement about the case, but the North Ossetian authorities have already leapt to the defence of the minister.

It took a week for them to confirm that Rustem Kelekhsayev had indeed been detained and officials then insisted he would be proved innocent. "A person with a biography as unblemished as his cannot be involved in a crime like this," said Ksenia Gokoyeva, press secretary for the head of North Ossetia, Taimuraz Mamsurov.

The father of the murdered man Kazbek Jibilov owns the agricultural firm Kazbek that was known to have recently received a subsidy worth 67 million rubles (2.6 million US dollars) from the federal budget.

IWPR tried to contact Marat Jibilov's family, but they refused to comment. A source close to the Jibilovs said they were investigating the murder on their own and determined to do everything possible to "get the truth".

All the men under investigation are linked to the government and to an Ossetian nationalist youth movement, Alany. Activists from this movement broke up an opposition rallies in Vladikavkaz in

September 2005 and took part in anti-Georgian protests.

“This is a large group that was formed in the ministry of youth affairs,” said Alikhan Khugayev, one of the opposition leaders who organised a number of rallies. He said it was created to put pressure on the opposition and the Mothers of Beslan organisation that was formed after the tragic end to the hostage seizure in Beslan’s School No. 1 in 2004.

The next high-profile killing took place on April 13. Vladimir Sanakoyev, the general director of a large construction company, Shakhstroiservis, was shot dead in his own garage.

Sanakoyev’s company had been sub-contracted to work on two large-scale projects that are subsidised from the federal government budget and that have great political significance - the construction of the Dzaurikau-Tskhinval gas pipeline, connecting North and South Ossetia, and the building of the Zaramag hydroelectric plant.

The first project is financed by the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom, the other by the electricity giant UES, to the tune of 15 and 10 billion rubles (580 and 380 million dollars) respectively.

Shortly before his death, Sanakoyev complained to the police that he had received an extortion demand for 10 million rubles (390,000 dollars) and was threatened with death if he refused to pay the money. No criminal case followed, as the police were unable to identify any suspects.

A few days later, another North Ossetian businessman, Oleg Gioyev, owner of the large Salyut distillery in Beslan, was killed in the doorway of his Moscow office by a bomb planted in a motorcycle scooter standing nearby.

Last autumn, another prominent businessman from Beslan, Artur Kokayev, who headed the Beslan branch of the republic’s Region Development Bank, was also murdered.

North Ossetia is rife with speculation about the murders, with many people suggesting that they are part of a murky power struggle for wealth and political influence ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for this autumn. Some have been suggesting that the four men arrested for the murder of Marat Jibilov may have been set up.

A retired senior police officer, who wished to remain anonymous, described the murders to IWPR as “links in the same chain”, while being unable to say who lay behind them.

“It looks as though there’s a well-organised band practicing extortion,” he said. “There may be some political schemes behind it all that are aimed at discrediting the republic’s current leadership in the eyes of the public and the federal authorities. The parliamentary elections in North Ossetia are always preceded by some sensational events.”

Opposition leader Alikhan Khugayev and police sources say that a series of bank robberies and attacks on bank staff, none of which has resulted in prosecutions, could all be part of the same picture, with some figures trying to raise money for the parliamentary elections.

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