

Swiss Hold Ossetian for 'Revenge Slaying'

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Groundswell of support for man believed to have exacted blood revenge on Swiss air traffic controller he blamed for 2002 plane tragedy.

Everyone who knew Vitaly Kaloyev sympathised with his intense grief after he lost his wife and two children on a summer's day two years ago, but opinions in his home region of North Ossetia are sharply divided about the murder that he is accused of carrying out last week.

Kaloyev was arrested on February 25 in Zurich, accused of stabbing to death Peter Nielsen, a 36-year-old Danish air traffic controller. Nielsen had been in sole charge of the Zurich air traffic control room of the Swiss company Skyguide, when a Russian passenger airliner and a cargo plane collided over Germany in July 2002. Seventy-one people died in the accident, including Kaloyev's wife Svetlana, son Konstantin and daughter Diana.

Friends and acquaintances say that after the tragedy, Kaloyev, 48, a successful architect, was devastated. He immediately went from Spain - where he had been expecting his family to join him - to the crash site and spent many days recovering the bodies.

On returning home to North Ossetia, he grew a beard, gave up his professional life and spent every day at the graves of his loved ones at a cemetery in Vladikavkaz.

"Once I saw Vitaly standing next to the tombs of his family under heavy rain, and washing them down," said Irina, a friend. "It was a terrible scene. The rain was pouring down over the gravestones, and he kept on wiping and wiping at them with a cloth."

"My friend knows Vitaly Kaloyev very well," said Larisa, who asked for her surname not to be used. "Vitaly is a well-off man and could have built his life anew. But when he buried his family, he buried himself. He began learning German. His friends say that Vitaly just wanted to meet this controller, look him in the eyes and ask him in his native language how he could have made such a mistake."

"How our hearts ached, how we grieved with him," said Kaloyev's cousin Tamara Khabayeva. "It's hard for us to talk about this grief even now. But I don't believe he could have murdered a man. He told his relatives he was going for medical treatment. He had a problem with his joints."

The Kaloyev case has sparked a debate between those who speak of Kaloyev with admiration and regard his actions as being in accordance with North Ossetian tradition - and those who say this was just the act of a crazed individual and nothing to be proud of.

The Izvestia newspaper reported that Kaloyev went to Skyguide's offices, told people there that the air traffic controller was "scum" and said, "We in the Caucasus have our own way of speaking with scum."

The republic's government has already made it clear where its sympathies lie, making the highly unusual statement that it is ready to hire a Swiss lawyer - whatever the fee - to defend Kaloyev.

Fatima Khabalova, head of the press service for the North Ossetian government and parliament, told IWPR that, "We are expressing our readiness to support Vitaly Kaloyev on whatever terms are acceptable to a Swiss lawyer. Citizens of the republic have appealed to us to set up a support fund for Kaloyev, but we are better off looking at this issue from a legal point of view."

There is also a groundswell of support for the murder suspect amongst ordinary people, and a sense that justice has been done - even though Switzerland's investigation into the air crash was still ongoing.

"At least someone has behaved like a man," said Zalina, a young sociologist. "Our republic has shown that there are real men living here who are able to deliver justice when the judges are silent."

Taimuraz Khutiev, chairman of the council of elders of North Ossetia, told IWPR, "Of course the fact that a murder has been committed makes this a crime. But in my heart I approved of his actions. This man lost everything. The Skyguide controller had to be judged, and they [Swiss authorities] did not do that. That was an insult for society, and now Vitaly Kaloyev has thrown down a challenge to our state. Our council of elders and the whole of Kaloyev's motherland, Ossetia, ought to support him."

Others are less willing to give Kaloyev the benefit of the doubt, or to excuse his alleged crime as allowable under Caucasian traditions of blood vengeance.

"Kaloyev lost his family, but he has deprived other children of their father. So it's not just one tragedy, but a whole chain of them," said Ismel Shaov, head of the press service at the interior ministry.

"Because the controller was not brought to trial, this man opted for his own justice. Blood revenge is not common in North Ossetia. If there are cases, they are rare, and usually the exception not the rule. But here we are talking not so much about revenge as the act of a desperate man."

Alexander Gazayev, director of the Rehabilitation Centre in Vladikavkaz wondered aloud, "It's hard for someone who has not experienced this tragedy to judge someone else's actions, but is Vitaly's soul at rest after this "justice"? I think it's now worse for him."

Ironically, Switzerland is the Western country that has closest contacts with North Ossetia because of its large humanitarian programme in the North Caucasus.

Dietrich Dreier, who works for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation in Vladikavkaz said, "Of course I understand that he acted the way he did because his family died. But Vitaly has to be punished. You can't solve problems in this way."

"There is an investigation going on into the crashed planes. The controller's guilt had not been established because it was not over yet. Matters concerning aeroplanes and the air [traffic] always take a long time to resolve in Switzerland. But he should have waited for the decision of a court, and not taken justice into his own hands."

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