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Conspiring to Theorize

Comment by Gerhard Mangott
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Three Explanations for the Murder of Alexander Litvinenko

The murder of former FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko is a heinous crime. The substance used, polonium-210, is known to cause a slow and painful death, indicating that the perpetrators were vying for the kind of prolonged public attention they may not have achieved had Litvinenko been gunned down by contract killers.

In addition, with the use of this substance, the murderers left a trail implicating direct Russian involvement, particularly the traces of polonium found in planes travelling between Russia and the UK. These elements certainly indicate that the murderers were interested in damaging the reputation of those Russians who have since been declared to be the masterminds of the plot by the Western media.

There are three main explanations for the flagrant killing of Alexander Litvinenko.

The first one ties the responsibility for this crime directly to President Vladimir Putin. This is the least likely explanation, since the murder further tarnishes the image of Putin, whose reputation has already suffered from the anti-Putin hysteria in the Western press. There are no obvious benefits to Putin from the murder; rather, it has the potential of making him a pariah and may complicate the important initiatives currently underway – ratification of Russia's WTO agreement by the U.S. Congress and the initiation of a new legal co-operation framework with the EU.

Besides, the case for the murder of the second-rank security agent could only have made sense in 2001, when Litvinenko publicly accused the Russian FSB units and Putin himself of having bombed its own people in order to provide a pretext for renewed military activity in Chechnya. But his limited relevance now makes his murder completely untenable for Putin.

A second, more likely explanation is that a rogue unit of the FSB is responsible for the killing. Former colleagues of Litvinenko could have been interested in taking revenge for his defection or could have found out that he had compromising material regarding the 1999 apartment bombings or the murder of Anna Politkovskaya. Although this scenario does not reflect on Putin directly, indirectly it implies that he is unable to keep full control of the Russian security services.

There are numerous motives, however, including domestic considerations, since various factions within the FSB have different intentions regarding the 2007-2008 Russian election cycle. Circles around crown prince Dmitry Medvedev could well be trying to discredit the security services linked to his main rival for the Russian presidency in 2008 - Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov.

One of the goals of the murder could be the radical destabilization of Russia from within. A rogue FSB unit might have contacts to a camp within the presidential administration, hoping to create a situation that would force Putin to declare a state of emergency, thereby laying the groundwork for an extension of his presidency, the suspension of presidential elections, or the constitutional changes required for a third consecutive term for Putin.

Regardless, the more Putin's reputation abroad is damaged, the more he might be inclined to promote constitutional change to remain in office, since he would no longer need to take world opinion into account. In addition, further pressure on Putin to remain in office could be brought by potentially compromising material held by the agencies.

The third explanation, no less likely than the second one, is that Litvinenko's patron Boris Berezovsky may have ordered his killing. After all, Berezovsky's principal aim since being forced into exile in 2000 has been to harm Putin's image. Berezovsky may even have access to polonium, since he still maintains excellent relations with the security service of the Chief Intelligence Directorate (GRU).

Even if those responsible for Litvinenko's murder are never brought to justice, it seems certain that such events aimed at damaging Putin's reputation will continue – further killings, poisonings, maybe even some low-scale terrorist attacks. Even now it remains a possibility that former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar has also been a victim of poisoning. Further concern comes from the fact that several people who had contact with Litvinenko have also tested positive for polonium exposure, including Italian Mario Scaramella and three Russians, including Andrei Lugovoi. The entire incident raises concerns about the potential for low-yield nuclear terrorism. This murder may well be among the first terrorist attacks involving radioactive material.

Putin could seek to withstand the destabilizing pressure by turning against the security services and weakening their influence within his administration by promoting the liberal camp within the Kremlin. To accomplish this scenario, Putin would need to dismiss the Fradkov government and appoint Dmitry Medvedev as the new head of government. Within the presidential administration, Putin should demote the two main FSB representatives – Igor Sechin and Viktor Ivanov.

In the run-up to the 2008 election season, it seems likely that Russian politics will become increasingly unstable. Therefore, the EU and the United States should prepare to deal with a conflicted and unpredictable Russia.

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