Bullets Silence Voice of Reason

Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

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The shock over Galina Starovoitova's murder has turned to disgust with the realization that those responsible will never be brought to justice, if previous assassinations are any guide. In the weeks since the 20 November shooting of the Duma deputy and the wounding of her aide outside Starovoitova's apartment in St. Petersburg, speculation abounds that provides an all-too-clear indication of the lawlessness in Russia today: The motivation behind what bears the hallmarks of a "contract hit" is supposed to have been of a business, political, or personal nature. The fact that any one of these theories is viewed as plausible in Russia today says more about the country than about the victim.

Starovoitova herself was a heroine to many. With Andrei Sakharov and Boris Yeltsin, she became a founding member of the Interregional Group of Deputies, an oppositional faction in the Congress of People's Deputies (CPD) that pushed for democratization and fundamental civil rights during the Gorbachev period. As early as 1990, the group proposed that the CPD recognize the declarations of sovereignty adopted by most Union republics. Following the August 1991 putsch, she was a leader of the DemRossiya movement, committed to bringing Russia closer to democracy. A trained ethnographer, she would push continually for the rights of ethnic groups. Her belief in self-determination, and in the rights of all peoples, led to her support of ethnic Armenians seeking self-rule in Nagorno-Karabakh during the 1980s. Later she would propose flexible membership for the autonomies in the Russian Federation, arguing against a double standard. "If in accordance with international standards we recognize the rights of nations to self-determination, we must recognize it also [within] Russia," she wrote in Moscow News in April 1992.
An adviser to Boris Yel'tsin on interethnic issues, she was eventually eased out by "unreconstructed" individuals who were gaining increased access to the president. After she was fired, having criticized Moscow's support for Ossetians against the Ingush in the North Caucasus, she continued her vocal opposition to government actions, including the bloody war waged against Chechnya, which she termed in these pages as "unhealthy for Russian society" itself. (See Perspective, Vol. V, No. 3.) She spoke out also against what she saw as an ominous change in the tenor of the presidency: "The historic time of Yel'tsin the reformer has passed, and his new regime can turn out to be dangerous not just for Russia."

A State Duma deputy since 1995, she continued to be a voice that could not be ignored, voting against Yevgeni Primakov's nomination for the post of prime minister, decrying corruption in government, and--most recently--denouncing the comments of the blatantly antisemitic Duma deputy, General Albert Makashov, as well as the Duma's failure to strip Makashov of his parliamentary immunity and prosecute him for fanning ethnic hatred. In the end, only bullets could silence her.

About 800 persons are killed each year in the city of St. Petersburg and the surrounding region, according to the newspaper Helsingen Sanomat, earning it the designation of "Russia's number one city in criminal activity." Yet across the entire country, assassination is becoming so common place--with journalists, politicians and business leaders targeted--that Starovoitova is in danger of becoming just another statistic. It is important to remember that she was more than that, and more than simply a Duma deputy in opposition. She was also a voice of reason in a growing cacophony of greed, self-interest, amorality and hatred that is quickly becoming business as usual.-KM

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