

Ukraine Killings of Journalists: Spate of Suspicious Deaths must be followed by Credible Investigations

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The killing of journalist Oles Buzyna on a Kyiv street this week was shocking enough in and of itself.

According to Ukraine's Interior Ministry, the 45-year-old journalist – who was widely known for his pro-Russian views – was gunned down by masked assailants in a drive-by shooting.

But what makes his murder especially chilling is the fact that it is just the latest among a string of suspicious deaths of former allies of Ukraine's deposed former President Viktor Yanukovich. It came only a day after a member of Ukraine's political opposition, Oleg Kalashnikov, was also found shot dead in the capital.

This week's deaths are not alone. Since the end of January, several allies of Ukraine's deposed former President Viktor Yanukovich have been found dead – many of them in suspicious circumstances.

Oleksandr Peklushenko, a former regional governor, and ex-MP Stanislav Melnyk were also shot. Mykhaylo Chechetov, former deputy chairman of Yanukovich's Party of Regions, allegedly jumped from a window in his 17th-floor flat. Serhiy Valter, a mayor in the south-eastern city of Melitopol, was found hanged, as was Oleksiy Kolesnyk, ex-head of Kharkiv's regional government. The body of Oleksandr Bordyuh, a former police deputy chief in Melitopol, was found at his home.

This string of deaths has put the Ukrainian authorities in the hot seat.

Police were initially quick to classify many of them as suicides.

It is certainly plausible that some of the deaths were suicides or accidents. However, in the absence of credible investigations, and given the rapid succession of the deaths within the wider context of Ukraine's political climate at the moment, nobody can rule out that some of them were politically-motivated killings. But by whom? No-one will know without independent, impartial and thorough investigations.

Most of the deaths took place amid mysterious circumstances. Maybe as a recognition of this, the authorities have opened probes into some of the cases. But Amnesty International has yet to see evidence of a credible outcome of any of these.

They must be followed up by prompt, impartial and effective investigations. All such investigations must be credible if Ukraine is to begin to tackle its pervasive lack of accountability for serious human rights violations. [A recent Amnesty International report](#) revealed, for example, how virtually nobody has been brought to account for more than 100 killings, and an even greater number of police beatings and ill-treatment, of protesters during the February 2014 EuroMaydan demonstrations.

Beyond the lingering lack of justice for the EuroMaydan deaths, and the more recent spate of deaths of opposition members this year, the organization has also documented a worrying rise in other forms of persecution.

Opposition politicians are facing mob violence, often carried out by groups or individuals affiliated with the right-wing.

Meanwhile, members of the media are suffering harassment at the hands of the authorities. Among them is the journalist and prominent blogger Ruslan Kotsaba – recently named as Amnesty International’s first Ukrainian prisoner of conscience in five years. He could face more than a decade in prison on the charge of “high treason” and for his views on the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.

Ruslan Kotsaba was arrested on 7 February in Ivano-Frankivsk, 130 km south-east of Lviv, after he posted a video describing the conflict as “the Donbas fratricidal civil war”. He also expressed opposition to military conscription of Ukrainians to take part in the conflict.

After being formally charged on 31 March with “high treason”, he faces up to 15 years in prison, as well as up to an eight-year sentence on a further charge of “hindering the legitimate activities of the armed forces”. Amnesty International has called for his immediate and unconditional release, and we see his treatment as a brazen restriction on the right to freedom of expression.

The freedom to peacefully exercise that right was one of the fundamental rallying cries of the EuroMaydan protesters.

To now deny Yanukovich’s allies or other opposition members that same right – through imprisonment or death, or through lack of an effective investigation – would be the height of hypocrisy. It is also a betrayal of human rights, which must be protected for everyone, regardless of their political stripes.

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