

By Fred Burton and Ben West

As Umar Israilov, a 27-year-old Chechen political refugee living in Vienna, Austria, returned home on foot after grocery shopping Jan. 13, 2009, he spotted two men standing outside his apartment building - one of whom had a gun. Upon spotting the men, Israilov dropped his groceries and fled down Leopoldauer Street in the Floridsdorf neighborhood of Vienna, dodging cars and pedestrians. But the gunman managed to wound Israilov, halting his flight. The two men then approached him in a side alley, where the armed man shot Israilov twice in the head, killing him.

One man has been detained in connection with the killing, which a Stratfor source alleges was carried out by organized criminal assets in Vienna at the behest of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov and with Kremlin approval. Israilov was an outspoken critic of Kadyrov and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Because of this, Israilov had frequently expressed concerns for his safety and that of his family.

Before seeking asylum in Austria, Israilov fought during the Second Chechen War against Russian forces, which captured him in 2003. Afterward, he served as one of Kadyrov's bodyguards, a position that gave him a front-row seat to the activities of Kadyrov, who at that time led the militia of his father, then-Chechen President Akhmed Kadyrov. (Ramzan Kadyrov became Chechen president in 2007, three years after his father's assassination.) Israilov and the younger Kadyrov had a falling-out in 2004, after which Israilov said his former boss tortured him using electric charges.

Israilov fled to the West shortly thereafter, first seeking asylum in Poland and later obtaining asylum in Austria. Once in Europe, he often spoke out against Ramzan Kadyrov, filing complaints about his alleged torture with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, and talking to reporters from The New York Times about his experiences. While allegations that Kadyrov and his associates committed torture were not new, Israilov's former position in Kadyrov's circle set him apart as a dissident - and marked him as a security risk to his former employers due to his firsthand knowledge of how Kadyrov operates. Israilov reportedly told police in Vienna that he felt threatened and asked for extra security.

Austria has long been a popular place for political asylum-seekers who are facing threats due to their political views; providing adequate protection for all of these dissidents is impossible. Israilov further endangered himself by maintaining a relatively high profile due to his court filings and conversations with journalists. (He might have sought publicity in a bid to support himself and his family financially.)

Chechnya, Russia and the Israilov killing

According to Israilov's father, in June 2008 a Chechen visited the younger Israilov, showing him a hit list of 300 Chechens who oppose Kadyrov. Ramzan Kadyrov is well-known for not tolerating detractors, allegedly having ordered the deaths of dissenters before. While spokesmen for Kadyrov have distanced the Chechen president from the Israilov killing, saying the latter did not pose a significant threat to Chechnya, Israilov's killing could well have been intended as an example to other Chechen dissidents who felt safe abroad. While Chechen dissidents routinely die or disappear under murky circumstances in their country, this is the first time a vocal Chechen dissident has been slain abroad. The brazen nature of Israilov's killing in particular suggests an effort to highlight the vulnerability of exiled Chechen dissidents.

According to Stratfor sources, agents were not sent from Chechnya to carry out this operation. After getting permission from Moscow for the Israilov killing - Russia keeps a tight grip on Chechnya, so Moscow would interpret a unilateral assassination abroad as subversive - Kadyrov allegedly mobilized organized criminals in Austria to carry out the deed. While it is not clear exactly which organized criminal faction carried out the killing, the man detained in connection with the killing was a Chechen who has lived in Austria for several years under the name Otto Kaltenbrunner. While he has not been charged with anything, the getaway car was registered in his name - suggesting the involvement of Chechen organized crime, which has a strong presence in Russia and Europe as well as in the Caucasus.

As major fighting in the Second Chechen War wound down from 2005 to 2007, many of the militants who had fought the Russians disbanded and fled the country. These soldiers, highly trained and accustomed to using violence to get their way, had limited options beyond putting their skills to use with the various Chechen organized criminal factions that thrived in postwar Chechnya. Chechen gangs are prized for their high level of training and brutality, abilities that have proved very valuable to criminal groups in Russia, the Caucasus and Europe.

The high degree of professionalism in the Israilov killing tends to support the existence of a Chechen organized criminal angle. This professionalism includes the audacity of Israilov's killers, who attacked in broad daylight on a busy street. It also includes their ability to kill Israilov (himself a militant trained under Kadyrov) without any significant struggle or collateral damage. Moreover, at least a low level of surveillance must have been carried out on Israilov's residence to confirm that he lived there and to establish his schedule so the attackers could wait for him.

The Chechen leadership has a relationship with Chechen organized crime because of the military and security service background of many Chechen criminals, and because Kadyrov led these militias during the Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s. Such a relationship could be called on in commissioning a killing in Vienna.

Using hired guns from Austria would allow any foreign entity that ordered the killing to distance itself from the crime. Even if Austrian police managed to track down and initiate a prosecution of those who carried out the killing, arranging the extraditions of suspects from Russia would be virtually impossible without Moscow's cooperation. Russia has not cooperated with British authorities investigating the killing of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, for example, and the investigation has turned into a political skirmish in an already-tense relationship between the two countries. Attempting to pursue the Israilov case with Russia probably would bring a similar

outcome for Austria: inconclusive findings and weakened relations with a Russia that is asserting itself much more than it did in 2006.

Suspicious of Moscow's involvement in the assassinations of Russian dissidents by various means have become common in the past three years. Russian organized criminal groups, as well as the Russian domestic security and intelligence service, the FSB, are the most likely culprits behind the increase in high-profile assassinations of Russian dissidents over the last few years. Many of the assassinations have been connected to the issue of Chechnya and alleged human rights abuses there.

The Chechen wars are a sensitive issue for both Russians and Chechens. Those who stir up tales of past offenses by either side are seen as undermining the stability in Chechnya that has come about because of the ongoing alliance between Putin and Kadyrov. The suspicious deaths of individuals (followed by their date of death) who fall into this category include:

Anna Politkovskaya, October 2006. A prominent journalist and critic of the Kremlin, Politkovskaya was in the process of publishing a series condemning the government's policy in Chechnya. She was shot in the head in her apartment building. (Politkovskaya has been mentioned in a number of Defence Viewpoints blogs by Paula Jaegar)

Alexander Litvinenko, November 2006. Litvinenko was a former KGB agent who had defected to the United Kingdom and published books on the internal workings of Putin's FSB networks, and he was critical of the new Russian state. He was poisoned with radioactive polonium-210.

Ivan Safronov, March 2007. Safronov was a journalist who criticized the state of the Russian military and was accused of leaking military affairs to foreign parties. He allegedly committed suicide by jumping from the fifth floor of his apartment building, though some reports say a person behind him forced him out of the building.

Oleg Zhukovsky, December 2007. Zhukovsky was an executive of the VTB bank, which at the time of his death was being taken over by the state so the Kremlin could handpick its senior officers to oversee many strategic state accounts. Zhukovsky allegedly performed the feat of committing suicide by being tied to a chair and thrown into his swimming pool, where he drowned.

Arkady Patarkatsishvili, February 2008. A wealthy Georgian-Russian businessman, Patarkatsishvili was extensively involved in Georgian politics. Patarkatsishvili died in the United Kingdom of coronary complications that resembled a heart attack. His family and many in Georgia have accused the FSB of involvement, however, saying the FSB has many untraceable poisons at its disposal.

Leonid Rozhetskin, March 2008. Rozhetskin was an international financier and lawyer who held stakes in strategic companies, like mobile phone giant MegaFon. He disappeared while in Latvia after losing Kremlin backing by selling his assets to multiple parties, including some government ministers who are former FSB agents.

Paul Klebnikov, July 2008. The editor of Forbes' Russian edition, Klebnikov was shot dead in Moscow as he was heading into a subway station. The driver of a stolen car that pulled out of a parking lot and drove toward Klebnikov fired four shots before fleeing the scene.

Ruslan Yamadayev, September 2008. Yamadayev was a Chechen military leader and former member of the State Duma. He was shot in his Mercedes as it was stopped at a red light near the Kremlin in Moscow.

Stanislav Markelov, January 2009. A prominent Russian lawyer who had prosecuted an army colonel convicted of murdering a Chechen woman, Markelov was shot dead along with a journalist in broad daylight on a Moscow street near the Kremlin. He was also involved in the case of Anna Politkovskaya.

### Vienna, City of international intrigue

Vienna has long been a key battleground for international disputes between competing countries' security and intelligence operatives. No stranger to international intrigue and attacks, the Austrian capital has had a reputation for assassination plots, intelligence gathering and foreign operatives conducting missions against dissidents who thought they were safe living in a Western city in an otherwise peaceful country.

In one example of this tradition, Iranian agents linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security shot and killed three members of a Kurdish delegation conducting negotiations with the Iranian leadership in 1989. Similarly, many cases of espionage between the United States and the Soviet Union unfolded in Vienna, including the cases of Marine Sgt. Clayton Lonetree and Felix Block, who passed information to the Soviets when he was second-in-command at the U.S. Embassy in Vienna. The Israilov case is thus probably only the latest in a long tradition of foreign intrigue.

Austria's central location between the former Warsaw Pact countries of Czechoslovakia and Hungary and NATO countries of Italy and West Germany, along with Vienna's official neutrality, made Austria a natural Cold War battleground. The Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States all focused intelligence-gathering capabilities there. And as Cold War battle lines are redrawn with Russia's resurgence, the significance of places like Vienna re-emerges. Considering that these activities only began to slacken less than 20 years ago, old intelligence networks could be put into operation again with relative ease.

The blurring of the line between Russian intelligence agents and organized crime that occurred during the 1990s means that Russia still has a considerable network around the world, though now, elements of this network also are engaged in criminal activities. This network must be considered when looking at cases like that of Israilov.

Significantly, Austria is home to the largest Chechen refugee population in Europe. An estimated 20,000 Chechens - not all of them legal residents - live in the Central European country; many of them fled the bloody Chechen wars with Russia. In general, ethnic organized criminal outfits flourish among immigrants or refugee populations because they can offer illegal

immigrants services that they cannot get from the state. They also flourish there because they can use the immigrant community to operate with more secrecy. This is because many immigrant communities live apart from the indigenous population, often in separate neighborhoods, speak a different language and generally stick together in opposition to their host country's police services. Additionally, family bonds (intensified when around strangers) strengthen ties within immigrant communities, allowing for the kind of secrecy that lets organized crime thrive.

The establishment of a strong Chechen presence in Austria, along with a pre-existing Russian presence, means that Chechnya and Russia have a long reach in the country. Considering the organized crime-FSB nexus, the increase in politically motivated murders of Russian dissidents and how Moscow most likely was pleased with Israilov's demise, Russian assets in Vienna could well have been involved in the murder. While Russia is broadly suspected of killing dissidents abroad in recent years, Chechnya is not known to have carried out attacks in the European Union before -- meaning the Israilov killing will send chills down the spines of exiled Chechen dissidents.

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