

Solving the Gongadze Case: Great Boast, Small Roast.



Georgiy Gongadze
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“The Gongadze case is solved”, stated Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko at the March 1st press conference, “Now I can tell my children who killed Gongadze and how they did it.”

Georgiy Gongadze, the editor-in-chief of the “Ukrainska Pravda” web site went missing on September 16, 2000. After a late meeting with his deputy, Olena Pritula, he called for a taxi and was never seen again. Two months later the beheaded corpse of the journalist was found in the forest near Tarascha, 100 kilometres from Kiev. Several months before his disappearance Gongadze wrote an open letter to the General Prosecutor, complaining that he was being followed.

The Gongadze case remained unsolved for several years despite numerous promises from President Kuchma and different heads of the General Prosecutor’s Office to solve it. Instead of performing the investigation, the police tried to drag out the case, inventing one story after another, particularly, that Gongadze either was accidentally shot by special forces, or murdered by two drug users, who “unfortunately” had an alibi for the day of Gongadze’s disappearance. While the General Prosecutor’s Office was able to find a trail of Gongadze in Russia, allegedly he was seen in Moscow on September 21, 2000 buying a ticket to Smolensk. Minister of Interior Yuriy Kravchenko, who was personally responsible for the investigation, stated that the police were taking into consideration all versions of Gongadze’s disappearance, though the version, that his murder was connected with his professional activities was the least likely one.

Even after the body was found, despite numerous expert examinations, authorities refused to acknowledge that it belonged to Gongadze. Roman Bezsmertniy who at that time was a representative of the president in the Parliament stated that even if experts were 99.6% sure that the body belonged to Gongadze, there was still a possibility that it wasn’t him. “99.6% isn’t 100%”, he stated, regardless of the fact that DNA expert examinations, which are considered to be most accurate, are not able to give more precise figures. Even now the body is still being kept in Kiev’s morgue.

Later, in November 2000, Olexander Moroz, the leader of the Socialist Party of the Ukraine said that Mayor Mykola Melnichenko, one of Kuchma’s bodyguards, had been recording conversations in Kuchma’s office in 1999-2000, and had published 14 fragments out of 700 hours, where voices similar to those of Kuchma and Kravchenko discussed ways of eliminating Gongadze.

The reaction of these officials was predictable; the recordings were fake. However by recording the conversations, Melnichenko had violated the law. Just as with Gongadze’s corpse – numerous expert evaluations of these tapes were performed by Ukrainian and foreign independent experts, and while foreign experts confirmed the authenticity of the recordings, Ukrainian experts either stated that they were fake, or demanded the originals of the digital recording. Regardless of

the fact that Melnichenko’s recordings could not be admitted as evidence in court, because they were illegally obtained in a legal way, they did succeed in creating political consequences.



Mykola Melnichenko,
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**ЗНАЙДИТЬ ЖУРНАЛІСТІВ
ГЕОРГІЯ ГОНГАДЗЕ**



**ЖУРНАЛІСТІВ УКРАЇНИ
ВИМАГЮТЬ**

“Journalists of Ukraine demand to find journalist Georgiy Gongadze”

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About 100 000 people took to the streets demanding Kuchma's resignation and calling for the recovery of the missing journalist. However the poorly organized demonstrations, the lack of a professional leader to unite the people, the overall passiveness of the European community, and Russian support for the Ukrainian government negated the revolutionary efforts of the Ukrainian people. Kuchma dismissed the General Prosecutor, Minister of Interior and head of the Security Service of the Ukraine, but the new people were even worse than their predecessors, and the Gongadze case remained unsolved.

During his election campaign, new Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko promised to do his best in order to solve the case.

And after his inauguration during his first speech before the Council of Europe Yushchenko promised that within the next 2 to 3 months the Gongadze case would make its way to the court. Finally, in the beginning of March, Yushchenko and then Piskun announced, that the case had been solved, and those,

who had kidnapped and murdered Gongadze had been apprehended and taken into custody.

The official version of the murder confirms the rumours that were spread among journalists. After Gongadze left Pritula's apartment, he got in a car, that he thought to be a taxi. He tried to sit in the front seat, but the driver said that the seat was broken, and suggested he sit in the back seat. After getting in, three policemen also got in the car, blocking the journalist inside. Then they drove away from Kiev and beat him to death. They partially burned his corpse, and buried it in the forest. During the press conference Piskun showed the car that was disguised as a taxi, and another car, in which the corpse had been taken to the forest. It still has Gongadze's blood stains (after more than 4 years) on the upholstery.

Piskun failed to explain why Gongadze was beheaded, and what was done with his head. Piskun also refuted rumours that the main purpose of the kidnapping was to frighten, but not to kill Gongadze. “The policemen had direct orders to kill the journalist” said Piskun, though he failed to explain who gave the orders to do so.

It is quite hard to share the optimism of the Ukrainian president, and it is really too early to say that the case is solved. As for the timing of Yushchenko's statement, the latest development in the case was the arrest of the suspects, while the fact of their implication has yet to be proved. And, according to presumption of innocence, before the decision of the court, no one can declare the suspects to be murderers, not even the President or General Prosecutor.

Even if the arrested people really had kidnapped and murdered Gongadze, and even if their guilt is proved by the court, will the case be solved, if only the executioners of the murder are imprisoned?

Finding those who ordered the murder of an opposition journalist becomes harder and harder. One of the main witnesses in the Gongadze case, ex-Minister of the Interior Yuriy Kravchenko, was found dead in his residence several hours before he was supposed to testify at the General Prosecutor's Office.



Gongadze's last car
© ForUm

Despite the fact that there were two shots to the head, the General Prosecutor is sure that it was a suicide; allegedly Kravchenko didn't die after the first shot, so he shot himself again. The fact that Kravchenko had been summoned to testify was not a big secret. On March 2nd, Piskun announced it on 1+1 TV channel, where he was participating in a talk show. As a result, anyone, who didn't want Kravchenko to testify had enough time to prepare. However Piskun didn't see a big problem in Kravchenko's death; for him Kravchenko was only a witness and Piskun was sure that "the breach in the witness line is not irreparable". This opinion is not shared by the Ukrainian Politcum.



Ex-Minister of Interior Yuriy Kravchenko
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Olexander Turchinov, the head of Security Service of the Ukraine, stated that Kravchenko had been one of the main suspects in the Gongadze case. According to Turchinov his department was ready to arrest Kravchenko, though the case was under GP jurisdiction. Thus the only person that could make a decision regarding the arrest of Kravchenko was Piskun himself.



Olena Pritula
© Ukrainska Pravda

Olena Pritula is also sure that Kravchenko's suicide can seriously complicate the case.

"Kravchenko was the only witness who could tell the whole truth regarding the murder of Gongadze and the people who wanted him dead. Now Kravchenko is dead, so Kuchma can feel relaxed about his fate", - she said.

Grigoriy Omelchenko, the head of the Parliamentary Commission for the fight against corruption and organised crime had predicted, that Kravchenko wouldn't survive until his visit to the General Prosecutor's Office. Several days before the suicide he said that too much depended on Kravchenko, and there was a possibility that if the General Prosecutor's Office didn't put Kravchenko under guard, he would either commit suicide or be murdered under the guise of suicide. After Kravchenko's death, Omelchenko was

absolutely positive that the ex-minister had been murdered.

Only after Kravchenko was found dead did Kuchma return from the Czech Republic where he had been enjoying a three-week vacation.

Now it is most likely that the investigation will stop at Kravchenko and not go any further. Eventually Kravchenko will become the only guilty person who issued illegal orders, though the person, that ordered Kravchenko to pass on those orders will remain unknown. Some politicians have already expressed their confidence in the fact that Kuchma will not be held responsible due to some secret agreement between Yushchenko and him, allegedly made during the orange revolution where Yushchenko guaranteed immunity to Kuchma. Even if Kuchma's guilt is proven, he is untouchable. According to the decision of the Constitutional Court passed on December 11, 2003, the president can not be the subject of a criminal liability during his term in office.

The following sources were used during the preparation of this report:

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