



Litvinenko: the view from Russia

Trusted Sources > Russia > Politics/governance

27 Nov 2006

Overview

The death in London on 23 November of the FSB (former KGB) agent, Alexander Litvinenko, topped the headlines in the UK and many other countries. Unburdened by hard evidence, commentators of various stripes have been quick to point the finger of blame at the Russian security services; President Vladimir Putin; and the Russian businessman in exile in London, Boris Berezovsky. Until Litvinenko died, the case had attracted little attention in the Russian media. But as the brickbats rained in against Russia, the media there have not shied from discussing all of the theories being put forward as to who killed Litvinenko and why - adding a few eye-catching theories of their own. The episode highlights the maturity and vigour of the Russian media in what is, for now, a predominantly media event - unlikely as such to have any consequences for investment risks.

Context

Litvinenko's death sparked a wave of anti-Russian sentiment in the British and other international media, recalling the Cold War, though that spectre reappears now in more complex, post-Soviet form.

Public Judgements

Russian media covers all the bases

The usual suspects

- > **Ekho Moskv**y, liberal-thinking radio station
- > **Vedomosti**, business newspaper
- > **Izvestiya**, newspaper
- > **ORT**, main state-owned TV channel

Alternative plausible theories

- > **Kommersant**, newspaper
- > **Moscow News**, newspaper

Alternative implausible theories

- > **Moscow Times**, Moscow-based English-language newspaper
- > **Pravda**, Communist Party newspaper

Wrap

Given the present lack of hard evidence, Russian media judgements are as speculative as their international counterparts. But the existence of so many different views in the Russian media is a sign of more openness

than is often recognised.

Context

"Don't touch Russia with a bargepole!" is a conclusion that many could reach after wading through the thousands of column inches and hours of air-time which the death of Alexander Litvinenko has inspired in the British media. When The Times runs a front-page headline, "The bastards got me, they won't get us all" (24 November), and anti-Russian sentiment is running as strongly as at any time since the collapse of communism, a reaction from inside Russia is only to be expected.

In the Soviet period, Moscow was periodically involved in the murky business of assassinating perceived enemies of the state, both at home and abroad. Following the break-up of the USSR, the KGB files were open to researchers for long enough to reveal details of several plots - a number of them successful.

The KGB's tentacles even reached London in 1978. The Bulgarian emigre, Georgy Markov, was a thorn in the side of the Soviet Union's most loyal ally in the socialist camp, Bulgaria. His regular broadcasts on the Bulgarian Service of the BBC World Service angered Sofia and Moscow. So in a joint operation which sounded like something out of a spy novel, Markov was eliminated by a poison pellet fired into his leg from the tip of an umbrella.

In post-Soviet times, there have been no proven cases of Russian special services eliminating opponents abroad - with the one exception of the Chechen separatist leader, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, in Qatar. But the context for that 'special operation' - a colonial war (in Chechnya) causing thousands of casualties on both sides - is very different from the purely political activities in London of Litvinenko - or, more broadly, the circle around the exiled businessman and formerly powerful oligarch, Boris Berezovsky, who initially employed Litvinenko when the latter was still a serving FSB agent in the 1990s, retaining him on the payroll ever since.

The UK government's grant of political asylum to Berezovsky, as also to the senior Chechen separatist politician, Akhmed Zakayev, has soured UK-Russian relations.

The link with Chechnya provides one plausible backdrop among many to Litvinenko's death. Although there is no hard evidence for now about what happened to him, few doubt that he was murdered.

Public Judgements

Before the announcement of Litvinenko's death, the Russian media paid little attention to the story. But after it was announced that Litvinenko had died, and the revelation that he had been poisoned with a radioactive substance, the arguments were aired across the media. Some gave summaries of what the British media were saying, including pointing the finger of responsibility variously at President Putin, the FSB and Boris Berezovsky; others came up with alternative views; and some took the flight of imagination even further than any British thoughts.

Russian media covers all the bases in this extraordinary "whodunnit?"

The usual suspects

- **Ekho Moskvyy**, liberal-thinking radio station. In a long discussion (26 November), Ekho Moskvyy and its outspoken presenter, Yevgeniya Albats, did not shy away from any of the theories that have seriously been put forward as to what happened to Alexander Litvinenko. Ms Albats was joined in the studio by two former senior KGB officers; the author of a book on the KGB and repressions; and a scientist who is a specialist on chemical substances. The scientist, Lev Fyodorov, set the ball rolling when asked about the radioactive substance which is said to have killed Litvinenko, polonium-210. Dr Fyodorov suggested that polonium-210 would be the last thing to use for an assassination, as there are ample more effective means. He said that the choice of murder weapon suggested a desire to create a huge fuss rather than to kill the victim efficiently. Stanislav Lekarev, former Deputy Head of the KGB's Main Directorate, referring to the killing of Georgy Markov with poison, said that it was unlikely that the modern FSB would do such a thing again, as security services don't like to repeat themselves as the risk of leaving metaphorical fingerprints is too great. Duma Deputy, and retired KGB general, Alexei Kondaurov, dismissed the theory popular in some circles that this was the work of Berezovsky to try to discredit Putin. He pointed out that it would be extraordinary for Berezovsky to do something which could threaten his secure position in Britain, and that even with his millions his access to polonium-210 would be exceedingly limited. General Kondaurov spoke of the idea that it could have been the Russian secret services, and said that it was unlikely - 'please God'.
- **Vedomosti**, business newspaper. Acquainted its readers with a thorough summary of what the British press was saying, without giving any conclusions of its own. Was it suicide? Was it the secret services? Was it Berezovsky? Was it Putin? But the paper did quote a source 'close to serving FSB officers' as saying that the FSB would not have sullied itself by an act like killing Litvinenko.
- **Izvestiya** newspaper. Echoing the comments made by Putin at his press conference after the EU-Russia Summit in Helsinki on 24 November, the paper raised doubts over the authenticity of Litvinenko's 'final statement', which was read out by his friend and fellow Berezovsky employee, Alex Goldfarb, the morning after Litvinenko's death. The statement was only in English, and used phrases such as hearing 'the wings of the angel of death', which is unusual for a native Russian speaker. There was no video recording of Litvinenko in hospital; and the statement was released only after his death, so no-one could check whether he actually said it.
- **ORT**, main state-owned TV channel. In a variety of programmes, and with a variety of guests, strongly pushed the idea that Berezovsky was behind the murder. A Deputy Head of the Security Committee in the Duma, Valery Dyatlenko, said that the Russian security services had no reason for killing Litvinenko, and that he believed that it was 'a game of some kind' by Berezovsky. Another MP, and former FSB Director, Nikolai Kovalyov, said that the person who gained the maximum benefit was Berezovsky. And the journalist, Mikhail Leontyev, said that only Litvinenko's "employers" (meaning Berezovsky) could have done this.

Alternative plausible theories

- **Kommersant** newspaper. Spoke to Litvinenko's former departmental head in the FSB, Lt Col Alexander Gusak, who ran the 7th Division of the FSB Department for Organised Crime. He said that in January 1996, after the ending of the capture of the village of Pervomaiskoye in Dagestan by Chechen separatist fighters, Litvinenko had been charged with transporting a wounded fighter to a detention centre. Litvinenko is said to have tortured the man to death. Col Gusak said that this was revenge for that killing.
- **Moscow News**, newspaper. Repeats a line published in The Times, saying that Litvinenko had recently gone to Israel to hand over a file to Leonid Nevzlin, the former number two of the oil company, Yukos (which was broken up by the Kremlin). According to Nevzlin, the file contained evidence of crimes committed by the Russian government, notably what was done to those who opposed to the dismantling of Yukos.

Alternative implausible theories

- **Moscow Times**, Moscow-based English-language newspaper. Covering all the bases, the Moscow Times quotes the political analyst, Stanislav Belkovsky, who says that the poisoning of Litvinenko was organised by supporters of would-be presidential candidate, Dmitry Medvedev, to discredit the security services (associated with the Kremlin faction opposed to Medvedev) thus forcing Putin to distance himself from them as they had damaged his image in the West.
- **Pravda**, Communist Party newspaper. In a rant which would not have been out of place in Soviet times, Pravda reminds its readers of the huge sacrifices made by Russia in the two world wars, only to be rewarded by the Western media whipping up anti-Russian sentiment among a poorly-educated and decadent public. Pravda concludes that it is as appropriate to blame Putin for poisoning Litvinenko as it would be to blame the fairies at the bottom of the garden or Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction.

Wrap

Without hard evidence as to what happened to Alexander Litvinenko, these Russian judgements are as imponderable as those of the worldwide media. The British government has called sessions of its COBRA security group to investigate all possibilities, even the idea that Litvinenko may have committed suicide. To the outside observer it seems incredible to think that anyone should put themselves through the agonies of fatal radiation poisoning to make a political point, but clearly the police and special services have to explore every avenue. It seems unlikely, however, that the British authorities will spend too much time following up the theory that it was all planned by Dmitry Medvedev to improve his presidential chances in 2008; nor will they call in for questioning the fairies at the bottom of the garden.

Amidst the scepticism and, in some cases, mockery of the coverage in the Western media, the most remarkable thing about the treatment of the Litvinenko case in the Russian media is that all of the arguments are put forward. It's often said that the Russian media under Putin has been heavily censored, with some observers suggesting that it is little better than it was in Soviet times, when all media was controlled by the Communist Party. But it would have been unthinkable for the Soviet media in 1978 (after the murder of Gerogy Markov) to conduct such an examination of what the western press was saying, even if only to dismiss it. One thing this whole chapter has shown is that the Russian media is more vigorous and mature than is often supposed.

Unless and until the Litvinenko murder is solved (which it may very well never be), this will remain a media-driven event - pitting a surge of negative sentiment towards the Russian government in the West against a defensive patriotic reaction in Russia itself. A purely media event will not take on a geopolitical dimension bearing on investment risks.