

Getting Away With **Murder**

A Report on the Murder of Belarusian Journalist **Vieranika Charkasava** and How Her Government Let the Crime Go Unpunished

Investigative journalist Vieranika Charkasava was a well-known opposition figure in her native Belarus. Her brutal murder two years ago has made Charkasava a symbol of media and civic repression in the country.

Vieranika Charkasava is not the only murdered journalist in Belarus. Other recent unsolved cases include the disappearance / deaths of Dzmitry Zavadski (July 2000) and Vasil Hrodnikau (October 2005). These murders have all taken place in a period of sustained government repression of independent journalism.

After eleven years of rule, the Lukashenka government is on the verge of eradicating all meaningful independent journalism in Belarus. During this time, it has bullied,

fined and imprisoned critical journalists. It has introduced a series of legal measures to make it increasingly difficult to openly criticise government. At the beginning of the year, non-state media were banned from the national printing press and distribution systems, forcing several papers such as the *Narodnya Volya* to print and distribute sporadically from Russia.

The pressure has intensified even further since Lukashenka's re-election for a third successive term. The *Nasha Niva*, the Belarusian informational and cultural weekly, celebrated its centenary this summer by being forced through a series of administrative measures to go underground. Today, most non-state media are giving up printing to move solely to Internet operations.



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The European Parliament “... expresses its condolences to the family of Vieranika Charkasava, paying tribute to an important personality who encouraged freedom of information; urges the Belarussian authorities to investigate this crime seriously and prosecute the murderer and the instigators of this act.” European Parliament resolution on the political situation in Belarus after the parliamentary elections and referendum of 17 October 2004.

No Justice for Journalists in Belarus

On the morning of 20 October 2004, Vieranika Charkasava, a Belarus journalist investigating ties between a Belarus bank and arms deals with Iraq, was stabbed more than 40 times and left for dead in her Minsk apartment.

Two years later, her family, colleagues and the international journalist community are still waiting for justice. Belarus authorities have made no progress finding her killer.

Police focused their investigation mainly on Charkasava’s teenage son and her stepfather. The two found her body but had nothing to do with her death. Family supporters believe the reporter for opposition newspaper *Salidarnasc* was killed because she was investigating Belarus Infobank’s alleged role in illegal financing of arms sales to Iraq.

Politics at Play

Charkasava’s murder came at a time of heightened international pressure on Belarus president Alexander Lukashenka. Officials quickly tried to play down the significance of her violent death.

“A quiet woman did not die the quiet death that, it appears, her fate would have dictated,” an unnamed Belarus official told Russian news agency APN a day after the killing. The official claimed Charkasava never had “dangerous information” and did not deal with “serious cases”.

Belarus was under the harsh glare of international organisations that condemned voter intimidation in the run-up to a controversial referendum on 17 October 2004. The referendum successfully lifted constitutional limits on how many terms Lukashenka could serve as president.

From the very beginning, the authorities ruled out any political motive in Charkasava’s death. Official suspects were the journalist’s chronically ill stepfather Uladzimir and her then 15-year-old son Anton. First questioned together with Uladzimir, Anton was later subjected to an illegal one-on-one

interrogation despite the fact that he was still a minor.

For the next six months, Anton and Uladzimir were harassed by police, enduring continual suspicion and interrogations in connection with the murder.

Investigator with a History

On the very same day that Charkasava was stabbed over forty times and found by her son and step-father with the knife stuck in her throat, the US government approved the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004. The act calls for free and

fair elections as well as the “full accounting of the disappearances of opposition leaders and journalists in Belarus.”

Amongst the murdered journalists is Dzmitry Zavadski, who “disappeared” in 2000.

The appointment of Uladzimir Chumachenka to lead the Charkasava investigation raised questions about the commitment of the authorities to solving the case. Chumachenka led the failed investigation into Zavadski’s disappearance. As with Charkasava, the Zavadski investigation targeted the murdered journalist’s immediate family. His wife Svetlana was subjected to

months of interrogations. Five years later, during a public demonstration calling for justice and commemorating Zavadski, she was assaulted by Interior Ministry special forces.

In Charkasava’s case, Chumachenka has been accused of ignoring significant evidence in favour of pursuing a “crime of passion” theory. Such evidence includes a tampered electrical fuse box outside the apartment and blood stain patterns on the walls indicating the blood was sprayed after – and not during – the murder.

“A quiet woman did not die the quiet death that her fate would have dictated.”

– Anonymous Belarus official

Charkasava's killer appeared to go to extraordinary lengths to stage the crime scene to implicate her family.

In pursuit of the theory, Chumachenka ordered a psychiatric examination of Charkasava's son Anton on 31 January 2005. The following day, police arrived to take Anton from his school to a psychiatric hospital. Alerted by teachers and his grandparents, Anton's father Dmitri Filimonov, a journalist with Russian newspaper Izvestiya, flew his son to Moscow.

This all took place despite reports published two weeks earlier by Siarhiey Sacuk in the newspaper *Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta* that clearly refuted the chief investigator's theory. After sifting through all the evidence, including timed telephone calls, Sacuk penned an article entitled "Fear as a Plausible Motive or Who Murdered Vieranika Charkasava?".

"It is inconceivable for him to [have murdered] Vieranika at 9.50 am," Sacuk wrote. "If so, he would have been late for school."

An Overlooked Connection

While official investigators have focused on her family, an important clue as to who ordered Charkasava's assassination may be found in her research into links between the

Belarus Infobank and Iraq.

Infobank was accused in August 2004 by US authorities of being the financial linchpin in alleged illegal sales of weaponry to Iraq. Infobank's US accounts were then frozen.

Charkasava appears to have gained sensitive information on Infobank's alleged role. A few months prior to her death, her parents noted that she once again started researching the scandal and was meeting an Infobank official.

Charkasava had a reputation as an established investigative journalist, including a series of articles published several months earlier analysing the Belarus KGB's tactics.

Evidence at the scene of the crime points to a link between her investigation and her death: the killer did not steal any jewelry or the US\$ 1300 left on Charkasava's desk. Photographs, however, taken on a trip to Baghdad organised by Infobank were missing.

Investigators chose to ignore this evidence.

Getting Away with Murder

On 14 March 2006, whilst releasing son Anton on bail for what many believe to be trumped up forgery charges, state prosecutors once again suspended the murder investigation.

Prosecutors said they dropped the investigation because "there was nobody who could be accused of the crime."

Authorities, however, have still not given up persecuting Charkasava's son in the hope that family and friends will give up their fight for justice. On 11 April 2006, Anton was handed a two-and-a-half year suspended prison sentence for forgery.

Meanwhile the person or people who killed Anton's mother are getting away with murder.

"I condemn the cold-blooded assassination of Vieranika Charkasava," said Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO, the only United Nations agency with a mandate to defend freedom of expression and press freedom. "This violent attack targeted not only an individual but an entire profession and a fundamental right, enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."



Belarus Cameraman Murdered

President Lukashenka's former personal cameraman, Dzmitry Zavadski, left the Belarus state broadcaster in 1996 to join Russian channel ORT. Imprisoned once for his critical journalism, Zavadski disappeared on 7 July 2000 on his way to Minsk airport. As the body was never found, the Belarus criminal code allowed investigations to be closed. Following international pressure the former head of the interior ministry's special police force and another official were given life sentences in 2002. Zavadski's family, though, described the trial as a 'farce' designed to protect those really behind the murder. Resolution 1371 of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly calls for a full and independent inquiry into official involvement in the crime.



“In order not to lose the trust in justice, we promise to her readers and many other different people to hold an independent journalist investigation of the murder. Vieranika’s relatives, friends, colleagues and readers will be missing her badly. For the first time, we are lacking for words...” Statement by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 21 October 2004

Join the Campaign to End Impunity for Vieranika’s Murderers

Send a letter to Belarus authorities urging them to reopen her case and bring her killers to justice. Go to www.ifj.org for more information.

Alexander Lukashenka, *President of Belarus*

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20 October 2006

Dear President Lukashenka,

The International Federation of Journalists, the world’s largest journalist organisation representing over 500,000 journalists worldwide, is calling on you to reopen the investigation into the murder of journalist Vieranika Charkasava, to find and prosecute her killers.

As we mark the second anniversary of her murder, the IFJ is concerned that not only have the authorities failed to identify and prosecute her killers, but they have chosen to ignore important evidence in favour of seeking to frame and punish her son, Anton Filimonau.

Vieranika Charkasava’s body was found in her Minsk apartment by her son and stepfather on 20 October 2004 with over 40 stab wounds in the neck and chest. In the immediate aftermath of the murder, police identified her fifteen-year-old son, Anton, and elderly stepfather as the main suspects and attempted to build a case against them.

A year later, having failed to make a convincing case against Anton, he was instead arrested and then prosecuted for forging counterfeit money. On 11 April 2006 he was handed a two and a half year suspended prison sentence.

Meanwhile, several journalistic investigations have revealed that prior to her murder Vieranika Charkasava had started researching allegations that the Belarus Infobank had been involved in illegal weapons sales to Iraq. Infobank’s accounts had been frozen in the US in August 2004 and Charkasava had participated in an Infobank-organised visit to Baghdad. The photos from that trip were the only items missing from her apartment after her body was discovered.

The IFJ believes that the continued failure to prosecute Charkasava’s killers is a stain on the image of Belarus and the readiness of the Belarus government to defend basic human rights. By finding Charkasava’s killers and bringing them to trial, Belarus can demonstrate to its citizens and the international community that it supports press freedom and is prepared to defend the lives of journalists.

Sincerely,

Aidan White
General Secretary, IFJ

