New details have emerged in the apparent poisoning of Russian activist Pyotr Verzilov, a member of the protest-art group Pussy Riot, and they may shed light on the deaths of three Russian journalists who were shot in the Central African Republic in July. Verzilov had apparently been working with the journalists before they travelled to Africa, and before he...
Verzilov had probably been poisoned. He is recovering, but still hallucinating.

Also on Tuesday, one of Russia’s many quasi-anonymous, semi-underground online publications on the publishing and messaging platform Telegram—the contemporary version of samizdat—reported that Verzilov had been working on an investigative story about the deaths of the three Russian journalists, Alexander Rastorguev, Orkhan Dzhemal, and Kirill Radchenko. The three had been in the Central African Republic reporting on a mercenary force linked to a close associate of President Vladimir Putin. The suggestion that their deaths were connected to their investigative work surfaced as soon as they died, but the Russian Foreign Ministry slapped it down, branding a Dutch newspaper that mentioned the mercenaries “fake” news.

Verzilov, who studied philosophy at Moscow State University, is a
transform it into a general-interest publication. (As one of the editors told me at the time, every story about Russian law enforcement was dreary in the same way as every other.) They began covering protests, the Russian involvement in Syria, and other news of the day.

In an e-mail to me on Tuesday, Tolokonnikova confirmed that Verzilov had been slated to join the reporting trip on which the three men died, but he stayed in Moscow to organize and take part in a protest during the final match of the World Cup. He was arrested and jailed for fifteen days after the action, along with the three other protesters. The four were released on July 31st, the day after the Russian journalists died in the Central African Republic. One of the three who died, Rastorguev, had been a close friend of Verzilov.

According to the report on Telegram and in the semi-independent Moscow newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, Verzilov raised money to mount an investigation into the journalists’ deaths. He had an additional connection to the C.A.R. through the Voice Project, a freedom-of-expression organization that got its start by working with musicians in Eastern and Central Africa in the two-thousands and later raised money for and campaigned on behalf of Pussy Riot. According to the Russian reports, Verzilov expected to receive some documents pertaining to his investigation the day that he fell ill.
In the past decade and a half, Russian journalists have been beaten to death, shot, thrown out of windows, and poisoned. Yuri Shchekochikhin, a journalist and member of parliament, had been investigating the deadly September, 1999, apartment-building explosions in Russia for *Novaya Gazeta* when he was lethally poisoned, in 2003. Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist who was shot dead in 2006, had survived a poisoning attempt two years earlier. Russia consistently ranks in the top ten on the Global Impunity Index maintained by the Committee to Protect Journalists—it is one of the world’s most dangerous countries to be a journalist, and those who kill journalists usually get away with murder.

*Masha Gessen, a staff writer, has written several books, including, most recently, “The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia,” which won the National Book Award in 2017. Read more »*
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