

## The death of Budanov: harbinger of ethnic tensions?

On 10 June, Yuri Budanov was shot in Moscow. Budanov was a Russian army colonel, who had been jailed for the brutal murder of a young Chechen woman during the Second Chechen War. Despite his prison sentence, Budanov was still regarded as a war criminal in the Caucasus, while Russian nationalist circles saw him as a hero. His death has fanned the flames of tension between Russian nationalists and Chechens and other immigrants from the Caucasus.

The Budanov case has become one of the most notorious involving the crimes committed by the Russian army during the Second Chechen War. Budanov was tried for the rape and murder in 2000 of an 18-year old Chechen woman, Elza Kungayeva. He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment; after serving eight and a half years of his sentence, he was conditionally released in 2009 (a move which triggered protests in Chechnya).

The most frequent assumption regarding his murder is the 'Chechen link'; this may be grounded both in the threats made against Budanov by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and in the earlier executions of Kadyrov's opponents in the streets of Moscow, not to mention Austria. However, other scenarios cannot be ruled out; it is possible that an attempt is being made to blame the Chechen authorities for Budanov's death, in order to spark a conflict between the representatives of the Caucasus and Russian nationalist circles. The government has succeeded in preventing disorder: at a meeting in Budanov's memory in central Moscow, reinforced troops of the OMON were in attendance. However, this case may be exploited further by nationalist groups: polls indicate that Russian society is deeply divided in its assessment of the Budanov case, and he had many sympathisers within the power structures and the state administration. Furthermore, although he had been stripped of his officer's rank, he was buried with full military honours. <JR>