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PRODUCER: Jenny Chryss

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O’HALLORAN: Last November the chill of the Cold War seemed to return to London.

ACTUALITY - HOSPITAL MAN ANNOUNCES DEATH OF LITVINENKO

MAN: We are sorry to announce that Alexander Litvinenko died at University College Hospital at 9.21 on the 23rd November 2006. Every avenue was explored to establish the cause of his condition, and the matter is now an ongoing investigation being dealt with by detectives from New Scotland Yard.

O’HALLORAN: The dramatic illness and death of Alexander Litvinenko, Russian exile and former secret service man, was caused by a very rare radioactive substance - Polonium 210. In three weeks his immune system collapsed, he lost his hair, and his vital organs failed. Reports say Scotland Yard officers have evidence against two Russians who had visited London, one of them a former member of the Soviet security service, the KGB. And there’ve been allegations in Moscow as well as the West that Russia could have been behind Litvinenko’s death.

FELGENHAUER: We have a special department, still active, in the Russian intelligence community that performs research work and killings by poisoning. They existed in Soviet times, obviously it still exists, and they prepare assassinations by using very sophisticated poisoning techniques, very sophisticated.

O'HALLORAN: In Moscow and St Petersburg, File on 4 has examined several cases of mysterious deaths or obvious murders – including two with chilling echoes of the Litvinenko case. A recurring feature is the belief by the family, friends or colleagues of victims, that Russian state agencies may have blood on their hands.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY AT HOSPITAL 31

O'HALLORAN: I'm in a small park on Christovsky Island, on the Petrograd side of St Petersburg. There's a scattering of snow on the ground and ice beginning to form on the ponds, in the much delayed Russian winter. A couple of hundred metres ahead of me is a long red brick building. It used to be a clinic for the Communist elite. Now it's Hospital number 31, and it was here that a very severely ill man was brought with a most unusual and mysterious condition. The man, who had a background in security, had fallen ill two weeks earlier. At first it looked like food poisoning, but after a brief apparent recovery, the man's symptoms grew much worse, leaving his doctors utterly perplexed.

QUOTES FROM DOCTOR

READER: He was very feeble. He stopped vomiting and the diarrhoea became less frequent, but there was still no sign of toxic infection. It was a poisoning without a poison. What we didn't like from the start was the low level of white blood cells. It was as if his immune system was switched off.

O'HALLORAN: The words of Dr Pyotr Pirumov, personal physician to the patient, Roman Tsepov. Tsepov was in the security and bodyguard business. In the nineties, he'd guarded the city's powerful mayor and even the local man who, seven years ago, became Russia's President – Vladimir Putin. Tsepov was reputed still to have friends in very high places. In September 2004 he was 42, busy and active, when he fell ill after a trip to Moscow, as his doctor recalled.

READER: I sent a medical sister round to see him. She called me, saying she didn't like the look of him. I rushed to Roman's place. It was as if the skin was torn off his lips and tongue. The symptoms were as if he had just had a chemotherapy course.

O'HALLORAN: Hospital tests showed that Tsepov's white blood cells, vital in fighting infection, had dropped to a seventh of their normal level. His physician, by now desperate, concluded the bone marrow was being destroyed and asked a senior woman doctor, a professor, to see Roman Tsepov.

READER: In about three hours she calls me, in tears, and says "Roman is in a very bad state, his body is rotting by the minute, he is coming apart." The next day I sent all the test results to the clinic, but it was too late. Very soon Roman died.

O'HALLORAN: Whatever was done to investigate Tsepov's death, it left Dr Pirumov very unhappy. He was not even asked to produce Tsepov's medical notes. When we called Dr Pirumov, he seemed nervous about the case and eventually declined to be interviewed. But he has given details to a Russian journalist at a St Petersburg news agency. He recalls receiving, after Tsepov's death, a strange phone call from people who claimed to be forensic experts, saying that Tsepov had taken drugs without supervision to treat prostate cancer.

READER: I said, "I scanned his entire body through and through! If he had any cancer we would have found it! And what cancer on earth would cause full destruction of the bone marrow?" I said I had no respect for them and hung up. That phone call really proved to me that the whole story was no accident and happened for a reason.

O'HALLORAN: In the case of Alexander Litvinenko last November, very similar remarks were made about his immune system, with one doctor noting that his white cell count was nearly zero, and saying, "His bone marrow has been attacked". Even before the Polonium 210 case in London, the case of Roman Tsepov had attracted interest beyond St Petersburg. In Moscow, an investigative reporter, Igor Korolkov, of the newspaper Novaya Gazeta, says that about 18 months ago he obtained inside information from prosecutors which has never been formally released.

KOROLKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): My source at the prosecutor's office in St Petersburg told me that a post mortem examination of Roman Tsepov's body showed that he was contaminated with a radioactive element. And the quantity of this element in Tsepov's body exceeded the norm by one million times. This information was never officially reported by law enforcement and this is surprising.

O'HALLORAN: How much do you feel you can rely on that piece of information?

KOROLKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I am absolutely sure about this. This source is a very responsible and knowledgeable person.

O'HALLORAN: You mentioned a dose of radiation a million times, was that a million times greater than what would be a lethal dose for a normal person?

KOROLKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I understand it exceeds a lethal dose by a million times.

O'HALLORAN: Igor Korolkov doubts very much whether a normal criminal gang could obtain and administer such a substance. He's convinced that Tsepov was murdered and that someone very influential ordered his death.

KOROLKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): What caught my attention was that Tsepov's murder was part of a recent chain of high profile killings in Russia, and especially a chain of poisonings. Roman Tsepov was poisoned, a Moscow banker Ivan Kivilidy was poisoned, and finally a Chechen rebel leader Khattab was poisoned. And in the latter case,

O'HALLORAN: There are strong suspicions of poisoning in the case of another man who died rather closer to the Kremlin, in 2003. Yuri Shchekochikhin was one of Russia's most intrepid investigators into corruption. At first a journalist, he went on to become a member of the Duma or parliament for the opposition party Yabloko. Just like Tsepov, Shchekochikhin went down with a sudden and devastating illness which killed him in less than three weeks. These were his symptoms as described by a friend who was with him on June 17th, the day he fell ill.

READER: He complained about fatigue and red blotches began to appear on his skin. On June the 18th he told me he was vomiting and quite severely and he was feeling extremely ill. After that, his family and colleagues told me he'd been admitted to hospital. His fever became extremely high. When he reached the hospital he fell unconscious. All his internal organs began collapsing one by one. Then almost his entire skin was severely damaged, he lost almost his hair. He died on July the 2nd 2003.

O'HALLORAN: Yuri Shchekchikhin died in a Moscow clinic reserved for the ruling elite, bureaucrats and politicians. We were told causes of death mentioned to the family were an allergic reaction or possibly Lyell's disease, a rare condition involving severe skin blistering. Since then, family and friends have apparently tried but failed to get more detailed medical evidence. Grigory Yavlinsky, the leader of Shchekochikhin's party Yabloko, is convinced his colleague was murdered.

YAVLINSKY: The death, not simply killing but death, of Mr Shchekochikhin was really really very strange. The man, which was 53 years old or even 52 years old, was in three weeks transformed in the hundred years old personality. It was not reported at all, but you can't understand whom do you see. When we came on the funeral it was difficult to recognise him simply. There is a lot of strange things here. The first that there was no possible to speak to his doctors. My members of the party were trying to speak to them. As far as I know, until today the relatives of Mr Shchekochikhin didn't get the papers about the medical conclusion, of what it was, in fact.

O'HALLORAN: But what might be the motive for killing this eminent parliamentarian and journalist? Shchekochikhin had been deep into an investigation which implicated a very senior figure in the security services, and which also concerned senior people in law enforcement, says Grigory Yavlinsky.

YAVLINKSKY: He was investigating very special cases which were directly related to the highest levels of FSB, Russian security services. And also the top leaders of the General Prosecutor's office. So he was directly investigating the cases which were symptomatic in terms of corruption in the highest level of security system of Russia.

O'HALLORAN: And your theory is that Yuri Shchekochikhin's death had something to do with the fact that he was investigating not just corruption, not just illegality, but something connected with the security service, the FSB?

YAVLINKSKY: I want simply to underline the fact that he was investigating the issues which were related to the highest level of security services in Russia and highest level of the General Prosecutors office, this is a fact. That was his last investigation.

O'HALLORAN: Before he went into parliament, Shchekochikhin worked for the Novaya Gazeta newspaper. Last October, a prominent journalist of that paper was gunned down in her apartment block. Referring to that and other high profile killings last week, President Vladimir Putin acknowledged the seriousness of the problem and said the state had a duty to try and prevent such assassinations. On the details of Yuri Shchekchikhin's death, the first deputy chairman of the Duma security committee is sceptical about claims that he was murdered. Mikhail Grishankov, of the pro-Kremlin United Russia Party, is himself a former member of the Federal Security Service, the FSB.

GRISHANKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I knew Yuri Shchekochikhin very well. His death was a big tragedy and it was very unexpected to all of us. I know that his fellow journalists had many ideas about what could be behind his death and immediately great speculation arose as to who would be interested in killing him. His illness was indeed very unusual. But I'm used to operating with facts. I spoke to Yuri's colleagues immediately after he died. I asked them to provide me with medical files and the results of medical tests

KABANOV: Ja, yes.

O'HALLORAN: And this one's Yuri Schekochihin.

O'HALLORAN: Showing me a photo of Yuri Shchekochikhin taken hours before he fell ill, Kirill Kabanov rejected the assertion that foreign medical opinion supported Russian medical evidence on the cause of death. On the contrary, he says, the family and friends of the dead man never were able to commission thorough scientific tests on his body tissues.

KABANOV (VIA INTERPRETER): We asked for biological samples of the internal organs to be sent for independent analysis at foreign clinics, but we were denied the right to obtain this biologic material, we were denied the right to get cell samples from Yuri's internal organs. We had our own investigation done of Yuri's death and I personally had to use some of my old contacts from the security services. And the specialist I contacted said that with 90% certainty Yuri's case was a poisoning and most likely he was poisoned with thallium.

O'HALLORAN: Thallium? The heavy metal which was at first suspected in London when Alexander Litvinenko was lying ill in November. If you believe that Yuri Shchekochikin may well have died of thallium poisoning, why should Russian doctors say he had either an allergic reaction or Lyell's disease?

KABANOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I would like to draw your attention to the fact that Yuri's treatment and his post-mortem examination were all held at the Central State Hospital. This is the most important clinic in Russia and it's tightly controlled by the Russian Federal Security Bureau, because it's treating top-ranking Russian officials.

O'HALLORAN: What is the result of that in terms of the objectivity or truthfulness of the doctors?

KABANOV (VIA INTERPRETER): Very recently very few people in Russia find the courage to tell the truth.

O'HALLORAN: Kirill Kabanov also believes the MP's corruption investigations could have supplied a motive for murder. He says that Shchekochikhin had, shortly before his death, been openly seeking help from foreign government agencies to intercept "black cash" - the proceeds of crime - being exported out of Russia. Indeed, he says, his friend was due to meet a representative of the FBI the day after he was struck down by illness.

KABANOV (VIA INTERPRETER): You have to realise that Yuri was very often going into open conflict with top-ranking authorities, and in particular with top-ranking representatives of the security structures which have seized the power in Russia. The most dangerous element of Yuri's work was that he started passing the results of his investigations to law enforcement abroad, and these foreign organisations started opening criminal cases. Yuri found an efficient way of getting around the bureaucratic system in the security services. That's what made him so dangerous, because there was no way Russian officials could influence foreign law enforcement.

O'HALLORAN: And so, with these two strange deaths in mind, what of the recent victim, Alexander Litvinenko, whose poisoning is an established fact? How likely is it that Russian state agencies could have been involved? Pavel Felgenhauer looks at the evidence, both as a military affairs expert and as a scientist. For he spent seventeen years as a molecular biologist in the Russian Academy of Sciences, routinely using radioactive sources in laboratory work. He says he dislikes conspiracy theories, but on this occasion he feels driven to make an exception.

FELGENHAUER: It's one thing if you get a person just simply shot in the head, another when an enormous amount of polonium you can't get anywhere easily at all is used in a very sophisticated way, which will obviously involve different parts of the Russian Ministries and Intelligence kind of departments working together in a co-ordinated matter that would require a co-ordination from the very top.

O'HALLORAN: And what are the features which suggest to you the hand of some state agency?

FELGENHAUER: Oh you would require to get the polonium. The polonium is produced in one place of Russia, Rosatom, purified in another. Rosatom is the nuclear agency. You would require them to make a special kind of compound, special solution. Then you need to find out how much to use. For that you need a specialist in radiology, because it's not public knowledge. You need someone to prepare a meeting where you can encounter the target and use the polonium. You need the FSB, because FSB oversees security also of nuclear materials. You need the Kremlin to okay it and to control it. So from the very start when it was disclosed that this was indeed polonium 210, it was clear for me that this could be done only by a state, not by a group of people but by a number of state organisations.

O'HALLORAN: Last summer a new law passed by the Russian Duma came into force, allowing the targeting of people outside Russia's borders, under the heading of intelligence operations in the pursuit of terrorists. And, after Litvinenko's death, a Communist party member of the Duma Security Committee, Viktor Ilyukhin, said, "After we had adopted the bill, I would not rule out that our guys pulled this off." But the official Kremlin line has been very different, an indignant and emphatic denial. This is how Mr Putin's deputy spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, expressed it to the BBC in December.

EXTRACT FROM INTERVIEW

PESKOV: I can assure you that it is unthinkable that Russian government can be behind any killing and can have something in common with any killing. Russia is the last country in this world that should be interested in his death, and of course we have our image jeopardised by that case, everybody is blaming, in an unjustified manner, everything on us. Do not exaggerate the role of Mr Litvinenko as a critic of Mr Putin's Russia. He was not affecting Mr Putin, he was not affecting Russia, he was not affecting Russia's image, he was not so sophisticated and he was not, let's say, a symbol of criticism of Russia.

O'HALLORAN: And Mikhail Grishankov, pro Putin member of the Duma Security Committee, adopts the same Kremlin line. He suggests that Alexander Litvinenko wasn't very important; that any security threat he had once posed to his old FSB masters had long gone; and indeed, that Litvinenko had probably sold all the secrets he'd ever possessed.

GRISHANKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): Regarding the murder of Alexander Litvinenko, many writers and reporters are trying to make money out of this case, and they aren't at all concerned that this man lost his life. They're just trying to make as much money as possible. They make up stories. It's impossible to comment on such speculation. I think it's very wrong to paint a black picture of Russia. In fact, Russia's security services are facing an enormous task fighting terrorism, drugs and crime, and providing security for the country. So all these myths created about the security services in Russia have absolutely no basis at all. I can talk about this with full authority, because I once worked for the Federal Security Bureau myself.

O'HALLORAN: However Yevgeny Volk, director of the Heritage Foundation think tank in Moscow suggests that to regard Russia's security and military agencies as either not guilty or guilty in connection with high profile killings may be too simplistic. He suggests there are both present and former members of such bodies who may have had ample motive to organise or take part in political killings without receiving their orders from the Kremlin.

VOLK: I believe we should differentiate between the agencies on the whole as a governmental structure and certain people inside. Because the control of the government over the security agencies is very loose.

O'HALLORAN: So are there key figures in the FSB, the Federal Security Bureau, or perhaps in other state agencies, military agencies, who could be really out of control, as some opponents of the government suggest?

VOLK: I don't exclude this fact, because Russian security agencies are by no means homogenous. It's a large variety of people with very different interests. There are still many people who never have reconciled with the realities of free market and democratic reforms in Russia and they have every reason to hate the people who stood behind the reforms, because they believed that these people ruined great Russia, great Soviet Union, they ruined their professional careers, they made them unemployed. That's why it's very easy to hire them as the contract killers. But it doesn't mean that the agency they belong to is really behind this killing.

O'HALLORAN: And there are several cases in which members of murder gangs have been shown to have links to, or a background in, military intelligence. One victim was a prominent democratic politician well known in the West.

ARCHIVE – NEWS REPORT on BBC of GALINA STARAVOITOVA MURDER.

NEWSREADER: BBC Radio 4. It's six o'clock. The news with Rory Morrison, good evening. President Yeltsin has ordered an urgent investigation into the murder of one of Russia's best known reformers, Galina Staravoitova. The body of Mrs Staravoitova, a Liberal MP in the lower house of parliament, was discovered in St Petersburg last night. Her aide was also wounded in the attack

O'HALLORAN: November 1998 - a night of panic, shock and confusion for Olga Staravoitova after she got an urgent phone call summoning her to her sister's home on the Griboyedova Canal in St Petersburg.

STARAVOITOVA (VIA INTERPRETER): I started opening the doors of one of the ambulance cars and I started asking, "What's happened to my sister?" And a medical sister told me, "Galina's dead." I asked where is she, and she told me, "Galina is on the staircase."

O'HALLORAN: Galina Staravoitova had been gunned down on the stairway of her apartment. The investigation into her assassination has now been going on for more than eight years. Only last September a member of the killer gang was convicted. And in 2005 two leading figures in the squad were sentenced to more than twenty years

LINKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): Yes, it's very clear that if a former GRU officer was found to have been technical organiser of the crime, then of course it was organised by this GRU body. And after Galina Staravoitova's murder, Yuri Kolchin travelled to Chechnya to fight against rebels, and he travelled on behalf of GRU. And so, in short, yes I am convinced that GRU was directly involved in organising the crime.

O'HALLORAN: So why does he think Galina Staravoitova was targeted? The answer, says Ruslan Linkov, lies in a campaign she led to demand sweeping reforms of the armed forces structures, including military intelligence, the GRU.

LINKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): Basically the GRU was engaged in the dirtiest work, the sort of work that even FSB officers were embarrassed to do themselves. Galina Staravoitova struggled to get the Russian parliament to close down structures such as GRU, which was one of the instruments of the totalitarian Soviet regime, and which continued to serve the new Russian state in the same capacity. Also she was very vocal about the need to investigate the crimes committed by this organisation. She called for it to be closed down, and in fact she received direct threats from the GRU. And these people really feared that she might become a defence minister of Russia, which would mean getting the chance to physically close down this organisation.

O'HALLORAN: The role of the GRU came into sharp focus after the assassination of a Chechen former separatist president, Zelikhan Yandarbiyev, in the Gulf state of Qatar three years ago. He and his young son were killed by a car bomb. Two men were caught, tried and convicted in Qatar for the murder. They turned out to be members of the GRU. They were extradited back to Russia and some reports claimed they got a hero's welcome. The GRU also cropped up in the background to a heavily armed assault mounted two years ago on a former leading political figure from the Yeltsin era, Anatoly Chubais. A retired military intelligence man – a former GRU colonel – he is now facing trial for leading the attack. So could such military or security service units have been involved in killing Russians who could in no sense be branded as terrorists? Mikhail Grishankov of the Duma security committee, suggests that by formulating such questions, the West reveals an outdated attitude to Russia.

GRISHANKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I can say with 100% certainty that Russia is now very different from what it was like back in the 1930s and 1940s. And the myths that were formed in the West back in those times, exist as a hangover of the Cold War that lasted so many years. And maybe it's difficult to overcome. And this speculation about the alleged connection of the Russian security services to these murders, I perceive it as an attempt to bring these Cold War skeletons back to life.

O'HALLORAN: Critics of the government here have told me that in the history of high profile murders, the people who ordered them are never found. How do you respond to that criticism?

GRISHANKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I would like to point out to you that several high profile murders have been solved. I'm talking, for instance, about the murder of the former State Russian Duma deputy, Galina Staravoitova. So, on the contrary, I can say that very thorough and successful investigations are being conducted and they are already yielding very positive results.

O'HALLORAN: In the case of Galina Staravoitova, Ruslan Linkov, the man who was shot twice in the head at her side is very deeply suspicious of the role of the GRU because one of the key members of the killer gang had been employed by the Russian military intelligence, he claims, before that.

GRISHANKOV (VIA INTERPRETER): I find it very difficult to comment on such speculation. Many people work in many different places. I find Ruslan Linkov's statement extremely surprising. But I can say that after such tragic events, even after years have gone by, the people involved in them still want to remain the focus of public attention and start telling unbelievable stories for their own benefit.

O'HALLORAN: The evidence we've heard establishes that, under Russian law, hit squads can be sent abroad to liquidate terrorists. And it's not inconceivable that on occasion that definition might be stretched to include traitors. It's also known that some hits on the home front have been carried out by people in or recently retired from, the forces. It's also possible, of course, that some murky deaths now viewed as murders by critics of the Kremlin, may turn out to be deaths from natural causes. But if

