



What might be going on with Darya Dugina's assassination?

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A high-profile killing took place in Moscow last month — a killing with potentially massive implications, both for the war in Ukraine and for the stability of Russian President Vladimir Putin's government.

On Aug. 20, a car bombing in Moscow took the life of Darya Dugina. The 29-year-old Dugina was an ultranationalist activist. Earlier this year, she had been sanctioned by both the U.S. and U.K. governments for her role in spreading Kremlin propaganda. Dugina's most distinguishing attribute, however, was that she was the daughter of Alexander Dugin, the far-right philosopher and "Eurasianist" ideologue whose views about Russian empire and the need for confrontation with the West have become popular within the Kremlin's corridors of power. Indeed, it was Dugin who had articulated the concept of "Novorossiia" (New Russia) that served as part of the justification for Russia's 2014 invasion and annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Dugin has been a prominent cheerleader for Putin's Ukraine campaign — and for the subsequent expansion of the conflict to other territories that Moscow covets.

Not surprisingly, most of the coverage of Dugina's killing has depicted it as a failed attempt to eliminate her father. But by whom? A variety of theories have proliferated.

Russia's intelligence services have been quick to blame Ukraine for organizing the killing and have identified a Ukrainian national named Natalya Vovk, as well as an accomplice, as the culprits. (Vovk has since met an untimely end at unknown hands.) The story may not be so straightforward, however.

It's certainly true that Ukraine's military has become more and more assertive in its attacks on Russian forces in recent weeks, including on Russian soil. But Kyiv has vehemently denied it had anything to do with Dugina's death, and more than a few observers have taken the Kremlin's accusations as a sign that Russia is now laying the groundwork for a further escalation of hostilities in its current war. After all, there is precedent for just such a "wag the dog" scenario. In Sept. 1999, Putin's new government used the bombing of apartment complexes in four Russian cities as a justification to launch the second Chechen War. Indeed, Russia's own FSB may have been responsible for these bombings. And as recently as February 2022, Western intelligence foiled a false flag operation by the Kremlin that would have served as a pretext for its invasion of Ukraine. Putin's government could very well be taking a page from the same playbook once again.

But the killing might also be a sign that dissent is growing inside Russia, with opponents of the Russian president becoming increasingly active (and aggressive) as the costs of his Ukraine campaign continue to mount. In what might be proof, the National Republican Army, an "underground resistance movement" operating within Russia itself, has claimed responsibility for the killing, with former Duma deputy Ilya Ponomarev assuming the role of the group's de facto spokesman.

Finally, there is the possibility that Dugina's death was carried out by the Kremlin itself, ahead of a possible decision to de-escalate the current conflict. Such a choice would be a pragmatic one for the Russian government, given the massive losses and strategic setbacks suffered by the Kremlin to date. However, any concessions made by Putin are likely to be met with a backlash on the part of true believers in his ranks, such as Dugin and his daughter. These ideologues of Russian imperialism would never support such a step backward by Moscow. If the Kremlin is truly contemplating a change in strategy, it might have believed it needed to secure their preemptive silence by any means necessary.

One of these theories could very well be correct. Or none could be. What is already clear, though, is that half a year into what was supposed to be a short and decisive conflict, the Dugina killing could very well portend a new phase in that fight.

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