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The Weekend Interview

“Russia's Polonium Widow”

‘Marina Litvinenko thinks her husband was poisoned in London by the Kremlin's agents. This week Britain reopened the case’

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London

When they first met in Moscow in the summer of 1993, Marina Litvinenko was struck by Alexander Litvinenko's youthfulness. "I found Sasha a very easygoing guy, very funny and very protective," Ms. Litvinenko tells me, using the diminutive form of her late husband's first name. "He looked like a very nice guy—so much younger-looking than his age. He was in his 30s, but he looked much younger."

Thirteen years later, on Nov. 1, 2006, Alexander Litvinenko was poisoned at a London hotel bar where he had met an ex-officer of the Russian Federal Security Service, or FSB, and an FSB-linked businessman. Litvinenko had served in the FSB for more than a decade before being ousted for exposing official malfeasance that reached the highest levels of the state. He fell ill soon after the meeting, and over the next three weeks his condition worsened. He had been poisoned, investigators later determined, by highly radioactive polonium-210 that had been slipped into his tea at the hotel that day. The poison caused his hair to fall out and his digestive system to fail; doctors fed him through a tube until, at age 43, he finally succumbed.

It was while he was in that awful state that most of the rest of the world was introduced to the FSB defector. A photo taken while he was hospitalized made newspaper front pages: His lips were thinned almost to nothing, his head totally bald, his cheeks hollowed out, his piercing blue eyes sunk into their sockets. Alexander Litvinenko in his British-tabloid incarnation looked like the undead. The image soon became synonymous with what happens to those who wind up on the wrong side of [Vladimir Putin's](#) mafia state.

Ms. Litvinenko has spent much of the past eight years confronting that state, and the elegant former professional dancer has less-obvious scars to show for it. "I'm not a paranoid person and I try to live a normal life," she says as we sit in the lobby of a hotel in South Kensington, a London area popular with the city's large Russian émigré community. "I don't wake up with this on my mind and go to bed with it on my mind. But I know that if something happened to me, Sasha would be continuing until he found out what happened. So it's what I can do for him."



AFP/Getty Images

Bringing the killers to justice hasn't been easy amid the apathy of a European political class that until recently sought to appease Mr. Putin, even if that meant letting very unpleasant bygones be bygones. Although British police conducted a crime investigation, and at least one Russian suspect was charged (in absentia) with murder, the U.K. government long resisted launching an independent inquiry. Home Secretary Theresa May even conceded in a letter to the High Court of Justice last year that "international relations"—that is, relations with Moscow—"have been a factor in the government's decision-making."

This week brought a stunning reversal. In a letter to Parliament on Tuesday, Ms. May announced a new inquiry. Sir Robert Owen, the High Court jurist who will lead the investigation, has already concluded that the underlying material establishes "a prima facie case as to the culpability of the Russian state," and according to media reports he will now have access to classified British government information that wasn't available during the original inquest.

Did the downing of [Malaysia Airlines](#) Flight 17 by Kremlin-backed Ukrainian separatists impel London to dust off the dossier? Ms. Litvinenko doesn't think so. While noting that "everything around my case is political," she says that the timing of the announcement amid rising world-wide revulsion for Russia was a coincidence: "It's not to put more pressure on President Putin or to make his day as bad as possible."

But she believes that the Ukraine crisis has awakened some Western capitals to the true nature of the Putin regime. Take British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#)'s coalition government. "They put good relations with Russia in top priority," she says. "But the Russians have been trained in a different way. They're not from Oxford, or from Cambridge. They've got a different agenda. They've been trained by the KGB Every time you cede more, they will try to catch you in a weaker position. If you say, 'Excuse me, I did something wrong,' they don't appreciate it—they say, 'OK, now I will make it worse for you.' "

Mr. Cameron's government, Ms. Litvinenko thinks, now gets this, hence the new investigation. "I'm not saying 'I told you so,' " she says. "It's just so sad how many people had to die before the West realized."

As Marina Litvinenko retells it, life with her husband often resembled the plot of a John le Carré espionage novel *a la russe* . Perhaps it was far less extraordinary when set against the background of

modern Russia, where in the 1990s oligarchy replaced Soviet communism and where paying bribes "became like paying tariffs," as Ms. Litvinenko says.

The couple married in 1994, shortly after their only son, Anatoly, was born. (Alexander had two children from a previous marriage.) Litvinenko was at the time working in the FSB's economic- and organized-crimes unit. Her husband was especially sensitive to the rampant graft and official criminality around them, Ms. Litvinenko says. "Working against crime it started to become very difficult because all the same crime started to be in the government."

At one point, Litvinenko even asked his wife to type a statement addressed to the Kremlin "about how these people who work underground, stealing money, are very soon going to be respectable businessmen and then going to control politics." She's not sure if the statement ever made it to high officials, and it's difficult to completely square Ms. Litvinenko's image of her husband as an idealistic outsider—one he cultivated during his lifetime—with the murky realities of post-Soviet Russia.

What's clearer is that in late 1997, amid his growing disillusionment with the FSB security service, Alexander Litvinenko was ordered by his superiors to knock off Boris Berezovsky, a mathematician-cum-billionaire TV mogul. Litvinenko had by then already developed a friendship with Berezovsky. "Sasha decided not to go to the press but to go to Berezovsky," Ms. Litvinenko says. "Berezovsky couldn't believe it." Eventually, she says, her husband and a few like-minded colleagues wrote a letter to then-President Boris Yeltsin regarding the episode. But the Kremlin man who received the statement "sent it back to the same people who had asked Sasha to kill Berezovsky," according to Ms. Litvinenko.

The aborted hit on Berezovsky would eventually lead to the resignation of the FSB's director. His replacement in 1998 was none other than Vladimir Putin. Ms. Litvinenko says that after her husband "showed Putin the connections between organized crime and officers in FSB," the Litvinkos' telephone line was tapped.

In November 1998, Litvinenko and three other colleagues in Russia held a news conference, laying out the evidence they had of high-level, FSB-connected corruption. "The FSB is being used by certain officials solely for their private purposes," Litvinenko said. "It's being used for settling scores and carrying out private and criminal orders for payment." From then on the state went into action against her husband, Ms. Litvinenko says. "Our life became completely different."

Litvinenko was forced to resign from the FSB. The state prosecution service charged him with "exceeding his official authority." He served seven months before being cleared of that charge, only to be briefly detained again and released in 2000. "When I spoke with the prosecution service," Ms. Litvinenko recalls, "they said . . . 'Sasha shouldn't go on TV, and we have all his cases. If something won't get him to prison, we'll open another case and another one and another one.' They openly told me that they would fabricate cases."

In the fall of 2000, the Litvinkos made their way to Britain via Turkey. The next year they were granted political asylum. Litvinenko began consulting with the British secret service, MI6. Ms. Litvinenko says "it was all about his work with organized crime," which makes sense given the huge influx of Russian immigrants into Britain at that time. He also became active in Russian dissident circles, co-writing a 2002 book, "Blowing Up Russia," which alleged that a series of 1999 Moscow

apartment-block bombings was orchestrated by Mr. Putin to reignite Russia's Chechen wars and propel him to power.

All the while, Litvinenko was awake to the risks that he and his family faced, even in London. As the Putinist tide began to rise in Russia, legislators passed laws in 2006 authorizing the government to target state enemies abroad. A list of names began to circulate: It included the dissident journalist Anna Politkovskaya, Boris Berezovsky, who by then had also found asylum in the U.K., and Alexander Litvinenko. All three are now dead: Politkovskaya and Litvinenko were assassinated in 2006, and Berezovsky died last year in an apparent suicide.

"Sasha knew this but he believed that he's a professional," Ms. Litvinenko says. "He thought he could protect [himself]. But it didn't happen."

Of the two men Litvinenko met that fateful evening in November 2006, one, Andrei Lugovoi, was known to him as an FSB associate and former head of security at Berezovsky's office. The other, Dmitry Kovtun, was new to him. British investigators eventually traced the polonium trail back to both men, but by then both had returned to Russia, which has refused extradition requests for Mr. Lugovoi for legal proceedings. Messrs. Lugovoi and Kovtun have both repeatedly denied any involvement in Alexander Litvinenko's death.

Mr. Kovtun has since maintained a relatively low profile. Mr. Lugovoi has entered the Russian parliament. "The guy is even a leader there in the security commission," Ms. Litvinenko says. "It's a black joke! The guy is a suspect, who could use radioactive material in London." Her compatriots are aware of these bitter truths, she thinks. "I can't say people are happy about this, but Russians have this special sarcasm—'OK, they've done it—so what?'"

That fatalistic attitude is ruinous for Russian progress, Ms. Litvinenko suggests. "For many people," she says, "democracy is equivalent to having a luxury car, having a good place, streets looking the same as in London and France, the same shops. But that's not democracy. But many people are happy with this. They care more about stability than human rights. . . . I can't understand how you could teach your child to live this way, to not be proud of what you do, to not feel real freedom, to not know there's rule of law."

It's the Russian public's apathy that keeps Mr. Putin in power, she says. "He doesn't have any ideology. It's about money, power, control. During the Soviet Union, the KGB was a weapon without money. Now it's a weapon and money. They don't think about Russia, the future of a country."

As for the West, Ms. Litvinenko is puzzled by those who still urge rapprochement with Mr. Putin's Russia. "They say Putin is a person you can't push hard because he becomes harder," she says. "But I disagree." What does she hope will be achieved by the public inquest, at last, into her husband's murder? "I don't want to just punish somebody. I just need to finish this one, for memory of Sasha. I want people to know the truth."

Then she adds, in a wavering voice, "To give him a rest."

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