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## Same Old Ruthless Russia

By Michael R. Caputo

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American journalist Paul Klebnikov was shot to death outside my office building on Friday. At least it used to be my office. I worked with Klebnikov, Forbes magazine's maverick correspondent, several times in the past 10 years, sometimes in Moscow, sometimes in New York. Our paths crossed often through one of Russia's wildest decades.

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Eight years after we first met as he covered Boris Yeltsin's 1996 presidential election, his murder brings clarity: Nothing has changed. Brutal criminals still run amok in Russia, operating with impunity and no fear of prosecution.

Klebnikov had high hopes for Russia and was determined to urge democracy along. He grew up in the United States, cradled in the close-knit Russian American community; his

Russian skills were perfect and his devotion to the culture ran deep. He blossomed in journalism just as the communist bloc crumbled, and his unique understanding of "the story" in the region propelled his career.

As we toured the Russian countryside eight years ago, he talked to peasants waiting in line to vote and grilled me with questions, too. Had I run across billionaire Boris Berezovsky in my work with the Yeltsin administration? I hadn't. Klebnikov had recently been scratching the surface of Berezovsky's brazen get-rich-quick schemes. He was convinced there was much more to the oligarch. He was in town to investigate him as well as to cover the elections.

Berezovsky was one of several super-wealthy men who had back doors to Yeltsin's Kremlin. His popularity waxed and waned, but as he amassed wealth he gained unparalleled power. Experienced expatriates in Russia shared an essential rule: Don't cross these brutal billionaires, ever, or you're likely to go home in a box.

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Klebnikov knew this well. In Russia the mafia kills every day. He knew Paul Tatum, the Oklahoma entrepreneur who ran afoul of Moscow's mafia and was shot dead just a few hundred yards from a hotel he had founded and had fought against Mayor Yuri Luzhkov to control. After Tatum's murder, Hizzoner promised swift justice. We're still waiting.

Tatum had led a loud life in Moscow. Klebnikov told me he knew Tatum's battle with city "authorities" was never a sound strategy for survival. The Tatum murder shook him, but he was determined to go forward with what grew into a series of articles exposing Russian corruption. After all, he was a reporter, not a businessman.

As a journalist, Klebnikov was the real deal. He was based in New York through the 1990s but had more contacts in Moscow than most reporters on the ground full time. During his frequent trips to the region he accomplished more meetings before lunch than many of us could pull off in a week.

Klebnikov listened as intently to the griping of a pensioner as he did to the drone of politicians. He was quick to the point, wasted no time, and drove to the center of his story like a tank. Some thought he was bold, others thought him brash, but everyone was reading.

"Godfather of the Kremlin," his December 1996 Forbes cover story on Berezovsky, threw new light on the doings of Russia's oligarchs. The story grew into Klebnikov's first book, with the same title, published in 2001. The exiled industrialist took the magazine to court in London, and eventually Forbes recanted accusations of violence. Those of us who lived in Moscow during Berezovsky's heyday still believe.

His follow-up stories on Russian industrialists were always fair and thorough, but he didn't make many friends in the country. Soon after Vladimir Putin stepped into the presidency, Klebnikov and I met in New York. I told him he needed to watch his back with so much change afoot. He shrugged and said he was uniquely positioned to get to the heart of corruption in Russia. "Who else is going to do it?" he asked. I had no answer.

When Forbes announced Klebnikov would lead its new Russian publication and relocate to Moscow, I immediately feared for his safety. A few months later he was dead. I think about him, sprawled bleeding on the sidewalk, coughing his final words to a reporter colleague who found him dying.

Russia hasn't changed in the past decade and at this trajectory it won't be truly civilized for generations. Those who killed Klebnikov are killing today, plan to kill tomorrow, and know they'll roam free to kill for years to come. Hellbent on getting rich, they have no boundaries. Raised in a communist world devoid of morals, they have no soul.

There is no valid reason why a nation so tolerant -- even complicit -- in organized crime should stand on par with world leaders in groups such as the World Trade Organization. Putin must stand as the guarantor of media freedom. And the Bush administration must demand results in this murder investigation and require the assassins and their bosses be detected, arrested, tried and punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Or will it let Paul Klebnikov, like Paul Tatum, be just another footnote in

Russia's disingenuous flirtation with world-class rule of law? We're waiting.

*Michael R. Caputo, a Miami-based writer, was an election adviser to Boris Yeltsin's administration and lived in Russia from 1994 to 1999.*

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