

Russia:

Behind the disappearance of presidential candidate Ivan Rybkin

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The mysterious disappearance of Russian presidential candidate Ivan Rybkin for five days earlier this month and then his reappearance and the strange explanations he furnished recall the spooky appearance of Volands, the Mephisto figure in the Michael Bugakov novel, *The Master and Margarita*. Events at the pinnacle of Russian politics are increasingly sliding towards irrational darkness.

If it did not have a direct bearing on the democratic rights of the majority of the population, it would read like a pulp-fiction spy novel. The government, which preaches democracy and “openness,” solves its domestic problems in thoroughly unscrupulous manner using anti-democratic methods—employing intrigue and intimidation, involving the secret services, politicians, various civil servants, and the media.

The following picture emerges from what Rybkin himself has admitted, and from what has been reported by the media.

Rybkin disappeared on Thursday, February 5. He was seen at home at about 8 p.m. At 10 p.m., he telephoned Xenia Ponomareva, chief of his election campaign staff.

Two days before, on Tuesday, February 3, he had flown to London, returning the next day. On Wednesday and Thursday, he was in contact with many journalists and gave at least 10 interviews. In one, which he gave to radio “Svoboda,” he declared that the Russian secret services would try to prevent him from participating in the election campaign and had shadowed him on his journeys abroad. He reported that during the departure for London, his plane was moved to an area off the main runway, where it was surrounded by seven cars. According to Rybkin, “four people in black clothes and with black caps” entered the aircraft; they neither looked for anything nor questioned anybody, but “did their best to spread fear and alarm.” Who they were, and how he was able to take off, he did not explain.

A press conference was planned for Friday, February 6, at which Rybkin was to discuss “Putin’s latest economic policy.” His disappearance the day before meant this could not take place.

On Sunday, February 8, his wife filed a missing person report, leading on Monday, February 9, to the launching of a murder investigation.

On the same day, information leaked out, according to which Rybkin was in the Waldferne guesthouse near Moscow, which is controlled by the president’s staff and is used by the FSB (secret service). The report about Rybkin’s alleged whereabouts was made by the deputy chairman of the Duma (parliament) security committee, G. Gudkov, a former KGB-FSB officer.

On the next day, Tuesday, February 10, it was revealed that Rybkin was in Kiev, in the Ukraine. From here, he phoned, apparently in sound mind, to say that he had driven to see his friends in Kiev for recuperation and had switched off both telephone and television. “On the whole, I had a fine time.”

Most commentators immediately expressed their doubts about this information. The idea began to circulate that he had simply “taken off,” and that nothing mysterious had happened to him. On the other hand, it was claimed that the whole thing was a trick of Rybkin’s patron, the Russian oligarch Boris Beresovski, who lives in exile in London. According to this explanation, the disappearance was designed to draw attention to Rybkin’s election campaign—and was unworthy of a presidential candidate.

It looked as if Rybkin’s personal appearance in Moscow would clear up matters. But that is not what happened. His explanations on February 11, given to the radio station “Moscow Echo,” only deepened the uncertainty and contradictions.

According to Rybkin’s version of events, he had left Moscow secretly, without informing his closest relatives or his election campaign aides. He travelled on the number 23 “Moscow-Odessa” train. He crossed the border to the Ukraine at Konotop, where he presented his documents and completed the entry visa.

Yet, representatives of the Russian secret services have stated several times that Rybkin never left Russia between February 5 and 10. “Officially, Ivan Rybkin crossed the border on his journey to London on February 3 and on his return on February 4. There is no official evidence of any further border crossings,” declared Vadim Shibayev, deputy director of the FSB centre for transport operations, on February 10.

The Ukrainian border authorities also failed to confirm whether Rybkin had entered their territory.

According to Rybkin, he lodged at the Hotel Ukraine during his four-day stay in Kiev, where he met with representatives of the opposition to Ukrainian president Leonid Kutchma. In the meantime, the hotel management has declared that a “Russian citizen with this well-known surname” did not stay at the hotel. Thereupon, Rybkin changed his story and claimed to have resided with a friend.

Opposition leaders in the Ukraine have unanimously denied having any contact with Rybkin. “There were no meetings with us,” said opposition leader Alexander Turtchinov. The Communist and Socialist Parties of the Ukraine, as well as the bloc “Our Ukraine” led by Viktor Yutchenko, say they know nothing about any such meeting.

Rybkin’s return to Moscow seems no less strange. According to his version of events, he flew back from Kiev. His passport should have been registered on his departure at Borispol airport. But journalists who had driven to the airport once details of his flight from Kiev with Transaero airline became known were unable to meet him. Also, the Ukrainian border authorities gave no clear answer as to whether Rybkin had flown from Borispol. They declared that they could only provide this information in response to an official request from the relevant authorities in Russia. No such request has been made.

In the meantime, Rybkin flew to London, where—for security reasons—he plans to remain and conduct his campaign until the March 14 election. Then, during a video press conference screened in Moscow on February 13, he declared that everything he had said so far was untrue.

He claimed that he had actually been lured to Kiev under false pretences, with the prospect of a conspiratorial meeting with the Chechen separatist leader Aslan Maskhadov. The meeting did not occur, however, but in the apartment where it was supposed to take place he was drugged and only regained consciousness days later, on Tuesday. He was then put under pressure with “perverse” video films.

Subsequently, he was forced to phone home and to provide the false statements about his disappearance. Finally, he was taken to the airport and returned to Moscow. He could not imagine who could profit from his disappearance.

Rybkin’s five-day disappearance remains wrapped in an incomprehensible cloud of darkness. On the other hand, the details and hints he has provided suggest the involvement of the Russian secret services. Rybkin claims to fear for his liberty and even his life.

After his return, his secretary said that the experience had been like “another Chechnya war” (under President Yeltsin, Rybkin was mediator in the first Chechnya war). The theory expressed by some newspapers that he was dosed with special psychoactive drugs could not be substantiated. The same secretary told *Nowaja Gazeta*: “Ivan Petrovitch will not submit to any investigation and medical treatment, although I thought personally about it....”

The journalist Anna Politkovskaia provided the most convincing explanation of these events. In her opinion, Rybkin was kidnapped by the secret services in order to find out whether he possessed any compromising information against Putin. He was given “truth drugs,” which is why he could not provide the exact details of his odyssey.

Once it became known that he was staying at the Waldferne guesthouse, he was brought to the Ukraine, where he was held until he reappeared. At the same time, he was obviously intimidated, and his disappearance was used to discredit him both personally and politically. Indeed, could anything now be believed from someone who had just “retreated” to Kiev and left everyone in the lurch?

Politkovskaia suggests that President Putin personally sanctioned Rybkin’s disappearance. She writes, “Who could have given the instruction to forcibly obtain information from Rybkin? The person who had most need of it, he gave the order. Personally.”

Politkovskaia’s final conjecture concerns the question, What kinds of films could have been made during the time Rybkin was in such dubious company? It is possible that “in the next days, we will witness videos or photographs in which someone resembling Ivan Petrovitch Rybkin appears. A so-called Skuratov-gate II, or some such a thing. The aim is to compromise him before he opens his mouth, so that nobody believes anything he says.”

Politkovskaia is alluding to an episode five years earlier, in January 1999. At the high point of the struggle for power between the then prime minister Yevgeni Primakov and the powerful oligarch Boris Beresovski, a videotape appeared showing a man in the company of two “girls of easy virtue” who “resembled” the then general prosecutor, Juri Skuratov. At that time, Skuratov worked for Primakov. The film cost Skuratov his career. The showing of the film had been sanctioned by a certain Vladimir Putin, at that time the boss of the FSB, who then stood on the side of Beresovski.

Could Rybkin become dangerous for Putin? Quite possibly. It is only necessary to cast a glance at the campaigns of the presidential candidates during the last few weeks.

The former parliamentary speaker and chairman of the Security Council, Ivan Rybkin, announced his return to the political stage after a long break. Since 2000, he has functioned as a political lever for Beresovski, who

lives in London. Beresovski is attempting to utilise information he possesses about Putin’s involvement in the Russian secret services’ participation in the separatist invasion of Chechnya in August 1999 and the explosions that occurred thereafter in Russian apartment blocks, in which about 300 people died.

So far, Rybkin had enjoyed a comparatively “clean” reputation. He was a politician who was free from connections with any big scandals or dubious plots. Any facts he brought to light as a presidential candidate could not be ignored by society and the media, and would have had far-reaching consequences.

Rybkin announced his presidential candidacy at the end of December, supported by forces close to Beresovski—at a time when absolute chaos prevailed in the liberal parties. They had not yet recovered from their defeat in the December 7 parliamentary elections, and could not agree on a common “democratic” compromise candidate. For some time, the young politician Vladimir Ryshkov was held out as a prospect. December 31 was set as the final date for a decision, so that the opposition parties had to hurry. Beresovski made his decision, and Rybkin appeared on the scene.

As Ryshkov was still uncertain, Irina Chakamada, one of the chairs of the liberal party Union of Rightwing Forces (SPS), announced she would stand as an independent candidate. At the beginning of January, Leonid Newslin, who lives in Israel and is one of the chairs of the Yukos oil combine, announced he would financially back her campaign. Immediately, the Russian authorities launched an international manhunt for Newslin.

On January 14, Chakamada publicly accused Putin of committing a “state crime” because of the government’s behaviour during the hostage drama at the Moscow Musical Theatre in the autumn of 2002; whereupon Rybkin declared his readiness to withdraw his candidacy in her favour. But Chakamada quickly toned down her attacks. Rybkin then came forward in her stead with even louder public accusations.

On February 2, he published an article in *Kommersant*, under the headline “Putin has no right to power in Russia,” in which he repeated Chakamada’s accusations: “Society must evaluate the actions of President Putin and his close circle as state crimes. The constitution has been to all intents and purposes destroyed, and Russia is sinking into darkness again.”

In another article, “Tsar Vladimir,” which Rybkin wrote shortly before he disappeared and which was published while he was missing, he wrote, “I am against Putin because he does not keep his promises.” He provided examples—“successes” in Chechnya, the “renewal” of the army, the “rebirth of the Russian state”—and cited the curtailing of democratic rights and liberties, and so on. He then asked: “If our fundamental civil rights in this great country are not respected by those in government, how can one hope for any development by leaving Putin in power for another four years or even longer?”

In a further statement, Rybkin dubbed Putin an “oligarch” and pointed to the president’s links to the business world that underlie his alleged fight against a series of other oligarchs.

All this signalled that Rybkin was intensifying his accusations and perhaps intended to say even more. In view of this threat, the Kremlin obviously concluded that it was too dangerous to fight him at arm’s length. It would only come to accusations and appeals to international institutions. It would be better to intimidate him and discredit him in the eyes of the voters.

On the day he disappeared, the Central Electoral Commission announced that the percentage of “invalid” voter signatures (26 percent) supporting Rybkin’s candidacy was so large that he could not stand. Then, the next day, the commission unexpectedly changed its position and declared that the proportion of invalid signatures did not exceed the permissible maximum limit of 21 percent, and that Rybkin was certified as a presidential candidate.

Taken together, these events lead to the assumption that, faced with a potentially dangerous opponent of the incumbent president, the Kremlin tried to break, intimidate and discredit him in public. The goal of “shaping” a candidate seems to have been achieved. One way or another, Rybkin had resigned himself to this. This explains his refusal to speak directly about the participation of the Russian secret services in his disappearance. He is ready to come forward as a candidate against the existing power without, however, exceeding certain limits. This reveals the common ground he shares with his alleged opponents.

This entire episode says more about the character of the ruling regime in Russia today than a string of long polemical articles. It exposes a system in which no party, regardless of the extent of difference about official policy, has any interest in telling the people the truth and respecting their formal constitutional rights. There is no section of the ruling elite that is interested in conducting a consistent fight against the abuse of power by those in control and prepared to defend the democratic rights and liberties of Russian citizens. The Byzantine character of the Rybkin episode clearly reveals the demonstrative and arrogant contempt in which the ruling elite holds the mass of the population.

After Rybkin’s wife, Albina Nikolaievna, learned of his alleged “sick leave” in Kiev, she declared bitterly, “Poor Russia, if such people want to govern her.” There is more truth in her words than meets the eye. It is not about this or that presidential candidate. The Rybkin episode is clear proof that the Russian people do not have their own candidate in these elections, and that they are being robbed of any real possibility of taking control of their own fate.



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