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◀ **At his birthday party, one guest presented him with a heavy machinegun mounted on wheels, another gave him a walking stick with a dagger concealed in its handle** ▶
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Photographs by Dimitry Beliakov

Andrei Lugovoi stands accused of the notorious polonium murder of Alexander Litvinenko, but is feted as a hero in Russia. Mark Franchetti has spent months hunting and partying with, and interrogating...

BRITAIN'S MOST WANTED



A few days after the British government requested the extradition of Andrei Lugovoi on suspicion of killing Alexander Litvinenko, the former KGB officer poisoned with polonium in London last year, Britain's most wanted man spent a leisurely afternoon with friends and family at one of Moscow's most exclusive social events. Sipping white wine in a VIP box overlooking Moscow's racetrack as photographers took shots of him, Lugovoi placed bets and jumped up cheering when his nine-year-old son Yegor won £50.

Lugovoi appeared equally relaxed six weeks later when relations between Britain and Russia plunged to their lowest depths since the end of the cold war over Moscow's blunt refusal to hand him over: the country's constitution bars its citizens from being extradited.

And shortly after, as Britain expelled four Russian diplomats in protest and the Kremlin responded by kicking out four Brits, Lugovoi holidayed in luxury on the Black sea. Since he became Britain's most wanted man, his life, in short, has been one of endless VIP events, appearances on talk shows, and celebrity.

In a further snub to the British government, Lugovoi is standing for parliament in next Sunday's elections as No 2 to Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the controversial leader of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic party of Russia (LDPR). If elected, Lugovoi, who so far is not under investigation in Russia, would gain immunity from prosecution at home. The party may not win enough votes to stay in parliament, but polls show that his candidacy gave it a boost. Few may believe his vehement claims of innocence in Britain, but in Russia many will vote for him.

Over the past 10 months I have spent weeks with Lugovoi and Dmitry Kovtun, a childhood friend who was with him in London when he last met Litvinenko, on November 1, 2006, the day the former KGB officer was poisoned. The time with him has been intriguing, lavish and occasionally bizarre: at one dinner in a Moscow restaurant, drinking from a £180 bottle of red wine and puffing from a Cuban cigar, Lugovoi denied any involvement in the murder and argued he is the victim of a conspiracy hatched by Russia's enemies and British intelligence. On a hunting trip in a remote forest close to the Volga river, I watched the two men drink vodka and sing sentimental communist-



'Could I really have killed in cold blood then behave so calmly? I have a firm position: I'm innocent. I had nothing to do with it'



Previous pages: Lugovoi with a bodyguard in Moscow on November 2, 2007. Above: dining in style at a Moscow restaurant. Left: wearing a communist Young Pioneer tie at school in 1978

era songs around a camp fire. And at a party for Lugovoi's 41st birthday, one guest presented him with a 1937 heavy machinegun mounted on wheels; another gave him a walking stick encrusted with precious stones and gold, which concealed a dagger in its handle.

Lugovoi invited me backstage during the LDPR party conference at which he launched his political career. He also took me in his chauffeur-driven BMW to a compound outside Moscow to watch him fire from a gun as bodyguards from his security company trained in the background.

He answered hundreds of questions about his KGB past, his current business and his alleged involvement in Litvinenko's death. He never appeared to be off-guard and only once became agitated when I challenged his claims that he had nothing to do with Litvinenko's poisoning. Nor did he make a secret of why he granted me access: "I wanted you to see me for what I am and make your own conclusions. Could I really have

killed in cold blood then behave so calmly? I wanted you to watch how I behave, not only when I wear a tie but also when I sit by a fire and drink vodka. I have a very firm position: I'm innocent. I had nothing to do with it."

Spending time with Lugovoi has been a journey that confounded my expectations. I suspected him, then believed his denials, only to later become even more confused, all while coming to like him, despite all my mistrust.

I have also watched him change. Apparently genuinely bewildered when his name was first linked to Litvinenko's poisoning, only a few days before the former KGB officer died a slow and agonizing death last November, Lugovoi has since become increasingly bullish and self-confident, if not cocky. He once asked if I could procure as a memento a copy of a British daily that ran his photograph on its front page.

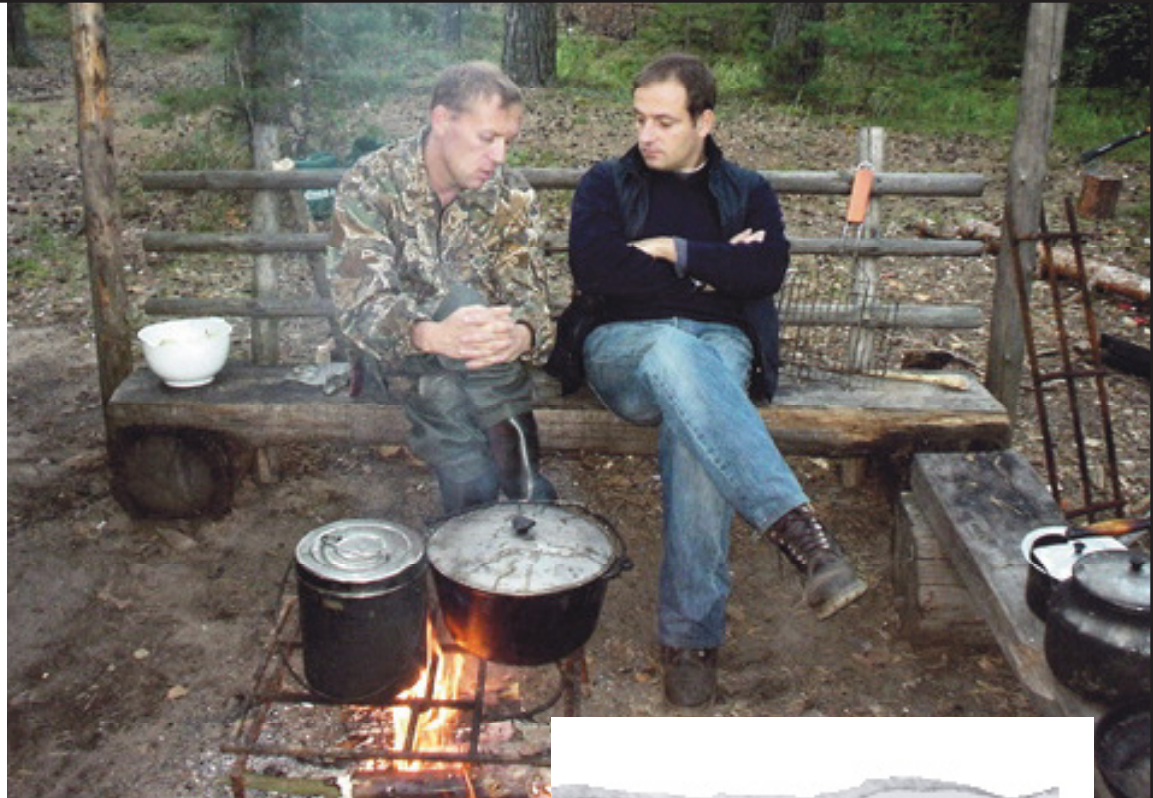
The full truth about who ordered Litvinenko's death or what role Lugovoi played in his murder, if any, is unlikely to be revealed. But in the story of a former KGB bodyguard turned businessman turned suspected killer turned celebrity, there are echoes of the narrative of modern Russia.

Lugovoi's world view, once enthusiastic about all things western, now increasingly distrusting and hostile, reflects those of millions of Russians. Similarly, his bullishness is indicative of Russia's growing assertiveness, as it seeks to regain some of the influence it lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. A millionaire businessman who is shadowed by bodyguards, he is also ►►► 61



Above: Lugovoi singing with his school band in 1982.

Right: with reporter Mark Franchetti on a hunting trip to the Volga delta



representative of a wealthy new elite born from the ashes of communism, which, as Lugovoi put it, “will be ruling Russia in the next 20 years”.

How is it possible, many will ask, that a man accused of the world’s first known assassination involving a radioactive substance can have a political future? “Who is Lugovoi to the potential Zhirinovskiy voter?” said Vladimir Pozner, one of Russia’s most respected political commentators. “If you believe he did murder Litvinenko, you say, ‘Good, Litvinenko was a traitor who should have been murdered, and this guy’s a hero.’ If you don’t believe he killed him, you say, ‘He is persecuted by people who hate us, the West, so he’s a hero.’ It’s a win-win situation.

“Unlike during communist times, the anti-western sentiment here is at grass-roots levels now. It’s more dangerous – it’s led to nationalism, chauvinism and even to neofascist views, because the West miscalculated in its attitude to Russia. After communism collapsed, the feeling was one of gleeful rubbing of hands. Many Russians felt that, ‘Look, we’ve got rid of this terrible system. We’ve taken the brunt of this. Greet us with open arms.’ But quite the opposite took place.”

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Andrei Konstantinovich Lugovoi was born into a patriotic military family. His grandfather was awarded a Soviet medal for his part in the 1945 battle for Berlin. His father served in the military and his brother was an officer on a nuclear submarine. His mother was a school teacher.

“Back in Moscow I joined the military college,” recalled Lugovoi, as he chopped wood during the hunting trip. Very much the leader of his group of old friends from the military, Lugovoi later cooked dinner on an open fire, sang and played the guitar. Our vodka supply of 15 bottles among eight ran out in 24 hours. “An officer’s son joined the military; it was taken for granted,” he went on. “Just as I was expected to join the Communist party, which I did at 18.”

Aged only 20, he was selected to join the KGB and tasked with the personal security of the country’s leadership. “In the West you think everyone here lived in fear of the KGB,” said Lugovoi as he stirred a fish soup, while Kovtun,

also the son of a military officer, sipped wine, dressed in camouflage and Prada boots. “Instead, most had huge respect for KGB officers because only the best were chosen. I was very proud. I was never a fervent believer in communism but the Soviet system had predictability.”

That security ended with the Soviet Union’s collapse. Millions lost their life’s savings to

Litvinenko may have fallen foul of ruthless Russian businessmen ▶ Andrei Lugovoi is under suspicion

‘I think the polonium was planted on us and left in the places we visited to frame us. Why? To discredit Russia and Putin’

hyperinflation. Crime and corruption became rampant. A few ruthless and well-connected businessmen turned fabulously rich while millions struggled to survive. “My father took the collapse very badly,” recalled Lugovoi. “Unlike myself, he was very ideological and we used to argue about the changes.”

Soon Lugovoi too became disillusioned. Travelling to the United States for the first time in 1992 as a bodyguard to Yegor Gaidar, the former liberal prime minister, accompanying Yeltsin on a US-Russia summit, he and his KGB colleagues exchanged Soviet cigarettes for Marlboros with the US agents guarding George Bush Snr. “One packet of US Marlboros was the equivalent of a fifth of my monthly salary,” recalled Lugovoi. “I had three children by then,” – he now has four – “and was expected to care for them on the equivalent of five packets of US cigarettes. That’s how impoverished the army elites and ordinary Russians had become.”

The KGB, which Yeltsin renamed the Federal Security Service (FSB) and broke up into separate agencies to reduce its power, suffered a huge brain drain. Russia’s secret policemen resigned in droves to work in the lucrative private sector. At a time when contract killings became the favoured method of settling disputes, security for Russia’s early tycoons was imperative. As their wealth and power grew, so

did their private armies of former KGB officers. They offered protection, connections and, crucially, sensitive information.

The murkier Russian business grew, the more shadowy their work. Gathering *kompromat* – dirt – on rivals, industrial espionage, eavesdropping, intimidation and blackmail were, and to some extent still are, commonplace.

As a bodyguard to the Russian prime minister, Lugovoi was well placed to find a new employer. Lobbying and seeking favours, politicians and businessmen paid Gaidar visits. Lugovoi met them as they paced in the waiting room. That is how he met Boris Berezovsky in 1993. Then Russia’s most controversial oligarch, with the best Kremlin contacts, Berezovsky later fell out with Putin and is now wanted by the Russians on charges of embezzlement. To the Kremlin’s fury he was granted political asylum in Britain.

The right opportunity came in 1996 when Lugovoi resigned to become head of security at ORT, a national television channel controlled by Berezovsky. His monthly salary shot from £250 to £2,500, plus a chauffeur-driven car. He was taken under the wing of Badri Patarkatsishvili, Berezovsky’s business partner.

As head of security, Lugovoi was embroiled in a ruthless battle for political influence between ORT and NTV, then Russia’s other privately owned national channel, which belonged

Right: Lugovoi graduates from military academy in 1983 at the age of 17

to Vladimir Gussinsky, a rival of Berezovsky's. "Phone tapping, surveillance, buying compromising documents – it all went on, I won't deny it. It was normal then," said Lugovoi.

Also employed by Berezovsky, not at ORT but as part of his private group of former KGB/FSB officers, was Alexander Litvinenko. An FSB organized-crime investigator, Litvinenko became close to Berezovsky when he was sent to probe a car-bomb assassination attempt that wounded the tycoon and killed his driver. At the time, Litvinenko and Lugovoi crossed paths but barely knew each other.

Their affiliation to Berezovsky became a liability when the tycoon turned fervent Putin critic. Litvinenko – who publicly accused the FSB of several crimes, including a plot to kill the tycoon – was briefly jailed. He later fled Russia, settling in London, from where, on Berezovsky's payroll, he sought to discredit Putin and the FSB.

Lugovoi also ran into trouble. Accused of plotting to help break free a jailed Berezovsky business partner, he too was imprisoned, for 15 months. Most believe the charges were trumped up, but in the wake of Litvinenko's death, his detractors, including Berezovsky, suspect that in jail, Lugovoi was either recruited or cut a deal with the FSB. He was released in 2002.

"There is a saying: 'There is no such thing as a former KGB man,'" said Andrei Vasiliev, editor of Kommersant, one of Russia's top dailies, once owned by Berezovsky. Vasiliev, who knows Lugovoi, used to be close to the tycoon. "I find Lugovoi's story a little strange. He was in prison, had a criminal record and suddenly he is okay, is allowed to do business, still having contact with Berezovsky. It raises questions."

Lugovoi, who likes to joke I am an undercover MI6 officer, strongly rejected the claims that he was recruited by the FSB, and cited examples of people who were jailed, including Berezovsky associates, but did well after their release. He started out as an entrepreneur with a private security company that hires out bodyguards to wealthy Russians. He still owns the business, which also provides consultancy to investors.

Until recently, Lugovoi was a shareholder in a soft-drinks company. He and his partners are building and selling industrial warehouses and are now seeking to buy swathes of agricultural land. He estimated the total worth of businesses he is a shareholder in to be around £100m.

"I'm a successful businessman," said Lugovoi, as we dined with an old KGB friend of his, now a business partner. "In the last seven years under Putin, we Russians have been given back what we lost: our self-respect and dignity."

It is a view shared by millions of Russians. "The word democracy, in Russian, is *democratia*," said Pozner, the political commentator. "When communism collapsed, everyone was saying, 'We want democracy.' But suddenly the stores were



'Why tell him the aim is to kill? If Lugovoi did take part in the operation, most likely he wasn't aware it would lead to death'

empty and people lost everything, while a few became billionaires. So people changed the word to *der-mo-cra-tia* – shit-o-cra-cy. Even today, if that's democracy, most say, "Then no thank you."

"Under Putin the message is that Russia is back, it's powerful again, you can't push it around like you did when the Soviet Union disintegrated. That's why he's so popular."

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It was business, not friendship, that reunited Litvinenko and Lugovoi in London, nearly 10 years after first meeting in Moscow. As Lugovoi recalls it, Litvinenko called him in November 2005, encouraging him to come to London to meet with a British company seeking a security consultant in Russia.

A month later the two former KGB officers met at Oxford Circus. Litvinenko took Lugovoi to the offices of Risc Management, a security consultancy, to discuss business in Russia. On a subsequent trip, Litvinenko introduced him to another big security company. Lugovoi, a fan of Sherlock Holmes novels, London and, in particular, Harrods, was soon impressed with the meetings. The two agreed that Litvinenko would receive a 20% cut of business deals he helped clinch in Britain.

In 2006, Lugovoi flew to London at least 10 times. On each trip he met Litvinenko, often more than once. Since the former FSB officer's death, Lugovoi has claimed that contacts Litvinenko introduced him to were MI5 officers seeking to recruit him as a source, which is not implausible. Lugovoi refused but continued to have dealings with Litvinenko. "I was briefly denied a UK visa, obviously to pressurise me. I was clinching other contracts in London. I feared I wouldn't be allowed back if I severed ties with Litvinenko's contacts too abruptly."

On October 16, 2006, Lugovoi flew to London with Kovtun, who was also looking for business contracts in Britain, and introduced him to Litvinenko. Scotland Yard has not spoken of its evidence against Lugovoi, but the first

traces of polonium-210, the isotope that killed Litvinenko, are believed to have been found in places Lugovoi and Kovtun visited on that trip.

Ten days later, Lugovoi again met with Litvinenko in London, while Kovtun flew to Germany. Polonium traces were found in Hamburg and London in places they visited.

On November 1, 2006, both men were back in London, this time to attend a football match. Lugovoi was with his family. According to him, he had no plans to see Litvinenko on that day but agreed to a brief meeting after the former FSB officer insisted they get together. In late afternoon, Lugovoi, Kovtun and Litvinenko met at the Pine Bar of the Millennium Hotel in Mayfair. According to British investigators, that is when Litvinenko was poisoned with polonium

210-laced tea which, 23 days later, killed him.

Again, polonium traces were found in locations visited by Lugovoi and Kovtun. It was discovered in about a dozen sites, including hotel rooms, planes and the Emirates stadium, where Lugovoi watched a game. Investigators believe there was more than one attempt to poison Litvinenko, hence the early traces.

As he wasted away, baffled British doctors struggled for two weeks to identify the poison. They finally discovered it was polonium just two hours before Litvinenko died.

Lugovoi and Kovtun were also contaminated and rushed to a Moscow hospital a few days after Litvinenko's death. Kovtun suffered the greatest exposure. "We were really shocked when we first heard of polonium," said Lugovoi.

It was in hospital that Scotland Yard investigators questioned the two, but bizarrely, never summoned them to London for further questioning. Lugovoi and Kovtun, who made a statement at the British embassy in Moscow when their names surfaced, even phoned one of the senior British investigators. "They questioned us once as witnesses, didn't make contact for months and suddenly announced that I'm the prime suspect and should be extradited to Britain," said Lugovoi. "Call that fair justice? They hardly encouraged me to go to London voluntarily."

Lugovoi's version of what might have happened is unconvincing. "I was framed. I suspect this was some British intelligence operation involving Litvinenko and possibly Berezovsky that went wrong. I was contaminated by Litvinenko or someone else, not the other way round. I think polonium was planted on us and left in places we visited, to frame us. Why? To discredit Russia and Putin. I'm certain of one thing: I'm innocent. I'm not a cold-blooded killer."

If, as Scotland Yard alleges, Lugovoi did poison Litvinenko, it is almost certain that he was in the dark about what substance he was handling. ➤➤➤ 65

How else can one explain that he contaminated not only himself and Kovtun, but his family too? Had he known he was dealing with a deadly killer that, if discovered, would leave traces, surely Lugovoi would have been more careful? Is it possible he did not know he was killing Litvinenko?

Assuming, as some suspect, that Lugovoi was part of a Russian special services operation, and killed Litvinenko in cold blood, would he not have demanded a cover, and travelled under a false name?

In Moscow, those who think he did poison Litvinenko say he could have been told the substance used to lace Litvinenko's tea was a truth serum or some debilitating drug, being used so Russian agents could question Litvinenko – who had links to Chechen insurgents and was considered a traitor – or lure him to London's Russian embassy.

I asked a former KGB general, now an MP, for his expert opinion. Assuming Litvinenko's death was ordered by Russian agents, as the British government privately suspects, why involve someone like Lugovoi? Why use polonium? And if you had been in charge of such an operation, what would you have told Lugovoi? "They say it would have been easier to kill Litvinenko with a gun or in a car accident," said Alexei Kondarov, who spent 22 years in the KGB. "Not true. Killing someone on foreign soil is difficult without getting caught. One thing is getting your agent close to the target. Much harder is pulling him out without leaving traces.

"Polonium is difficult to detect. It doesn't work immediately, so it's easy to get the agent out of the country."

Kondarov argued that if Russia was behind Litvinenko's death, Lugovoi was recruited because he had access to him. As a former KGB officer, "it would also be easier to come to an arrangement with him".

"What would I tell him?" speculated Kondarov. "As little as possible. Why tell him the aim is to kill? What if his hands start shaking? I'd say the powder will give Litvinenko dysentery or something. If Lugovoi took part in the operation, most likely he wasn't aware it would lead to death."

Kondarov stressed he did not know who was behind Litvinenko's murder. However, if this was the

work of his former colleagues, the success of the operation hinged on one crucial factor: whoever chose polonium as the weapon banked on it never being discovered.

"Moral aspect aside, had the polonium not been detected, it would have been a brilliant coup. The target's dead. No traces. And you've spread fear. They almost got away with it."

The FSB has vehemently denied any involvement in Litvinenko's death. Too small a fish, they say. But they have also claimed that he was an MI6 agent who sought to recruit former FSB colleagues to work for British intelligence. Some would say that would have been reason enough to kill him. Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the FSB, recently accused MI6 of seeking to influence Russian politics.

At a time when Russia and Britain have both stepped up their spying against each other, what could be a more potent message of Russia's resurgence than killing one of its "agents" in London and – had the polonium not been found – leave no trace? If so, Litvinenko's death had nothing to do with what he might have known – most say he had no secrets – but is linked to a new war between Russian and British intelligence.

Lugovoi has often asked me if I think he killed Litvinenko. I confronted him with the theory, which I support, that he did murder but is not a cold-blooded killer. I told him I think he was recruited by Russia's secret service but was tricked and used without his full knowledge. He did not flinch. He again voiced his innocence, and agreed he was framed, but by MI5. "C'mon, Andrei, we both know that if you did take part in Litvinenko's murder, you are hardly going to tell me, are you?" I often said to him. Every time he smiled a wide, spontaneous grin. For me, that has always been revealing.

Russia will never hand over Lugovoi. For now, at least, his star is rising. Making accusations against the British, running for parliament, all seem to keep him in the public eye. Since he knows too well what prison is like, that is probably his best protection ■

Mark Franchetti reports on Andrei Lugovoi for a BBC This World special, Britain's Most Wanted, to be shown on BBC2 at 7pm tonight



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