

A Death in Riga

How a Russian mafia kingpin's career spans both the looting of Latvia's Parex bank and the subversion of American politics

On 24 May 2010 Latvian lawyer Ainars Platacis left his office in Riga and disappeared. His Mercedes was found on 25 May near his home and looked as if he had just stepped out of the vehicle for a moment. It was unlocked and the keys were in the ignition. He had left his jacket with a wallet and some credit cards but no cash in the vehicle, along with a computer. The car was abandoned near the house of Julijs Kruminis, a Latvian businessman who had worked at Riga film studio and Mosfilm in Moscow. The police have failed to establish why he died but do not rule out murder. However his death stands at the centre of a series of events linking the mafia connected to Parex Bank with Russian interference in the US election.

Platacis had reportedly been threatened by Grigorijs Rabinovics (aka Grigory Rabinovich) a Latvian businessman who is also one of the leaders of the Russian Taganskaia Mafia shortly before he died. Rabinovics had faced trial for making threats against several people in 2009 according to the Latvian media but the case was closed in January 2010. He had previously owned a fashion retailer Global Fashion Group which ran several clothing outlets in Latvia. He had also, however, purchased 400 000 shares in Parex bank in 2003 via his firm Bastions ZS and bank insiders describe him as being like a Godfather to the bank's owners, Krasovickis and Kargins. .

Subsequently the bank became part of the machinery deployed by Rabinovics as he expanded his Russian business empire along with individuals reputedly linked to the Taganskaia Mafia. In 2006 he began manoeuvres aimed at capturing the Moskva store in the Russian capital in its entirety having positioned himself as its major shareholder. In the that year Parex issued two loans to the store, one in the spring for EUR 3.87m with a further EUR 15.67m loan being issued in September. Subsequently according to the Russian media a firm called Spektor which was owned by Rabinovics and had shares in the store reported the Moskva firm for insolvency. Rabinovics was seeking to wrest control from the then majority shareholder Dmitri Ulyanitsky. His partners in the attempted takeover reportedly included Igor Zhirnokleev Mafia and Aleksandr Romanov who were both key figures in the Taganskaia mafia. Ulyanitsky subsequently alleged that Zhirnokleev had demanded money to "protect" the store and compelled him to sign contracts worth \$100000 per month with a security firm. The head of the store's legal department Andrey Bralyuk who tried to ward off its seizure was beaten up on 10 February 2009 and died in hospital. In March 2009 Aleksandr Torshin the Russian banker and politician and a friend of Romanov's intervened ostensibly to ask for the conflict to be investigated. Parex bank was applying pressure during this period in tandem with the alleged threats from Ulyanitsky.

The loans between Parex and Rabinovics were not solely deployed as weapons in his predatory manoeuvres in Moscow. They were also, it could be argued, able to assist the owners of Parex bank to conceal assets when it collapsed in 2008. Rabinovics's own business SIA Global Fashion Group (GFG) was loaned money by Parex on December 18 2008, and was declared bankrupt on 23 December 2008. The entirety of SIA Global Fashion Group's assets were pledged as collateral to secure the loan of 9.4m Lats (which had an exchange rate of approximately 0.75 against the pound in this period). Parex also provided loans to the same value to three other companies linked to GFG, these being the Latvian registered General Investment Corporation, Hermitage, and the UK registered Heddington Trade Limited. The accounts of the British registered