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Former policeman 'carried out Georgiy Gongadze murder on behalf of Leonid Kuchma'

A top-ranking former policeman has confessed to carrying out Ukraine's most infamous post-Soviet murder, claiming he was acting on the orders of Leonid Kuchma, the former president.



Ukrainian reporter Georgiy Gongadze (L), together with the editor of his Ukrainskaya Pravda internet newspaper Alyona Pritula Photo: REUTERS

In closed-door testimony at his own trial this week, Olexiy Pukach claimed that he murdered famous investigative journalist Georgiy Gongadze in 2000 at the behest of Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's president from 1994-2005.

His testimony opens a new chapter in a murder case that played a key role in ending the autocratic 10-year reign of Mr Kuchma, ushering in a period of reform and turmoil.

The Kuchma government's inability to solve the murder at the time set the stage for the country's 2004 Orange Revolution during which protesters brandished placards demanding to know what happened to the 31-year-old crusading journalist.

Mr Pukach's allegation is strongly denied by lawyers for Mr Kuchma, 73. But it comes at a time when the embattled former president has already been charged with involvement in the killing. It is likely to complicate his efforts to clear his name.

A lawyer acting for Mr Gongadze's widow urged Mr Pukach, who has confessed to strangling and beheading the dead journalist with an axe, to back his words with proof. "Naming the names is not enough," said Valentina Telychenko, the lawyer. "The circumstances need to be properly described."

The murder of Mr Gongadze, who specialised in uncovering corruption, remains one of the most horrific crimes to have been committed in post-Soviet Ukraine. The journalist was

kidnapped on September 16 2000 after leaving a friend's flat in Kiev. Two months later, his headless and badly disfigured corpse was found in a forest 40 miles from the Ukrainian capital.

Mr Kuchma has always denied any involvement in the killing. But a recording made public soon after the murder suggested he had a strong motive. In it, Mr Kuchma was heard telling two colleagues that he was deeply irritated by the journalist's writings.

The three men were even heard discussing ways of silencing Mr Gongadze, including kidnapping him and taking him to Chechnya.

Mr Kuchma eventually admitted the voice on the tape was his but insisted it had been selectively edited to distort its meaning. His lawyer, Viktor Petrunenko, said that Mr Pukach's claims about the former president's alleged involvement in the murder were slanderous. "His motive for slander is obvious," he said. "It is to cast himself as an unthinking individual without his own free will who carried out somebody else's orders so that he can avoid harsh punishment such as life imprisonment."

Mr Kuchma's supporters have claimed that the accusations against him are politically-motivated revenge ordered by Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's current president. Mr Yanukovich has strongly denied that.