

# Falling in Russia



Ravil Maganov, CEO of Russia's private oil giant Lukoil – and an opponent of the war in Ukraine – died after falling six stories from a Moscow hospital window. His death was ruled a suicide.

by Michael Curtis

**“Courage,”** wrote Winston Churchill, “is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all others.” Throughout history that quality has been exhibited to uphold and defend the moral standard of life. The story is still honored of the battle at Thermopylae, 480 B.C., when 300 Spartans, assisted by a small group of Greeks, defended the mountain pass of Thermopylae against the invasion of the Persian King Xerxes. In the three day assault the Persians killed 298 of the Spartans, and technically the Greek combination was beaten, but the gallant

defiance and demonstration of courage was the start of future victories of Greeks, finally beating the Persians at the battle of Platea 479 B.C.

The modern counterpart in the display of courage, the most outstanding factor in contemporary international affairs, has been the Ukrainian response to the invasion of the country by Russia, starting in February 24, 2022, and the extraordinary leadership, physical and moral of Volodymyr Zelensky. The Ukrainian president is at this moment the "human conscious," and his courage will remain an immortal example. The heroic Ukrainian defense is a majestic demonstration that aggression must be opposed, that unprovoked acts of aggression must not succeed, must be countered to prevent further aggression, and must be punished.

Ukraine to survive needs material and political support. The democratic world is aware that it must assist, and keep insisting, on aid to help its courageous defense.

The outcome of the fighting is unpredictable, whether ousting the Russians, liberation of territory taken by the Russians, or negotiations. Much is unclear, such as the number of Russians killed since the start of the invasion, in marines, intelligence units, elite paratroopers, combat pilots: the projection by the British defense minister of 80,000 casualties appears too large. Equally uncertain is the fate of Europe's largest nuclear power plant, Zaporizhzhia, occupied by Russian forces but run by Ukrainian engineers. Is Russia using the plant as a shield, storing weapons, and launching attacks from it, or has Russian shelling led to the shutdown of one of the reactors of the plant? International inspectors must continue to examine the compound. It is probable that Russians have been using the plant in order to bomb Ukrainian towns,

There are a multitude of issues that are relevant to the conflict in Ukrainian aspects, but two comments may be here

allowed: most vital is continuation of Western assistance and resolution to persist in aid of Ukraine; and the strange nature of recent events in Russia, the virus of suspicious deaths of critics of the policies of Vladimir Putin.

First, is the question of the determination of the West to continue the necessary policy of support for Ukraine, persist in supply of weapons to Ukraine, to continue the strategy of taking the fight to the Russians, imposing sanctions on Russia, quit buying Russian oil and gas, to support the Ukrainian struggle for existence, conscious of the overwhelming Russian superiority in troop numbers and weaponry.

Nations habitually disagree on what it means to be committed to a principle or policy: U.S. officials still differs over the guideline of George Washington's dictum of not being involved in European wars and polices. Those differences have been shown on many occasions: French withdrawal from membership of the NATO military command: U.S. refusal to agree to the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, or the results of the Geneva Conference on the Korean war in 1954, or of the climate accords in Paris in 2015. Critics indicate that American history is full of records of the signing but not ratified or of unfulfilled treaties with Native Americans.

Nevertheless, the U.S., whether led by Democrats or Republicans, and the democratic world must continue and persist in support of Ukraine. The West must reject the idea that Putin will engage in nuclear blackmail. Western countries must avoid reduction of commitment, or breakage of promises, or non-ratification of commitment.

In 1975 and 1979 British television featured a sit com *Fawlty Towers* written by John Cleese and Connie Booth that became highly popular. It featured a rude, inept, hotel manager who was troubled by people insisting on staying at hotels, and whose incompetence leads to accidents and farcical situations

with the eccentric characters who appear. In present day Russia, faulty hotels and windows have become common. In what might be amusing, if it were not deadly, the country is experiencing what might appear as the scenario of a mystery thriller by Agatha Christie, the setting where prominent individuals, all critics of Putin, suddenly meet an unexpected demise. Clearly, the international community needs Hercule Poirot with his grey cells to investigate.

The spread of this pandemic, an unusual virus, may be an indication of internal turmoil within Russia, and increasing opposition to Putin's authoritarianism and connected with economic and military problems Russia is experiencing. The mysterious deaths, though not officially approved, are probably more than subtle warnings to Russians to support the war. Citizens understand that what is crucial is not who fired the shot, but who paid for the bullet. The likelihood is that the deaths were carried out by financing secret operations of security services and armed forces with approval of Putin.

The symbolic bullet has reached prominent individuals. One surprising recipient, seemingly unrelated to other victims is Darya Dugina, pro-Putin journalist, daughter of the ultranationalist theorist Alexander Dugin, who was car bombed in the center of Moscow. Russian authorities have improperly blamed the event on Ukraine.

It is noticeable that many of the deceased have been related to Lukoil, the Russian oil company that has called for an end to the Russian war in Ukraine and argued for the conflict to be resolved through the negotiation process and diplomatic means.

The head of Lukoil, 67-year-old Ravil Maganov, who has been critical of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, died after falling from the sixth-floor window of the Central Clinical Hospital in Moscow. He was reported as being hospitalized for a heart attack. He was the second senior official who worked

for Lukoil to die unexpectedly. In May 2022, former head of Lukoil Alexander Subbotin, supposedly treating his hangover with toad venom, was found dead in a shaman's house in a city outside of Moscow.

On August 14, 2022, the Latvian-American, 52-year-old Dan Rapoport fell from a luxury building in Georgetown, D.C. He was wearing orange flip flops, and black hat and had \$2,620 in cash. He had run a bar in Moscow, fled Russia, moved to the U.S., and then settled in Kyiv. Rapoport was a critic of the Russian system, of Russian equipment and technology, and was a supporter of opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Three days before his death, Rapoport posted an image on Facebook of Marlon Brando playing Colonel Kurtz in the film *Apocalypse*, with the words, "the horrors, the horrors."

The nationalist, the 35-year-old Yegor Prosvirimin, a known critic of Putin and of the Russian system which he predicted would collapse, fell naked from the 5<sup>th</sup> floor window of a residential building in Moscow.

Biologist Alexander Kagansky , 45, fighter of cancer, fell in his underwear from the 14th floor window, of a high-rise residential building. A stab wound was found in his body.

Mikhail Lesin, former prime minister and former media adviser to Putin, in 2015, died of a "blunt force" injuries of the head, in Dupont Circle hotel in D.C.

Others who died. In April 19, 2022, oligarch Sergey Protosenya, former manager of energy giant Novatek was found hanged in the garden of his home in Catalonia, in Spain.

On April 20, Vladislav Ayayev, former Kremlin official and VP of Gazprombank , was found dead in his luxury Moscow apartment.

Leonard Shulman, head of transport at Gazprom., died in the bathroom of his cottage.

The conclusion is clear. The U.S. and democracies must continue their material and political support for Ukraine, even though it may mean a cost in the life-style and standard and shortfalls of their countries.

The U.S. should not be deterred by the Russian threat of using nuclear weapons or mass destruction weapons or "grave consequences," or cut off of North Stream gas supplies to all countries that impose sanctions if its existence is challenged. It is aware of two factors: it must ensure production and supply of military inventories, of critical weapons such as Javelins and artillery rounds; it may have to supply part of stockpiles that have been developed for national defense.

Thousands of Russians, queuing with red roses, paid their respects to Mikhail Gorbachev, the architect of reform who broke up the Soviet Union, who died aged 91. He will not be given a state funeral. Putin who declared that the breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century has no room in his schedule to attend the funeral. In contrast, the former leader understood that Russian hegemony in eastern Europe could not be sustained except by coercion, tanks, exile or death of opponents. The Western hope is that Russia can revert to the principles of Gorbachev: glasnost, openness, and perestroika, restructuring.