

How Ukrainian journalist Maks Levin

WAS EXECUTED BY RUSSIAN FORCES

Investigation report by

Arnaud FROGER

head of RSF's investigation desk

Patrick CHAUVEL

French photo-journalist





*RSF locates the crime scene and
burned car of Ukrainian journalist Maks
Levin, who was killed on 13 March
2022 in a forest north of Kyiv.
28 May 2022 © Patrick Chauvel*

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) gathered the evidence on which this report is based in the course of the investigation it carried out in Ukraine from 24 May to 3 June 2022. RSF handed over the evidence to the Ukrainian judicial authorities and will also provide them with a copy of this report. The evidence gathered by RSF indicates that the Ukrainian photo-journalist Maks Levin and the friend who was with him were executed in cold blood by Russian forces, probably after being interrogated and tortured, on the day they went missing, 13 March 2022. Levin's body and car were found on 1 April in a forest located on what was the front line north of Kyiv.



Ukrainian journalist Maks Levin © Markijan Lyseiko

THE REPORT'S HIGHLIGHTS

- The photos of the crime scene, the evidence RSF found there and RSF's observations attest to the fact that the journalist Maks Levin and his friend Oleksiy Chernyshov were executed.
- Levin was very probably shot by one of the bullets that RSF found at the crime scene.
- Material evidence was found of a Russian presence very close to the crime scene including food package, plastic cutlery which could still contain DNA traces.
- Those responsible for murdering Levin and Chernyshov may have been members of the Russian Guard's 106th airborne division or a special forces unit.
- RSF was interviewed by members of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) who are in charge of the Ukrainian investigation into this double murder.
- RSF provided the Ukrainian investigators with several dozen photos and nine pieces of evidence, including three bullets, Chernyshov's identity documents, and items left by Russian soldiers found near the crime scene.

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Ukrainian photo-journalist Maks Levin, killed near Kyiv on 13 March 2022.
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1/ MAKS LEVIN, MISSING JOURNALIST FOUND DEAD

Maks Levin was a renowned Ukrainian photojournalist. He was 40 years old when he went missing on 13 March 2022, while covering the Russian invasion and the fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces in the Kyiv region.

Levin's body and the body of a friend who was with him at the time, the soldier Oleksiy Chernyshov, were found on 1 April in a forest near Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka, a village 30 km north of Kyiv. According to a statement¹ issued by the Vyshhorod prosecutor's office on 2 April, Levin was killed by two shots fired by Russian soldiers using small arms.

In mid-March, the Russians had not yet abandoned their offensive against Kyiv. Major battles were taking place north of the capital. Ever since the start of the war, Levin had been helping to document² the consequences of the Russian invasion by providing media outlets with photos and videos that he was taking with his drone. According to one of RSF's first sources, Levin had lost track of his drone and was looking for it when he was killed. Right at the start of the war, in late February, Levin had spent several days working as a fixer for the French war reporter Patrick Chauvel, who was RSF's partner in this investigation.

¹ Vyshhorod prosecutor's office statement: <https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/na-kiyivshhini-okupanti-vbili-ukrayinskogo-fotozurnalista-trivaje-rozsliduvannya>

² Ukrainian city of Borodyanka, attacked and bombarded by the Russians, and filmed for Reuters by Maks Levin using a drone. <https://twitter.com/PeteOnlyPete/status/1499439684853936134>

2 / WHAT LEVIN WAS DOING IN THE RUN-UP TO 13 MARCH

In the course of this investigation, RSF identified and met a dozen of Levin's close relatives, friends and colleagues. This enabled us to establish how he was spending his time, identify his motives more accurately, locate the crime scene, collect evidence and begin reconstructing what may have happened to him.

Journalist, not a soldier

All those interviewed by RSF described Levin as a seasoned reporter who did not perform any military activity. His proximity to certain soldiers was attributable to the friendships he forged while covering the war in the Donbas in 2014 when, like three other reporters and photographers, he miraculously escaped the siege of Ilovaisk by leaving in a humanitarian convoy that was fired on by pro-Russian separatists.

Levin's partner and a military commander to whom he was close confirmed to RSF that Levin was not enrolled in any unit. Photos of his body obtained by RSF show him without any military attire or equipment. However, he was wearing a blue armband similar to those worn by Ukrainian soldiers. Why? Journalists on the front line have to wear this armband so that Ukrainian soldiers could recognise them as "friendlies". It has been confirmed that Levin may have at times provided images taken by his drone, in particular, images showing Russian positions, to the Ukrainian forces on the front line where he was working. But those close to him and the images he had been selling to media outlets since the start of the Russian invasion confirm that his use of his drone was above all journalistic in nature.

According to those close to him, Levin was a courageous journalist who was very committed to the community of Ukrainian press photographers and reporters. He was actively involved in efforts to eliminate obstacles to coverage of the conflict and denounce violations of freedom of expression. He had also created discussion groups for journalists who were traumatised by the war in the Donbas. Over the years, he had established himself as a leading figure in the community of Ukrainian war reporters.

How he spent his last four days

| 10 MARCH 2022 |

Accompanied by his friend, the soldier Oleksiy Chernyshov, and at least one other soldier we have chosen not to identify, Levin went to a forest north of Kyiv, located between the village of Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka to the north, the village of Moshchun to the south, the River Irpin to the west and the River Dnieper to the east. He dispatched his drone towards a Russian-occupied zone, almost certainly a zone towards the west or towards the village de Moshchun to the south. This zone had been occupied by Russian artillery for the past few days. When he recalled the drone, its battery was running down and it ended up falling in the forest before it could reach him. A few minutes after Levin activated the GPS tracker in order to locate the drone, the Russians began firing at him and his companions. They realised they had been spotted. As a result, they were forced to turn back and leave the forest without recovering the drone.

| 11 MARCH 2022 |

Levin spent much of the day with his girlfriend. He said he had seen something important in the images that his mobile phone had received from the drone, but the quality of the images was poor. The last image that he shared with one of his friends showed Russian armoured vehicles near houses in a village. He was really keen to find his drone in order to recover its contents. At around 5 p.m., he went to meet soldier friends at their base near Kyiv and spent the night with them.

I 12 MARCH 2022 I

Levin went with some soldiers to Demydiv, a village to the north of Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka. He told his partner he was going to turn off his phone and would not be reachable. Since the start of the war, Levin and his partner has established a routine in which he texted her with his news every two or three hours. The area where he went that day was very hostile and the fighting was fierce. The Russian troops were trying to continue their advance on Kyiv from the north and were now less than 30 km from the capital. They were constructing pontoons over the River Irpin and were firing repeatedly in order to give themselves cover. When Levin returned to the base at around 2 p.m., one of his friends asked him if he would be available the next day to collect a package that was arriving by train. He replied that he did not know where he would be and was not sure if he would be available. He did not find anyone to go with him into the forest to recover his drone that day.

I 13 MARCH 2022 I

Levin again told his girlfriend he would be unreachable, as he usually did when he was following an operation or was in an area with a poor signal.

At 11:23 a.m., Levin sent her a voice message asking her for her news. It was his last message.

At 12:30 p.m., his girlfriend replied, sending him photos. They were not received or were not viewed.

According to the last position of the car registered by its GPS device, it was travelling at 30 kms per hour in a westerly direction in the forest to the south of Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka. It was 12:51 p.m.

Levin was thereafter unreachable and gave no further sign of life.

3 / EVIDENCE OF A DOUBLE EXECUTION



Screen grab from the GPS device in journalist Maks Levin's car showing its last position on 13 March 2022.

I SEVERAL PEOPLE CLOSE TO LEVIN BEGAN TRYING TO LOCATE HIM ON 14 MARCH.

Attempts to find out from the Russian and Ukrainian authorities whether he had been taken prisoner by Russian soldiers were unsuccessful. The forest area where Levin and his friend went missing had meanwhile become the front line between the opposing forces. The fighting prevented any attempt to visit the presumed scene of their disappearance for nearly two weeks. According to RSF's sources, a Ukrainian search on 31 March finally located Levin's burned-out car, which was identifiable by its licence plate, and a burned body, which at that point could not be identified. Because of the still frequent gunfire and artillery fire in the area, the scene was not thoroughly searched that day.

I THREE POLICEMEN CONDUCTING A NEW SEARCH ON 1 APRIL

found another body, located at some distance from the car and the burned body. It was Levin's. Subsequent examination of the first body confirmed that it was Chernyshov's. The three policemen took photos, gathered evidence and made observations. The bodies were sent to the morgue in Vyshhorod, on the northern outskirts of Kyiv. Levin's body was formally identified by his brother, who confirmed to RSF that he did this. The Ukrainian authorities say autopsies were carried out but have provided no details. Levin's death certificate, which RSF examined, contains no details about the precise circumstances resulting in his death.

The photos

During their visit to Ukraine, RSF's investigators obtained the photos taken when the crime scene was discovered on 1 April. After confirming their authenticity, RSF examined them and noted the following:

- Levin's car had been set on fire. It had bullet impacts. Only the front passenger door was open. The car's trunk was closed.
- Chernyshov's body was lying face down on the ground, near the open car door. Much of it was burned.
- Maks Levin's body was lying on its back. There were no burn marks. Three bullet impacts were visible, one in the chest and two in the head.
- Levin's mobile phone, papers, shoes and bulletproof vest were not found, and were probably stolen. But his helmet was found near the crime scene in the course of the search carried out on 30 May, during RSF's visit.
- Items belonging to him were found at the scene, including his Swiss army knife and headlamp.
- Levin is wearing beige trousers with pockets, a black jacket, glasses and a blue armband.

The crime scene

On 26 May, RSF went to the forest where Levin and Chernyshov had been found dead. There were strong grounds for suspecting that the Russians had left mines and explosive devices when they pulled out (and two booby-traps were found during one of the two subsequent visits). Therefore, the RSF delegation (which included several persons close to Levin) was systematically accompanied by members of the security forces who had agreed to assist our investigation. The goal was to find the crime scene, to compare our own observations with the information from the photos taken by the policemen who discovered the crime scene on 1 April, to gather any evidence or clues, and to reconstruct the sequence of events that led Levin and Chernyshov to the place where they were killed.



*Bullet impact in the tree behind journalist Maks Levin's burned car, identified by RSF on 28 May 2022 in the forest near Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka, Ukraine.
© Patrick Chauvel*



One of the bullets RSF found in Maks Levin's burned car on 28 May 2022.
© Florent Marcie

During the first visit on 26 May, a three-hour search starting from the car's last recorded GPS point failed to locate the crime scene. But a second search two days later, on 28 May, did locate it. **These were our observations:**

- Levin's burned car, a Ford Maverick, was positioned sideways beside a dirt road.
- The car had 14 bullet impacts, nearly all located at the back and on the right (passenger) side. They indicated that the shots came from a relatively limited area, mainly in the forest behind the vehicle.
- Bullet impacts were found on tree trunks located in an axis going from the rear to the front of the car. From this, it can be concluded that the car was already stationary when most of the shooting that left visible impacts on the car began.
- Two burned bullets were found inside the car. One was a small (5.45 mm) calibre bullet characteristic of the Kalashnikovs used by the Russian army. The other was a bigger calibre bullet of the kind used by Russia's special forces, RSF was told by an experienced military source familiar with the munitions used by the Russians.
- Traces of Chernyshov's burned body were still visible on the ground. A gasoline jerrycan, very probably the one Levin had in his car, was found nearby. Chernyshov's body was located some two to three metres from the passenger side of the car.
- Chernyshov's identity papers were discovered in the pocket of his military fatigues, of which the partially or totally burned remnants were still scattered on the ground.
- The ceramic plates of Chernyshov's bulletproof vest, which were also found, showed no trace of any impact. A security source later confirmed to RSF that he had been shot in the head.
- The location of Levin's body was identified with the help of photos of the crime scene. It was located around 17 metres behind the car.
- Three Russian trenches were identified at the last crossroads Levin's car passed through, located at the point where the corners of forest map squares 123 and 127 touch, a point marked by a stone in the forest. Evidence of the Russian presence was observed (including food packaging, plastic cutlery, cigarette packs and instructions on how to fire rockets). RSF took only a small sample of this evidence.

At RSF's request, a Ukrainian team carried out a third search with metal detectors on 30 May. **They discovered the following:**

- A 5.45 mm calibre bullet was found buried 15 cm in the ground at the exact spot where Levin's body had been found. A bullet casing was also discovered close by.
- A new Russian position was identified around 70 metres into the forest, in the direction from where most of the shots came. However, the search team could not approach the position because they spotted the presence of explosive devices.
- Levin's helmet (which was later formally identified by two persons close to him) was found on the other side of the dirt road from where the car was located.



*Remains of a Russian soldier's military uniform found by RSF in Moshchun, Ukraine, on 29 May 2022.
© Patrick Chauvel*

The crime scene photos and observations show that the two men were undoubtedly executed in cold blood, possibly after being tortured. Some of the evidence, including the position of Chernyshov's body, could indicate that he was burned alive. Observations based on the photos of Levin's body and the discovery of a bullet buried 15 cm in the ground at the exact spot where his body was found indicate that he was probably killed by one or two gunshots fired from a close range when the journalist was already on the ground.

A lot of evidence, two scenarios

In the absence of eyewitnesses, it is impossible to determine, with certainty, the precise sequence of events that led to the deaths of Levin and Chernyshov. Nonetheless, two possible scenarios can be developed from the information that RSF has gathered and from its observations.

HYPOTHESIS NO. 1: GUNNED DOWN IN RUSSIAN-OCCUPIED TERRITORY

On 13 March, Maks Levin did not manage to convince the group of soldiers he was with to accompany him into the forest to recover his drone. His friend, Oleksiy Chernyshov, nonetheless agreed to go with him to provide him with protection. He was carrying an AK-74 and was wearing a military uniform. The two men advanced into the forest towards the area where the drone had fallen.

By that time, the Russians had already taken up position in several villages adjoining the forest, especially in the west, as RSF was able to confirm during its field investigation. It was clear that the Russian forces had scouts and outposts in the forest, because of the fighting taking place there, but it was hard to know exactly where the soldiers were located. The front line was very mobile. The Russian and Ukrainian forces alternated in occupying certain positions.

When Levin and Chernyshov reached the crossroads where the corners of forest map squares 123 and 127 touch, they may have passed in front of the first Russian outpost without seeing the soldiers hidden in a trench. But the soldiers saw them. Levin's Ford Maverick headed west, towards the Russian-occupied zone. The soldiers in the trench reported the suspect vehicle to other positions. Levin stopped his car at the roadside, 250 metres further down the road, where it was found. He got out and began to look for his drone, moving away from the car. The situation seemed calm. The two men did not know they had been spotted, which could explain why Levin wasn't wearing his bulletproof vest with the "press" label. Chernyshov stayed in the passenger seat or in the immediate vicinity of the car, next to its right front door.

Meanwhile, the Russian soldiers had time to discreetly approach. In firing position, they easily spotted Levin, who was looking for his drone. His blue armband may have led them to think he was a Ukrainian soldier. Identified and completely exposed, he received the first shot head on, in the chest, and fell on his back. Hearing this shot, Chernyshov got out of the car, which was then targeted with a burst of gunfire, and he was quickly hit by a bullet in the head.


The Russian soldiers approached their targets, who were now lying on the ground. Levin may not have already been dead, and was executed while on the ground by means of two shots to the head fired at close range. Some of his personal effects were stolen, including his shoes, phone, papers, bulletproof vest and helmet.

The Russian soldiers used the jerrycan of gasoline in Levin's car – the jerrycan later found at the crime scene – to set fire to the car. They also doused Chernyshov's body with gasoline and set fire to it. Perhaps because there was not enough gasoline, or because the shooting could have alerted Ukrainian soldiers in the forest, they abandoned the site without setting fire to Levin's body, located at a distance of 17 metres. As Levin's helmet was not of very good quality, it was abandoned a bit further away by the Russian soldier who had taken it.

HYPOTHESIS NO. 2: INTERROGATION THAT TURNED INTO EXECUTION

The Russian soldiers fired warning shots at Levin's car when they saw it reach the crossroads at the corner of forest map squares 123 and 127. Chernyshov was disarmed after the car stopped. Offering any resistance was out of the question. Russian soldiers got into the car and, as the crossroads was located on the front line, they got Levin to drive a bit further into the forest and told him to stop at the side of the road. This could explain the careless way it was parked – contrary to Levin's custom – and the fact that, when his body was found on 1 April, he was still wearing his glasses, which he normally only wore when driving.

Once the car had stopped, the two men were interrogated separately – Chernyshov near the car and Levin a bit further away – so that neither could hear what the other said. In this hypothesis, the Russian soldiers were trying to find out who Levin really was, since he was in civilian dress and had a “press” bulletproof vest, which he was not wearing or had been forced to remove. The Russian soldiers may also have been trying to obtain information about the nearby Ukrainian positions. To make the men talk, shots were fired, including at the car. Chernyshov was doused with gasoline, threatened, and finally burned alive – as suggested by the position of his body in some of the photos taken at the crime scene. Both men were finally executed by shots to the head. The car was searched, its contents were stolen, and then it was set on fire with what was left of the gasoline.



*A trench that had been used by Russian soldiers near the last crossroad that Maks Levin's car went through. It is located 250 metres from the place where Levin's car and body were found. 28 May 2022.
© Patrick Chauvel*



*Food packaging and plastic cutlery used by Russian soldiers that RSF found on 28 May 2022 near a trench close to the spot where journalist Maks Levin's car passed on 13 March.
© Patrick Chauvel*

4 / WHO WERE THE DOUBLE MURDER'S PERPETRATORS?

A village of 2,000 inhabitants on the edge of the forest in which Levin was killed, Moshchun was very probably the rear base of the Russian soldiers sent into these woods. RSF went to Moshchun on 29 May to complete its field investigation. It is a key to understanding Levin's motives as a journalist and for any attempt to identify his killers. About half of its houses were destroyed or damaged by the bombardments.

Very few of the inhabitants stayed there during the Russian occupation that began at the end of February. RSF nonetheless managed to meet several of them in order to get some background to the events. On 6 March, the Russians gained control of the entire village and began installing tanks and other armoured vehicles there, turning the village into one of their most forward bases for their attempt to take Kyiv. The capital is less than 20 km to the south.

According to the residents we interviewed, the village was being bombarded five or six times a day. The Russian soldiers occupied the homes of the residents and parked their armoured vehicles next to their homes or in the courtyards, using them as civilian shields in an attempt to escape the Ukrainian bombardments. The last available photo taken by Levin with his drone shows exactly this kind of situation. It may have been taken in Moshchun or nearby. As the quality of this photo was poor, Levin clearly wanted to obtain more usable content by recovering his drone and its memory card.

We learned that the Russian Guard's 106th airborne division was in this area in mid-March. This is one of Russia's four parachute divisions. Commanded by Col. Vladimir Vyacheslavovich Selivyorstov, it has more than 12,000 men. Moshchun's residents also mentioned the presence of "Buryat" soldiers, a reference to members of an ethnic group of Mongolian origin. Several Russian army units have many members from this ethnic group. They include the 64th Motorised Rifle Brigade, which is based near the Chinese border and which is suspected of being responsible for war crimes in the Ukrainian city of Bucha³, located just 13 km southwest of Moshchun. Finally, one of our local sources told us that Levin's phone was activated in Moshchun on 16 March, three days after it was taken when he was killed. At this point in the investigation, we are not in a position to confirm this claim. On the other hand, it is very probable that those who killed Levin and Chernyshov stayed in this village between the beginning and end of March, until the Russians withdrew from the region.

³ https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2022/04/09/guerre-en-ukraine-a-boutcha-la-plongee-en-enfer-de-la-rue-ivana-franka_6121371_3210.html

5 / PURSUING THE INVESTIGATION

On 31 May, RSF was received by Ihor Mustetsa, Ukraine's deputy prosecutor-general, by Kateryna Duchenko, the head of the department for investigating crimes against the media, and by Oleksiy Khomenko, the head of the Kyiv regional prosecutor's office.

The Ukrainian authorities reported that, as of the date of this meeting, 110 media outlets had been forced to stop or suspend operations and 32 journalists had been killed since the start of the Russian invasion on 24 February, eight of them in the course of their work. The latter figure is identical to RSF's. The authorities opened an investigation into Levin's disappearance on 22 March but the investigators were not able to go to the place where he went missing because of the fighting still taking place there at that time.

At the request of the prosecutor-general's office, Arnaud Froger was formally interviewed on RSF's behalf on 1 June as a witness in the Ukrainian investigation into the double murder of Levin and Chernyshov. This interview was conducted by members of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in charge of the investigation. RSF shared with them the information it had obtained in the course of its investigation and handed over nine pieces of evidence it had collected in the field. They included several bullets, Chernyshov's identity documents and evidence attesting to the Russian presence in nearby trenches. This evidence could still contain DNA traces that could identify the Russian soldiers involved. RSF also handed over a USB flash drive containing several dozen photos of the crime scene taken by Patrick Chauvel.

RSF's investigation was a contribution to the official investigation, the one being conducted jointly by the Ukrainian judicial authorities and the International Criminal Court, both of whom received a formal request from RSF to investigate this double murder. This investigation is essential in order to establish the facts and identify the perpetrators. RSF is not in a position to confirm that autopsies have been carried out on the two bodies. Autopsies are nonetheless vital for developing and improving the reconstruction of the course of events. Similarly, we count on the Ukrainian defence ministry and intelligence services to provide the investigators with information about the presence of Russian soldiers in this forest and in the village of Moshchun in March 2022. If any of these soldiers are arrested, it is essential that they can be identified quickly in order to be questioned and held to account for the murders of the journalist Maks Levin and his friend, Oleksiy Chernyshov.



*French photoreporter Patrick Chauvel during the search operation for Ukrainian journalist Maks Levin's car, Butcha, Ukraine, on 27 May 2022.
© Arnaud Froger*



Душа покаяна
Левин
Максим
Евгеньевич
07.07.1981 - 13.03.2022



Aleksandr Levin laying flowers at the grave of his brother Maks. Boyarka, Ukraine on 30 May 2022
© Patrick Chauvel



Photo caption

Bullet found in the ground at the spot where Maks Levin's body was previously located. The bullet and casing were discovered during a search initiated by RSF on 30 May 2022 in the forest near Huta-Mezhyhirs'ka, to the north of Kyiv, Ukraine.
© Patrick Chauvel



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