

Police back on suspected murder case of tenants' rights activist

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The Kabaty Woods at dusk. It was here that, back in 2011, the body of Jolanta Brzeska was first discovered. Photo: PAP/Jakub Kamiński

On Monday, the Polish police announced they were looking for witnesses in the well-publicised case of Jolanta Brzeska, a tenants' rights activist whose charred body was found in one of Warsaw's parks back in 2011, with investigators hoping to shed new light on the suspicious death of a woman who dedicated her life to helping local residents caught in the gears of Warsaw's real estate restitution machinery.

In an official announcement, the police asked anyone who could provide new facts on the mysterious death to step forward, referring specifically to the passers-by who originally reported the shocking find back in March 2011. As one of the police investigators explained, the identity of the people who found the body while strolling in the park was still unknown – a surprising omission given that foul play was a likely cause of Ms Brzeska's demise from the very start. 7 years on, little is known of the causes of the mysterious



A lasting legacy: Jolanta Brzeska's daughter speaking during a commemorative ceremony, with her mother's image visible in the background. Photo: PAP/Radek Pietruszka

See no evil

An official investigation into the local activist's death was initially launched back in 2011, but since no possible culprits were identified, the probe was quickly dropped, leading some to suggest that the erstwhile government led by Civic Platform (PO) found it inexpedient to drill deeper into the mystery. The investigation was later re-launched in 2016 as the request of Zbigniew Ziobro, the current Justice Minister and Attorney-General, who vowed to find the real causes of what he believed to have been a case of homicide. He criticized the 2011 investigation, citing various irregularities including a negligent crime scene survey and a failure to collect vital evidence.



Explainer: Restitution in Warsaw

Initial analysis of the body proved that Jolanta Brzeska, who was 64 at the time of her death, died from extensive burns which resulted from her clothing being doused with kerosene. Suicide was coined as one possible explanation, but since the spot where the body was recovered was quite

The theory that Ms Brzeska may have been murdered is supported by the existence of a very clear motive on the part of, what has become popularly known as, the Warsaw restitution mafia – a group of fraudsters and criminals who obtained valuable real estate by exploiting legal loopholes and evicted impecunious tenants in order to sell the buildings where they lived to real estate developers. Jolanta Brzeska was very vocal in her opposition to the practices of private proprietors, who often turned the lives of residents into a nightmare in their quest for maximum profits.



Justice for Jolanta Brzeska: Squatters occupying one of Warsaw's old tenement houses express their solidarity with a woman who was "killed for the right to one's home", as one of the banners proclaims. Photo: PAP/Radek Pietruszka

Houses with a 'meat filling'

Jolanta Brzeska herself lived in one of Warsaw's pre-war tenement houses whose new owner began the process of what has often been euphemistically termed "cleansing" – a set of outrageous practices that involved drastic increases in rent as well as various forms of harassment intended to get rid of unwanted tenants before securing a



Warsaw's mayor 'wants to block' real estate restitution scandal probe: committee head

experienced a similar plight, with many of them being elderly or infirm individuals who had lived in the same communal dwellings for decades and who were now thrust into a ruthless world of capitalism and greed which they were ill-equipped to understand or deal with efficiently.

A rather gruesome catchphrase circulating around the movers and shakers of post-restitution real estate market was “meat filling” – a term denoting all unwanted tenants in a building that was about to be refurbished or sold. Stories from many tenants, who went through many years of legal tussles, include dramatic accounts of their apartments being intentionally flooded, door locks being drilled through by workers and electricity or heating being disconnected during the cold winter months in order to break the tenants’ spirits and force them to abandon their beloved homes.

Many years after Ms Brzeska’s death, her individual case was concluded with what one may call a modicum of justice. In December 2017, the parliamentary committee investigating into the irregularities surrounding the restitution process, found the decision to transfer the tenement house in which she lived into private hands to be invalid. The ownership of the house has thus reverted to the municipal authorities of the city of Warsaw.



The modernist tenement house in which Jolanta Brzeska used to live was ultimately reclaimed by the investigative committee. The picture and flowers in the foreground show how local residents continue to keep the memory alive. Photo: PAP/Jakub Kamiński

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