

The Nemtsov assassination: warning shots to the Kremlin's opponents

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At around 11.30 pm Moscow time on 27 February, one of the leaders of the Russian opposition, Boris Nemtsov, was shot dead by unknown attackers on a bridge near the Kremlin, as he was returning home in the company of a friend, a Ukrainian model. It should be considered most likely that Nemtsov was murdered with the aid of Russian secret services, at the behest of persons from the highest circles of Russia's leadership, in order to intimidate not just the opposition but also the wider political elite, and to discourage them and ordinary citizens from participating in activities directed against the Kremlin. It is less likely that radical nationalists spontaneously carried out the assassination in order to punish 'a traitor to the nation' and persuade the authorities to crack down in both domestic and foreign policy. Nemtsov's death will not currently lead to the mass mobilisation of the opposition or any kind of political turning point in Russia. However, the authorities may try to exploit it to create the impression that they are a bulwark against radical nationalism. Nemtsov's death may also signal a new, much harsher phase in the Kremlin's repression of all forms of opposition.

The most important Russian reactions

President Vladimir Putin, through his spokesman Dmitry Peskov, condemned the killing, calling it a provocation. He instructed that a group be formed consisting of investigators from the Investigative Committee, the Interior Ministry and the FSB. President Putin offered his condolences to the family of the victim. Peskov pointed out that Nemtsov "had been in contact with various people in Kiev", and that he had not posed a threat to the authorities. In their statements, Russia's Investigative Committee (SKR) and its spokesman raised several possible variants of the motives for Nemtsov's murder: personal issues (related to Nemtsov's companion); Nemtsov's financial activities; or political motives (related to threats by Islamic radicals in connection with Nemtsov's words of support for the editors of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, or Nemtsov's activities in Ukraine). The SKR's spokesman also expressed the supposition that Nemtsov could have been "sacrificed" by those who want to destabilise the political situation in Russia (implying that the opposition had carried out the murder).

The Kremlin-controlled media have generally repeated the SKR's versions. On 3 March the government newspaper *Izvestia*, citing a source within the investigative bodies, said that the main idea under consideration is that Ukrainian secret services and pro-Ukrainian Chechen

militants were responsible. Pro-Kremlin commentators have also suggested that the murder was a provocation aimed at damaging President Putin, arranged by the Russian anti-Putin opposition, Ukrainian radicals, or Western secret services. Some of them asserted that Nemtsov's death was intended to provoke an anti-Kremlin demonstration in Moscow (a Russian 'Maidan'). In contrast, independent media and commentators critical of the Kremlin blamed Nemtsov's death on the Russian authorities, either directly or as being guilty of fomenting an atmosphere of hatred that led to the murder.

Who killed Nemtsov and why?

The information on the crime disclosed to the public so far by the authorities and the government-controlled media (reports from the investigation, eyewitness testimonies, the recording from one of the cameras observing the scene) is in part contradictory and unreliable, and does not as yet allow us to decide who the perpetrators were, or who their clients were. However, a wide range of factors allows us to set forth some hypotheses on the matter.

It should be considered most likely that Nemtsov was murdered by the officers of the Russian secret services, or persons hired by them, and that the murder was carried out on behalf of a person or group of people from the highest circles of Russia's leadership. The aims of the assassination were as follows: to demonstrate the determination of a small group of the ruling elite to maintain power by using all available means, including bloodshed; to intimidate the opposition (whether overt or covert, even among the political and business elites), and discourage them from collecting and disclosing material embarrassing to President Putin and his entourage, and/or using it in political manoeuvring; from organising anti-Kremlin protests; and discouraging the general public from participating in any such protests or other forms of active opposition. Nor can it be ruled out that the intention of the initiators of the assassination was to bring about a crackdown in Russia's domestic and foreign policy. There are a number of reasons for giving credence to this version:

Firstly, what is known so far about the circumstances of the murder suggests that it was carried out by professionals with a sense of impunity. In particular: the killer shot Nemtsov with a few, well-aimed shots, and left the scene of the crime without hindrance; the attack took place in a busy, well-lit area in the centre of Moscow, observed by multiple cameras (the authorities have given partly contradictory and partly inaccurate reports about the state of these cameras); the murder was carried out in the immediate vicinity of the Kremlin, in a protected zone constantly under supervision by the Federal Protection Service. In addition, as one of the leaders of the opposition, the Federal Security Service had Boris Nemtsov under constant surveillance, which must have been particularly close on the eve of the opposition demonstrations, of which Nemtsov had been one of the organisers (if the surveillance had been lifted, it would have resulted from a decision by the persons supervising the secret services). These arguments practically rule out the suggestion that the Russian opposition or foreign forces could have committed the murder.

Secondly, the Russian authorities have already used physical liquidation as a means of combating its political opponents (especially those who have revealed information embarrassing to the authorities), using officers of the secret services or other power structures. The following such cases must be considered as proved: the killing of

Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Doha in February 2004 by GRU agents; and that of Aleksandr Litvinenko in London in November 2006 by FSB agents. The participation of law enforcement agencies and the inspiration of members of the Russian government in the deaths of Anna Politkovskaya in Moscow in October 2006, Natalya Estemirova in Grozny in July 2009, and Sergei Magnitsky in a Moscow detention centre in November 2009 is also highly likely.

Thirdly, the Kremlin saw Boris Nemtsov as one of the opposition leaders most damaging to the Russian authorities, in connection with his active participation in the collection and publication of materials compromising Putin and his entourage. Among other actions, Nemtsov was the co-author of a report entitled 'Putin and corruption' (2011) and 'Games in the subtropics' (2013; concerning the embezzlement during the preparations for the Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014). According to information provided by his colleagues, Nemtsov was preparing another report, 'Putin and the war', which was intended to reveal information concerning the secret deployment of Russian soldiers to fight on the territory of Ukraine. In this light, it is noteworthy that shortly after the assassination, the law enforcement authorities entered Nemtsov's apartment in Moscow and his offices in Yaroslavl, confiscating materials and computer hard discs.

Fourthly, in addition to several other opposition leaders, Nemtsov had been the object of a hate campaign in the government-controlled media. Inspiration and support for this campaign flowed from the highest representatives of the Russian government including President Putin, who himself used in public the term 'fifth column' in relation to the Russian opposition activists. As part of the propaganda campaign, it was suggested that the opposition's activity was organised by foreign agents and was anti-Russian in nature. Another propaganda documentary, attacking Nemtsov among others ('Anatomy of a protest, part 3'), was to have been broadcast on NTV television on 1 March.

Fifthly, the assassination of Nemtsov is part of the logic of political dynamics in Russia. There are a number of indications that the authorities fear political instability in the country, and are taking drastic measures to combat this. The statements and behaviour of President Putin and his closest associates suggest that they fear serious public protests whether politically or economically motivated (due to the worsening economic situation), and especially the accompanying alleged conspiracies by Western secret services and members of the Russian elite. In particular: Putin's speech in April 2014 to the FSB college, where he declared that repeat in Russia of a foreign-sponsored 'coup', as he described the Ukrainian revolution, would not be allowed to happen in Russia; his appointment in May 2014 of his trusted former security chief General Viktor Zolotov as first deputy minister of internal affairs and commander of the Interior Ministry's Internal Troops; and the creation in January 2015, at the Kremlin's initiative, of the 'Anti-Maidan' movement, made up of former soldiers and nationalist activists who have declared they will use violence to combat the political opposition.

It must be considered much less likely that the murder was carried out, on their own initiative, by one of the radical nationalist groups, mainly for the purpose of publicly punishing 'a traitor to the nation' and putting pressure on the authorities to crack down both in domestic (the fight against the 'fifth column') and foreign policy (especially in Ukraine and the West). This variant could be supported by the following arguments.

Firstly, radical nationalist groups have already carried out or attempted attacks on Russian social activists and politicians. Examples might include the conspiracy by a group allegedly led by the former GRU military intelligence officer Anatoly Kvachkov, and its unsuccessful attempt in Moscow in March 2005 to assassinate Anatoly Chubais; and the murders in January 2009 in Moscow of the lawyer Stanislav Markelov and the journalist Anastasia Baburova carried out by a group of radical nationalists from the BORN organisation (Russian Nationalist Combat Troops).

Secondly, Boris Nemtsov was a hate object for the majority of Russian nationalist organisations, and had appeared on all the lists of 'enemies of the people' which some of them had published.

Thirdly, disappointment is rising in radical nationalist circles at what they perceive as the Kremlin's overly moderate domestic and foreign policy. The organisers of the attack must have been fully aware that a direct consequence of the murder of Nemtsov would be damage to the image of the Russian government, and the creation of a risk of at least an *ad hoc* political mobilisation of protest against the authorities; this could also have been the goal of the initiators of the murder, if they were seeking to provoke a confrontation.

The political consequences of Nemtsov's murder

One immediate result of the murder was a wave of condemnation from both representatives of the Russian government and many leaders and politicians from abroad, mainly from Western countries. Once again the image of the Russian government had been seriously damaged in the eyes of the Western world. However, there is no reason to believe that this will translate into the West taking a harder line towards Russia, the more so as if the Russian authorities decided to identify radical nationalists acting alone as the perpetrators of the crime (according to a report on the RBK website on 1 March, Gen. Igor Krasnov, a specialist in crimes committed by radical nationalists, has been put in charge of the investigative group which would indicate that this has been chosen as the main approach), and especially if they caught and punished them, it could be beneficial for the Kremlin's image. The authorities would use this to launch the thesis that Putin's government is the only bulwark against Russia's landslide into nationalist anarchy, so in fact his government should be supported.

On the other hand, there has also been a short-term mobilisation by the Kremlin's opponents. In the centre of Moscow on 1 March, a legal procession was held commemorating Boris Nemtsov, organised by the opposition (instead of the march which had been planned for the outskirts of Moscow, under anti-Kremlin and social banners). The peaceful march, which went off without any excesses, and which also included anti-Putin slogans, was attended by about 50,000 people, according to independent estimates. A similar demonstration in St. Petersburg gathered about 8000 people. Smaller gatherings were also organised in other Russian cities (including Kirov, Perm, Nizhny Novgorod, Novosibirsk and Voronezh). Some of the people who participated in them probably did so more for moral than political reasons.

However, everything indicates that even if repeated demonstrations associated with Nemtsov's death are held, their numbers will decrease and they will not have any influence

on the political situation in Russia. Thus, they will not lead either to a change in Russian government policy towards liberalisation, or to the outbreak of mass social protests, which could result in a change of the political regime in Russia by revolutionary means, especially as the vast majority of opposition leaders are tied to the idea of non-violent protest, and they do not appear politically prepared to support any radical action aimed against the government. On the contrary, they fear the scenario of an uncontrolled rebellion and the possible casualties which would be connected with this. Also, the vast majority of participants in the current protests are only ready to protest within the limits laid down by the law and the authorities, which means they do not pose any real threat to the Kremlin. Furthermore, the assassination of Nemtsov has in fact intensified the atmosphere of fear among those parts of the general public and the elite who have criticised the Kremlin; this will contribute to their withdrawal from political activity, or into political exile, the pace of which has noticeably intensified over the last year.

Nemtsov's assassination could signal the start of a new crackdown in domestic policy. This would be linked to an escalation of political repression, a further strengthening of government control over all forms of social activity, and harsher propaganda against internal and external enemies (under the banner of the fight against the 'fifth column'). The deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country will contribute to such a policy.

On the other hand, however, the death of Nemtsov could aggravate anti-Kremlin sentiment within the wider Russian elite, including big business and those parts of the ruling elite who are critical of the policy of 'tightening the screws'. If there is a marked deterioration in the mood of the majority of the population, set against a background of a worsening socio-economic situation, this could – in the long run – result in an intensification of processes leading to political instability, as well as fiercer competition within the ruling elite, with consequences that would be hard to calculate.