Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 11.03.2015 www.osw.waw.pl

The 'Nemtsov operation' as a manifestation of the oprichnina today

Maciej Falkowski

Between 6-9 March, Russian law enforcement agencies arrested five people suspected of organising and carrying out the murder of Boris Nemtsov. All the arrested come from the Caucasus (Chechens and Ingush), several of whom (including Zaur Dadayev, the alleged leader of the group) served until recently in the Chechen institutions of force under the control of the Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. Representatives of the Russian prosecutor's office announced that the motive for the group, which allegedly acted on its own, was revenge for Nemtsov having insulted the religious feelings of Muslims (including in the context of the *Charlie Hebdo* case), which seems to be a very unlikely story.

All the information so far reported about Nemtsov's alleged killers has come from the Russian institutions of force, and cannot be verified. Regardless of whether the arrestees actually murdered Boris Nemtsov (which seems likely) or are merely taking the fall for the murder, the course and nature of the crime shows that Nemtsov was probably assassinated as part of a plan ordered by the Kremlin and organised by the Russian institutions of force. Regardless of who the actual attackers were, it is still most likely that the purpose of Nemtsov's murder was to intimidate the Russian elite, society, and any potential opponents of Vladimir Putin, and the disclosure/use of the Chechen motif only serves to reinforce this message. At the same time, Nemtsov's murder demonstrates that the mechanism for a group of people operating above the law, acting with the sanction and at the behest of the Kremlin, to intimidate and eliminate opponents of the regime – much like the sixteenth-century *oprichnina* – has now reached full maturity.

Arrests and investigation

Three of the suspects (including Dadayev) were arrested on the territory of Ingushetia, and two more near Moscow. According to official reports, Federal Security Service officers tried to arrest another suspect, Beslan Shavanov, in Grozny, but he allegedly committed suicide by detonating a grenade. According to anecdotal evidence, two more people have been detained in Chechnya. Dadayev and Shavanov were until recently officers of the 'North' battalion (both of them resigned shortly before Nemtsov's murder). This group is formally part of the 46th Brigade of the Russian Federation's Interior Ministry troops, stationed in Chechnya, but in fact it is under the direct command of Ramzan Kadyrov (the battalion's commander is the brother of Adam Delimkhanov, a close associate and cousin of Kadyrov and a deputy in the Russian State Duma). Dadayev was deputy commander of the battalion,

and had been decorated for outstanding service.

Dadayev pleaded guilty immediately after his arrest, saying he had acted on his own for religious reasons (in retaliation for anti-Islamic statements Nemtsov had allegedly made). The other detainees, however, said that they had not taken any part in the action, and were beaten while in detention. Dadayev himself withdrew his earlier testimony, and now maintains that he is innocent. Nevertheless, the version assuming that the detainees organised the attack themselves out of religious convictions has been given by the investigators as their principal line of inquiry (the day after the murder, the prosecutors named it as one of several possible motives, including Ukrainian and nationalist involvement).

The suspects' arrest was commented on by Ramzan Kadyrov, who stated that they could indeed have been acting for religious reasons. A statement published on his personal Instagram profile also said that both Dadayev and Shavanov had been exemplary officers, "Russian patriots" and "deeply religious" people. Kadyrov's statement, the Russian prosecutor's failure to investigate him in connection with the suspicions levelled against his former subordinates, and President Putin awarding him a state order for "many years of exemplary performance of his duties" on 9 March, sparked outrage among the independent Russian media and social & political activists. Although Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the announcement of the preliminary results of the investigation and the award of the order to Kadyrov were a coincidence, it seems that the Kremlin's gesture to the Chechen president should be construed as a guarantee of immunity for Kadyrov.

Dadayev's group: perpetrators or scapegoats?

The motive for the crime which the investigators have adopted (retaliation for Nemtsov's allegedly insulting statements to Muslims), which led to the arrest of the detainees, is not very convincing. It assumes that a group of uneducated Chechen officers, used to carrying out orders, and their relatives or acquaintances working in Moscow (including the driver and bodyguard) were following the Russian dissident's activity in real time, and – offended by his (pretty moderate) statements – took an independent decision to carry out a murder. Furthermore, such a spectacular and complex operation, performed by the walls of the Kremlin itself, could not have been organised without adequate cover from the special services.

Assuming that the killing of Nemtsov was in fact carried out by the detainees, it was certainly not at their own initiative. Their formal and informal relationships with Kadyrov are too clear to believe that they could have carried out the murder not only without his knowledge, but also without a direct command from him. In addition, the Chechen leader confirmed his links to the suspects, effectively justifying their supposed motive, and giving them a positive testimony, characterising them as decent people. We should also bear in mind Kadyrov's repeated statements of his readiness to execute every instruction given him by President Putin (one such statement came during a rally of many thousands of officers of the Chechen institutions of force in January 2015, during which those gathered swore an oath of fidelity to the Russian president), the presence of armed formations of Kadyrov loyalists in the Donbas, and the history of previous contract killings carried out by Chechens, including the murders of Anna Politkovskaya, Ruslan Yamadayev, Natalia Estemirova, Paul

Khlebnikov et al.).

Given the degree of Kadyrov's personal subordination to the Russian president, the specific bond (patron/vassal) linking both politicians, and the spectacular nature of the murder, it is very unlikely that the Chechen leader was acting on his own initiative or that of any group in the Russian ruling elite. Nemtsov's assassination must have been planned in the Kremlin, and so Kadyrov's people, under the protection of the special services, must have been merely the contractors.

But we cannot rule out another version: Nemtsov was killed by Russian special services, but that the Chechens were just assigned the task of carrying out the murder, so that on the one hand they would serve as scapegoats, and on the other as convenient deterrents. In this version, the detainees may have had no connection with the affair at all, and – under threat of reprisals against their relatives (acts of repression against the family members of armed guerrillas in Chechnya are a daily occurrence) – they may change their testimony and plead guilty in the near future. In this way, the odium of guilt would be imparted to the Chechens, who have a bad reputation in Russia; this would only reinforce the general fear of them, and would at the same time be a test of loyalty for Kadyrov.

Chechens as a tool in the hands of the Russian special services

Regardless of whether Kadyrov's men actually did kill the Russian dissident, the 'Nemtsov operation' (both the murder itself as well as the propaganda surrounding it) seems to have been a coherent project, with a clear message and a specific target audience. Everything indicates that its purpose is to intimidate the Russian public and elites away from offering any real or potential threat to the current government, especially in the conditions of the deteriorating economic situation. The murder of Nemtsov also shows that in Putin's Russia, we are in fact dealing with a modern form of *oprichnina* (similar to that used in Russia by Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century). This involves the intimidation or elimination of actual or potential opponents of the authorities by a group of people who operate above the law, and act only with the sanction of the Kremlin and at its command. In the case of Nemtsov, the role of the contractor – real or assumed – was played by the Chechens, who in the future can be used for the physical liquidation of domestic enemies.