The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Boris Nemtsov Murder Corners Putin's Kremlin

By The Moscow Times

March 01, 2015



There is no shortage of theories as to who was behind the murder of Boris Nemtsov. But we should not allow ourselves to be fooled by the decoys spread by investigators and the pro-Kremlin media, such as that his murder was the result of a business dispute or revenge by his girlfriend for allegedly pressing her to have an abortion — this shameful theory was advanced by the LifeNews tabloid, notorious for being used by the authorities to leak compromising information and misinformation about the Russian opposition.

This murder was calculated political violence. The location, the timing and the execution of the murder attest to this. Nemtsov was murdered at one of the most heavily guarded places in Moscow, with the Kremlin a mere stone's throw from the crime scene and forming the background for almost every photo carried by the media.

Nemtsov was murdered just two days before a planned opposition march, where, in the absence of popular opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who remains under arrest, he would have been a key figure.

CCTV footage of the murder shown by TV Center suggests a professional and well-organized execution — a hit man put four bullets into Nemtsov at the very moment when he could not be seen by most street cameras and passing motorists because a huge snowplow truck obscured the murder scene.

Many commentators have blamed President Vladimir Putin personally and his regime in general for creating an atmosphere in Russia in which confrontation with the West and its perceived agents at home — plainly branded as a fifth column by the pro-Kremlin propagandists — have become an integral component of Russia's national ideology.

These commentators also rightfully point to the state policy of glorifying violence against Ukrainian government forces over the past year, perpetuated by obscure Russian nationalist groups with open-ended goals, shady financing and ties to the Russian political establishment.

This could have led some trigger-happy elements in Russia to believe that they could advance Russian national interests by whacking an "enemy of the state" without the consent of the state leadership, just on their own "patriotic" initiative.

If the latter variant is the case, Nemtsov's murder amounts to a serious threat to the regime itself: someone has forcefully claimed a key monopoly that should belong to the state — especially in an authoritarian one like Russia — a monopoly on political violence.

In this situation, the Kremlin has two options.The first is to find Nemtsov's murderers and ruthlessly punish them in a transparent legal process, and in the meantime crack down heavily on the groups that may be the source of such violent initiatives. This would be an effort to pre-empt political killings by non-state actors.

However, this strategy has major flaws: To end political violence at home, the Kremlin should stop or, at least, roll back significantly, its campaign of finger-pointing at enemies of Russia both at home and abroad. This is not possible because this confrontation has become a core identity of Putin's regime.

Also, it would look really strange if law enforcement started protecting "foreign agents" and members of the "fifth column" from the "legitimate" justice of Russian "patriots."

The second option available to the Kremlin is to seize the initiative from the violent activists and engage in violent crackdowns on the political opposition. This is called a terror, and this is something that is still hard to imagine.

Over the weekend, the Russian media reported that Nemtsov's murder would be investigated by an official who oversaw the second politically motivated probe into Mikhail Khodorkovsky's former oil company, Yukos, and who now oversees the controversial case of the Ukrainian pilot Nadezhda Savchenko.

This fact puts big question marks over whether the country's leadership will choose to follow the first strategy.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/01/boris-nemtsov-murder-corners-putins-kremlin-a44331