

Putin Has Unleashed Dangerous Extremism

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The brazen assassination of Boris Nemtsov, a central figure in Russia's opposition movement, should give Russian President Vladimir Putin pause before embracing Syrian President Bashar Assad's strategy for political survival — empower the extremists while demonizing and brutalizing the moderates.

Assad's response to the wave of protests among Syria's Sunni majority against the brutal rule of his Alawite minority was to use overwhelming military force and to empower Islamic extremists to fight moderate and secular opposition groups.

At the start of the uprising in 2011-12, the regime released from its prisons a significant number of die-hard jihadists and facilitated their insertion into the opposition areas, directly contributing to the rise of the Islamic State. This allowed Assad to cast the war as a fight against Islamic terrorists.

Assad empowered and armed local Alawite militias (Shabiha) to terrorize the population

in Sunni areas supporting the opposition. This turned a conflict over Assad's rule into a brutal sectarian war, later magnified by Iran's direct involvement with Shia Hezbollah militias.

Since Putin's return to power in 2012, the Kremlin has empowered all sorts of right-wing and religious extremists peddling xenophobic, anti-Western and anti-liberal agendas. Loonies spewing hatred dominate Russian airwaves, while people who need their heads examined give policy advice to the president. Calls for violence against the regime's opponents have become routine.

Moderate opposition figures like Nemtsov or Alexei Navalny have been demonized as "foreign agents." Political outreach to people who eschewed violence ended, blocking legitimate pathways to peaceful evolution, much like in Assad's Syria. The war in Ukraine magnified those trends through Orwellian propaganda.

The Kremlin has now turned to forming extremist militias with the abject purpose of using violence against the moderate regime's opponents. The "Anti-Maidan" movement may appear farcical, but could serve as a cover for extrajudicial killings.

More worrying is the rise of Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov and his loyalists as a potential fighting force against the opposition. As a form of Putin's Shabiha this could be the path to a bloody civil war.

Putin's immediate reaction to Nemtsov's killing shows signs of fear of the control slipping out of his hands. He should launch a war on extremists and engage with the moderates. That's a better regime survival strategy than Assad's war.

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