The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Thousands March in Honor of Slain Opposition Activist Nemtsov (Video)

By Ivan Nechepurenko

March 01, 2015

Holding placards declaring "I am not afraid," thousands of Russians marched in Moscow on Sunday in memory of Nemtsov, whose murder has widened a split in society that some say could threaten Russia's future.

A sea of mourning Muscovites marched silently through downtown Moscow on Sunday in honor of Boris Nemtsov, one of President Vladimir Putin's most virulent critics, who was gunned down steps from the Kremlin on Friday night.

Black ribbons were pinned to the tricolor Russian flags many among the thousands of mourners waved as they filed onto Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge, where Nemtsov took his final steps. The crowd brandished an array of photographs of the handsome politician, who had been a household name in Russia since the 1990s. "Heroes do not die," read their signs.

Others were more defiant, carrying cardboard posters featuring the words "I am not afraid"

in bold lettering.

When the mourners reached the bridge, which leads off Red Square over the Moscow River and offers one of the city's most stunning views of the Kremlin, they paid their respects at the precise spot where Nemtsov was murdered, bowing their heads and laying flowers atop an ever-expanding mound.

"This is not only an opposition march," Gennady Gudkov, himself a former opposition politician and one of the march's organizers, told The Moscow Times on the scene. "This is a march for all the people who have come to understand we have reached a dangerous point."

The official number of participants, like in many protests or public events, remains disputed. Organizers of the march estimated that some 50,000 people had turned out, while the Moscow Police Department said in a statement Sunday evening that about 21,000 people had taken part in the memorial event.

Sunday's silent march replaced a planned anti-government protest, which Nemtsov had been set to lead. Similar events were held in other Russian cities, including St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod and Yaroslavl.

A strong police presence — both on the ground and in the sky — attested to fears that the event could be disrupted by radicals or enemies of the opposition. No violent incidents were reported.

In what appears to have been a carefully planned assassination, the suspects fired at least six bullets at Nemtsov as he walked across the Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge on Friday night, four of which hit him in the back and heart.

Nemtsov had been one of the most energetic and outspoken critics of Putin and his government over the past 15 years. He was a member of several oppositional political parties and helped organize numerous political rallies in Moscow and around Russia.

Russia's Investigative Committee said in a statement Saturday that investigators are currently working with two primary theories: The murder was either an attempt to destabilize the political situation in Russia or was conducted by Islamic extremists in revenge for Nemtsov's stance over the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris. Other less prominent theories include an attack by Ukrainian radicals, or by someone seeking revenge over Nemtsov's romantic life or financial affairs, the committee said.

Nemtsov's ferocious opposition to the Kremlin has not been named — at least officially — among the possible motives behind the crime.

Mourners that spoke to The Moscow Times expressed sadness and outrage at Nemtsov's murder, but also vocalized concern over the implications of the grisly crime.

"This [Nemtsov's murder] means that anyone can be killed in the center of Moscow," said Timofei Krit, a 28-year-old researcher at the physics faculty of Moscow State University. "But this doesn't mean we should be afraid. We have to fight for our belief that we can go home at night and be safe."

Some opposition figures have received death threats, as Nemtsov had, in the aftermath of the murder.

The Twitter feed of opposition State Duma deputy Dmitry Gudkov, the son of Gennady Gudkov and a leading figure in anti-government protests, was inundated with ominous messages, which claimed that he was "next on the list" and that he should fear for his life.

"I don't fear for myself as much as for my family," said the elder Gudkov, who was on the front line of Sunday's march.

Media-Propelled Hate

Since the Ukraine crisis has unfolded, unleashing a wave of patriotic fervor, Nemtsov and the opposition movement overall have lost much of their support among the general public.

Only 15 percent of respondents said they sympathized with politicians such as Nemtsov, Mikhail Kasyanov, Alexei Navalny and other opposition figures, according to a survey published by the Levada Center independent pollster Friday. The poll, conducted among 1,600 respondents across Russia with a margin of error not exceeding 3.4 percent, found that 68 percent said they did not sympathize with them.

Pro-government media outlets have intensified their efforts to undermine and discredit any signs of dissent in Russia in the past few years, contributing to the deep sense of alienation and mistrust among various social groups in the country, Alexei Makarkin, deputy director of the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies think tank, told The Moscow Times in an interview on Saturday.

"Anti-liberal propaganda has fostered a sense of mutual hatred in society. What we have is a situation that could detonate at any moment," he said.

"This killing demonstrates to what extent hatred has been legitimized or even sanctioned in Russia. Society was irritated for a long time, but when the hatred comes from TV screens, it makes a big difference," he added.

Some mourners at Sunday's memorial echoed Makarkin's analysis, holding up signs reading "Propaganda kills."

Makarkin specifically pointed to emotive and incendiary media coverage of the Ukraine conflict, saying it had separated society into "patriots" and "enemies."

For instance, the Gazprom-owned NTV channel was scheduled to broadcast another episode of its "Anatomy of Protest" program on Sunday that — its trailers enthusiastically boasted — was supposed to portray the alleged role of opposition members, including Nemtsov, in working to foment a Ukraine-style revolution in Russia. The channel removed the program from its Sunday schedule after news broke of Nemtsov's death.

Structure of the Situation

Nemtsov, who had accused Putin of waging a war against Ukraine and opposed Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine last year, was emphatically placed in the

category of enemies. He had reportedly been planning to publish a report on Russia's direct involvement in the fighting in Ukraine's east.

Together with his political allies, Nemtsov has accused Putin of rampant corruption, claiming that he enjoys a life of immense luxury with personal palaces, yachts and aircraft at his disposal. The Kremlin has repeatedly dismissed these accusations.

"Regardless of who killed Nemtsov, it's perfectly clear why this murder was committed. It was done simply to demonstrate the 'structure of the situation,'" Alexander Morozov, a political scientist and editor-in-chief of the online magazine Russian Journal, wrote on his Facebook page.

"The structure of the situation demands that there must be killings, and the more killings, the better," he wrote.

Everybody Has to Stop

A former political ally of Nemtsov's and the current head of Rusnano state corporation Anatoly Chubais said in a statement about his slain friend that "the demand for anger, hatred and aggression has been created in the country."

"If only several days ago here in our city people marched with posters saying, "Let's finish the fifth column" and today Nemtsov is killed, let's ask ourselves, what will happen tomorrow?" Chubais said Saturday, standing on the spot where Nemtsov was gunned down. "Everyone has to stop — the government, opposition, liberals, communists, nationalists, conservatives. Everyone. It is time to stop and to think for a moment about where we're bringing Russia."

Nemtsov will be honored at a public memorial service at Moscow's Sakharov Center on Tuesday, before being buried in the Troyekurovskoye Cemetery, the resting place of another murdered Kremlin critic, Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Firebrand opposition blogger Alexei Navalny, currently serving a 15-day prison sentence for having handed out flyers announcing the march that had initially been planned for Sunday, said he would request permission from the authorities to attend the funeral.

Putin's spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, could not confirm Saturday whether the president planned to attend Nemtsov's funeral.

"The President stated that this cruel murder has all the makings of a contract crime and is absolutely provocative in nature," Peskov said, noting that the president would take the investigation into Nemtsov's murder under his "personal control."

Contact the authors at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru and g.tetraultfarber@imedia.ru

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/03/01/thousands-march-in-honor-of-slain-opposition-activist-

nemtsov-video-a44321