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We Are All Victims of Nemtsov's Murder

By Ivan Sukhov

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On the day of Boris Nemtsov's burial, an old friend told me he was skeptical about the large funeral march in honor of the slain politician. "Of course, the murder itself is terrible," he said. "But when they say that those bullets were aimed at all of Russia, I frankly don't feel that they were directed at me. When Vlad Listyev [a well-known Russian television journalist murdered on March 1, 1995] was killed 20 years ago, I felt it and joined the procession in his memory. But not now," he said.

I took part in the memorial rally for Nemtsov last Sunday and am certain that the tens of thousands in attendance experienced a range of emotions over the man and his legacy.

Far from everyone there believed that during his post in the government in the second half of the 1990s, Nemtsov really tried to resist the formation of the oligarchic system that eventually came to dominate Russia's current political regime.

Nor did everyone like what Nemtsov did as one of the leaders of the opposition — not to mention the countless gripes over his personal style that his close acquaintances had, but that they obviously kept to themselves after his passing.

But the point is not so much the person of Nemtsov per se as it is the fact that his death indirectly affects a very wide circle of people — very possibly all of us. This is a fitting time to ask: Besides Nemtsov, who came under fire that night on the Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge?

First, it is the Russian opposition.

Whatever you might think of Nemtsov, he was capable of convincing a wide variety of leaders to sit down at the same table together — leaders who, without his presence, instantly lost their ability to cooperate at even an elementary level.

During the mass protests of 2011-12, most demonstrators came to the public square more to see each other than to see the opposition speakers — all of whom had failed to fulfill the mission of the opposition throughout all of President Vladimir Putin's rule, and with whom the people had therefore become hopelessly bored.

But Nemtsov played an important organizational role during that wave of protests as well as in the day-to-day work of the opposition movements. He also acted as a go-between with those sponsoring the movements and with their opponents in the Kremlin and the White House.

Of course, President Putin was the second person who came under fire that night.

Participants in the March 1 demonstration chanted, "Putin is a murderer!" But if we ask who profited from Nemtsov's death, Putin is not the obvious answer.

Kremlin officials huddled before dawn on Feb. 28 and refused to divulge what they discussed with anyone — even close confidantes — until after the rally on March 1. The first theory to emerge from the Kremlin concerned an alleged act of provocation against the regime.

Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov had announced that version of events just hours after the murder. Apparently, officials were waiting to see if the initial rally might go beyond its original goals and lead to confrontations with police or an announcement that demonstrators were settling in for a permanent protest.

For their part, the authorities showed flexibility, immediately agreeing to let marchers rally in the city center even though, prior to Nemtsov's murder, they had decided to locate a planned protest march on the far outskirts of the capital.

There is an unspoken assumption in official circles that the murder was carried out by some mysterious method the West employs to remove problematic regimes. But that theory does not hold water considering the problems the West has encountered even after toppling regimes through direct military intervention — not to mention the experience in post-Soviet states. But one thing is certain: Nemtsov's murder has weakened, not strengthened, Russia's political system.

This is not because protestors were shouting "Putin is a murderer!" practically right under the open windows of the Kremlin, but because the number of people willing to say such words — as well as those willing to listen — grew significantly between Feb. 27 and Feb. 28. The murder of Boris Nemtsov increased the protest mood at home and Putin's problems abroad.

The chain reaction this triggered is clear enough: Since Putin is fighting the opposition and a major opposition leader is killed just outside the president's front door, it means Putin is not just fighting the opposition, but killing its leaders. It adds one more very weighty item to the list of real and imaginary complaints against the country's leaders. Those complaints translate into Western sanctions, and those sanctions undermine domestic stability and, ultimately, the ruling regime's hold on power.

It is also very possible that the investigation into the murder could reveal that it was carried out not by agents of the U.S. State Department, but by Russians pursuing their own interests. For example, they might discover that the murderers are military personnel or military industrialists who feared Nemtsov's investigations into the weapons trade, or ultra-nationalists working to spark a major confrontation with the West.

It is one thing if the murderer turns out to be yet another hapless fool — who, as they say, is even more dangerous than a cunning enemy. But it is quite another if the killer is a vassal of the political elite and is taking deliberate aim against the sovereign.

One possibility that would put the authorities in a very awkward position is if the murderers were Russian Muslims who allegedly took mortal offense over Nemtsov's stance on the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January. Such a killer might have acted on his own initiative, or in response to Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's constant call to kill the enemies of the prophet and the enemies of the Russian president.

If the Islamic version of events proves true, the country will destabilize further as Russian nationalists fan hatred of North Caucasus Muslims, regardless of how they feel toward Putin, much less Nemtsov. On the other hand, some polls show that Russians who feel Putin is too soft on his domestic and international enemies have begun looking more favorably at Kadyrov as a possible substitute.

The idea of a conspiracy to replace Putin with Kadyrov seems more than a little far-fetched. After all, too many senior Russian officials know that if they entrust that fiery and fearless Chechen with the atomic bomb, in the end nothing might remain. Still, it is impossible to shake the impression that somebody is trying mightily to shake the foundations of the current political regime.

On the other hand, we might never learn the name of the killer because it was just some ordinary Joe who fell victim to the hate-filled propaganda flooding state-controlled television. It is even possible that Nemtsov was shot simply because, in general, people get shot on the streets in Moscow.

Russian society has entered the phase of its self-destruction, and no matter which of these theories proves true, they all indicate that by killing Nemtsov, Russians are really killing themselves.

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