

Decoding the Political Game Behind the Nemtsov Murder Arrests

By [Ivan Nechepurenko](#)

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A man walks past flowers at the site where Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov was murdered on Feb. 27, at the Great Moskvoretsky Bridge.

As the man suspected of having gunned down opposition leader Boris Nemtsov steps from the Kremlin allegedly confessed on Sunday, citing devotion to Islam as his motive, pundits agreed that the truth is likely much more complex than it seems.

Some reasoned that it would have been impossible for a group of simple thugs to assassinate such a high-profile figure in one of Russia's most secure areas without help from well-connected backers.

Others suggested that the purported Islamist link may be a bid to protect the Kremlin's image.

Still more speculated that the radical Islamist motive provides evidence of an internal power struggle between various branches of the Russian elite.

In particular, analysts pointed to the fact that Chechnya's strongman leader showered suspected triggerman Zaur Dadayev with praise after his arrest went public.

Kadyrov knew Dadayev personally. Until recently, Dadayev served as a deputy chief of Chechnya's infamous Sever police battalion, and had won honors and medals for his police work in the turbulent Caucasus republic. After his arrest was announced, Kadyrov took to Instagram — his preferred method for making important announcements — to refer to Dadayev as a "true Russian patriot."

On Sunday, Dadayev was charged alongside fellow suspect Anzor Gubashev in connection with Nemtsov's Feb. 27 murder. The arrests of three other men were sanctioned by the court: Gubashev's younger brother Shagid, Khamzad Bakhaev and Tamerlan Eskerkhanov.

Another suspect committed suicide by detonating a grenade after police surrounded his Grozny apartment on Saturday, Interfax reported.

A Moscow judge said during two separate hearings related to the case on Sunday that Dadayev had admitted his involvement in the murder, Interfax reported, while the other detained men have maintained their innocence.

The Rosbalt news agency reported that Dadayev told investigators he decided to fire the fatal gunshots upon learning in January of Nemtsov's "negative statements about Russian Muslims, the prophet Muhammad and the Islamic religion."

"Dadayev admitted to having organized this crime," Rosbalt cited an unnamed law enforcement source as having said. "So no one should wait around for any other big revelations or detentions in this case."

Dadayev himself remained silent in the courtroom, neither confirming nor denying the claims of his confession or motive.

Skepticism Mounts

It would have been impossible for a simple group of Islamic radicals to carry out such a precisely calculated execution of a prominent political figure in the heart of Moscow, Russian intelligence expert Andrei Soldatov told The Moscow Times in a phone interview Monday.

"Even if these people are truly responsible for the crime, they represent only the lowest rung of the overall scheme," he said.

Soldatov cited the fact that the assassins knew that Nemtsov would dismiss his driver for the evening, opting instead to take a scenic stroll. They knew precisely where to wait for him as he and his girlfriend crossed an iconic Moscow bridge on their way back to his apartment.

In addition to a wealth of other meticulous security provisions surrounding the Kremlin, parking in the area is restricted. The assassin's getaway driver would have had to have known precisely when the shots would be fired in order to take off with the triggerman immediately after the killing, Soldatov said.

"Our worst fears are coming true," Ilya Yashin, a close political ally of Nemtsov, who was among the first people to arrive at the crime scene, wrote on Facebook.

"The official version deflects suspicion from President Vladimir Putin. The state propaganda can now position the president as an effective manager who gave the order to find the killers, and here they are," he wrote.

Yashin pointed out that the slain politician was comparatively tolerant toward Islam. While Nemtsov may have criticized a January attack by Islamist radicals on the headquarters of satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo, other public figures criticized the attacks "much more harshly and loudly," Yashin said. The newspaper was targeted after it published a series of cartoon images of the prophet Muhammad that were broadly viewed as offensive.

After the attack, which claimed 11 lives and sparked related violence around Paris, Nemtsov wrote in his blog for Ekho Moskvy: "We are witnessing a medieval Islamic inquisition. ... If Christians live in the 21st century, Muslims live in 1415."

Kadyrov Attacked?

Many analysts have suggested that the arrest of a former high-ranking member of the Sever police battalion — reputed for its brutal crushing of the Islamist insurgency in Chechnya and neighboring Ingushetia — could have been a direct political assault against Kadyrov.

Kadyrov has made no effort to hold back his adoration for Dadayev, particularly with regard to his Islamic piety.

"Anyone who knows Zaur can confirm that he is a deep believer, and that he — like all Muslims — was shocked by the activities of Charlie Hebdo [newspaper] and by comments made in support of reprinting the cartoons," Kadyrov wrote via Instagram on Saturday.

"I knew Zaur as a true Russian patriot," he said.

According to Soldatov, Kadyrov's links to one of the key suspects may be a convenient method of stopping the investigation from spreading to more high-profile figures.

"This may be a convenient tactic: you blame a Kadyrov ally, and the trail stops there, leaving the real instigators unknown to the public," he said.

House of Cards

Others have speculated that the "Islamic trail" may be being used as a tool in political game between various forces both within the Kremlin and among the regions.

The secretary of Ingushetia's security council, Albert Barakhoyev, was the source of the news on some of the detentions over the weekend. Kadyrov is known to have been a source of alarm and irritation for the heads of neighboring republics, including Ingushetian leader Yunus-bek Yevkurov.

In contrast to most other regional heads, Kadyrov has been very active on the federal level, which may be an indication of his political ambitions.

"On one hand there is a desire to 'deter' Kadyrov, but on the other there is an idea that he is a guarantor of stability in Chechnya. As usual, the Kremlin will try to pit different forces against each other in a sort of checks and balances scheme," Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Moscow-based think tank Center for Political Technologies, told The Moscow Times.

If the move is aimed at pressuring Kadyrov, Yevkurov may benefit from relative calm emanating from his more powerful neighbor, the analyst said.

But even if the Kremlin's aim is to tame Kadyrov, it will not make too much of a ruckus about it, so as not to disturb the Chechen leader's grip on his home region, Makarkin said.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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