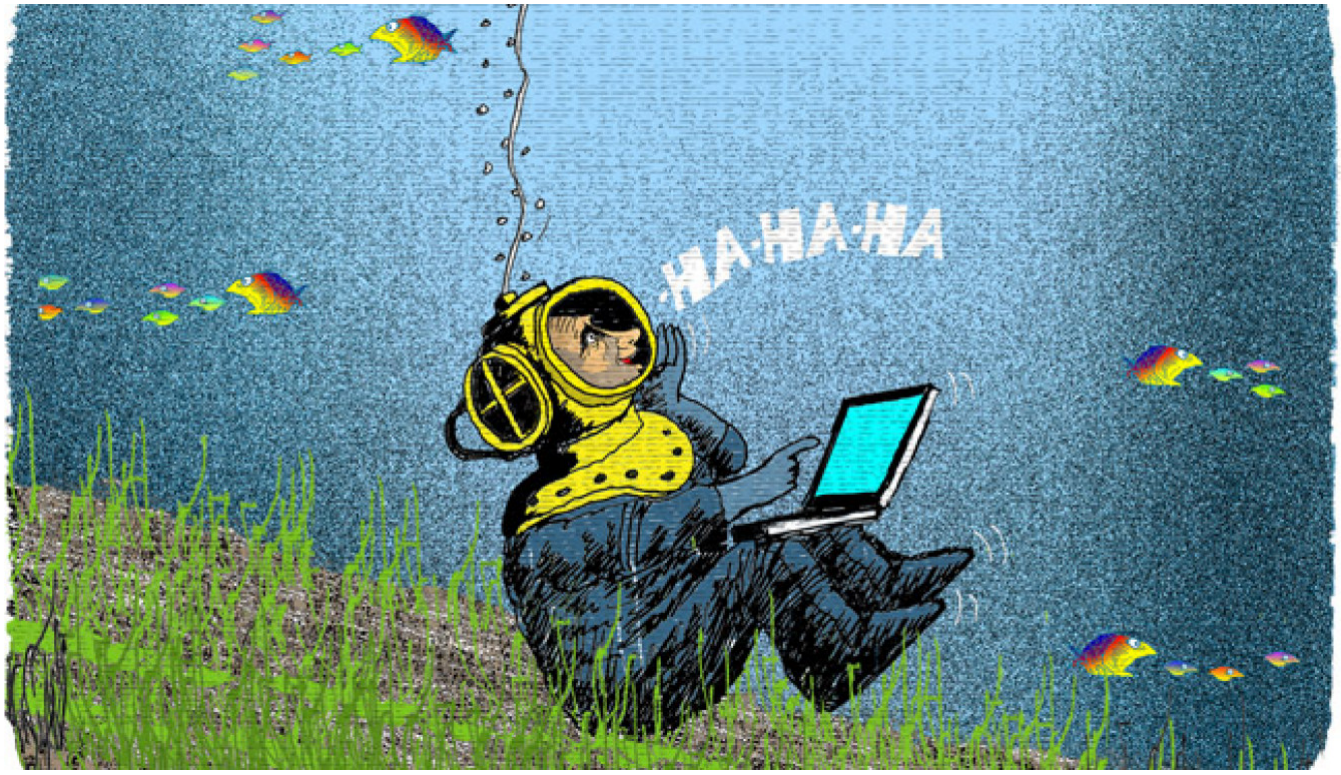
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Rumors Swirl in Moscow, But Kremlin Is Silent

By Georgy Bovt

March 17, 2015



More than two weeks have passed since the murder of Boris Nemtsov, and investigators have already managed to report the initial results of their work. They have arrested five people: 28-year-old Zaur Dadayev, the former deputy commander of the Chechen Interior Ministry's Sever battalion that serves as Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's "personal guard," 32-year-old truck driver Shagid Gubashev, 33-year-old private security guard Anzor Gubashev, 35-year-old Tamerlan Eskerkhanov and 45-year-old Khamzad Bakhayev.

One more suspect blew himself up with a grenade during his arrest in Grozny. The man who allegedly shot Nemtsov, Zaur Dadayev, supposedly confessed to the crime. However, human rights activists who visited Dadayev in detention reported that he retracted his confession, that he had been tortured into confessing and that he had only confessed because he was afraid his captors would kill him otherwise.

After that, investigators paid a visit to the rights activists on the suspicion that they were "interfering in the investigation process." Following that visit, Dadayev once again confessed

to the murder. Also, searchers found the alleged murder weapon at the bottom of the Moscow River near the site of the killing.

Meanwhile, citing "a source in the FSB," state-controlled media have put forward a theory that is politically satisfying for Russia's security forces, the Kremlin, Kadyrov and all of their rival groups — namely, that Chechen Adam Osmayev ordered Nemtsov's murder.

Osmayev was arrested in 2012 in Ukraine on charges of planning an assassination attempt against President Vladimir Putin and then released when the current Ukrainian authorities came to power. Osmayev now leads the Dudayev battalion that was named in honor of Chechnya's leader while the republic was at war with Moscow. In other words, the "Kiev junta" killed Nemtsov.

At this point, information regarding the official investigation ends and the speculation and guessing begin — each theory more shocking than the last.

And even though the previous official theory — that Nemtsov was killed because of anti-Islamic statements he made — does not hold water, the authorities have not formally retracted that explanation.

In fact, it has come to light that the murder suspects were tracking Nemtsov even before the Charlie Hebdo shootings and Nemtsov's subsequent comments. What's more, information released about the murder suspects indicates that they were not devout Muslims who lived strictly according to Koranic law.

Suggestions have surfaced in the mass media and in the blog of opposition figure Alexei Navalny that Federation Council member Suleiman Geremeyev and State Duma Deputy Adam Delimkhanov — senior Chechen politicians and relatives of Ramzan Kadyrov — might have been complicit in the killing.

Rumors are rife that this theory, which casts a shadow of suspicion on Kadyrov himself, has caused a split at the highest levels of power. Supposedly, top siloviki officials in the FSB, Interior Ministry and Investigative Committee want to push the investigation to its conclusion this time and actually identify the individuals behind Nemtsov's murder, but they are meeting resistance from other, equally senior officials.

The argument is that, because the truth might hurt Ramzan Kadyrov, only Putin can make the necessary political decision regarding which information, if any, to divulge.

And at the peak of that controversy, Putin "disappeared" from the political scene for more than a week, his ubiquitous presence suddenly missing from television screens. Up until his recent reappearance, the only sign of Putin was a short clip shown last Friday of his meeting with Supreme Court head Vyacheslav Lebedev in which he made no mention of the most delicate topic of the moment.

This is not Putin's first such disappearance during his 15 years in power. He dropped out of sight several times before, during his first two presidential terms and his tenure as prime minister. And after each return to public view, Putin took no sudden or radical steps concerning the pressing issues that might have prompted his withdrawal. Instead, he simply

reappeared as if nothing had happened, and the country's political life continued on as usual.

The difference this time is that his disappearance sparked an unprecedented flurry of wild rumors on the Internet — suggestions that Putin was suffering from a deadly disease, that he secretly joined mistress Alina Kabayeva in Switzerland where she allegedly give birth to their child at St. Anne hospital in Ticino, that presidential chief of staff Sergei Ivanov or Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu had led the siloviki in a coup d'etat or the more banal theory that Putin had secluded himself in the remote Valaam Monastery for prayer and meditation. However, there is no factual evidence to support any of these theories.

All this commotion on the Internet only prompted Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov to make the cynical joke that he would hold a contest for the most far-fetched theory explaining the president's absence. But the very fact that Peskov could make such jokes might indicate that nothing serious actually happened.

In any other country, even one-tenth as many rumors would cause a full-fledged national scandal, but silence reigned on this subject in Russia's state-controlled media. They offered not so much as a hint of major political changes afoot, an acute crisis or a "palace coup."

In any case, Russian history shows that such crises, revolutions and other abrupt changes occur without any forewarning to the public, and not after citizens have discussed the possibility "from every angle" for a week in advance — even if that speculation was confined largely to the Internet.

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