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Russian Opposition Battles Fear, Disunity Following Nemtsov's Death

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Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Ryzhkov, Mikhail Kasyanov and Ilya Yashin (left to right) lead a rally in January 2013. Since then the opposition protest movement has been steadily losing ground to the Kremlin.

Ilya Yashin was in the middle of a press conference presenting a special report on the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov — a genre invented and made successful by his late friend and ally Boris Nemtsov — when a police officer tried to force everyone to leave the building.

The officer claimed he was acting on an anonymous tip-off about a possible bomb in the building. But Yashin was calm and unfazed. "Come on, officer," he said. "You were here yesterday and you knew we were planning an event. What you're trying to do is to deliberately sabotage an opposition event."

The Kadyrov presentation was scheduled four days before the anniversary of Nemtsov's murder, an act that shook the Russian political opposition to the core. For the second year in a row, the opposition has hemorrhaged political ground under the onslaught of pro-Kremlin

forces. They have lost in courts, in voting booths and even in the streets, with authorities blocking their every attempt to engage in significant activity.

In the year following the murder, opposition leaders faced a relentless intimidation campaign, right up to hints of a repeat of Nemtsov's fate. And the campaign has largely worked: Anxiety and fear has pierced their ranks.

"No matter who decided on murdering Nemtsov, they have made quite a step in setting up an atmosphere of fear," Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader, told The Moscow Times. "'You shouldn't talk or write about that, otherwise you are going to be killed' is no longer a joke in today's Russia, it's real. It's a reality for the opposition and it's a reality for society."

Weaponizing Fear

In January, Ramzan Kadyrov began a bizarre social media campaign against the opposition, posting pictures of large dogs and rifles accompanied with messages that could be interpreted as murder threats. Mikhail Kasyanov, the former prime minister, and Boris Nemtsov's successor as leader of the PARNAS opposition party, has been targeted specifically.

In an Instagram post, Kadyrov uploaded a video of Kasyanov, showing the opposition leader in the crosshairs of a sniper's rifle. A week later, several Chechen young men followed Kasyanov into a restaurant and hit him with a cake. Some of them were detained, but the police refused to open a criminal case, implying that the incident wasn't serious enough.

The Kremlin showed few signs of willingness to intervene. On the contrary, several days later, Kasyanov was confronted in Nizhny Novgorod by pro-Kremlin youth activists. He was forced to hide in a hotel cloakroom, and when he emerged, was insulted, pushed around. A pro-Kremlin television crew was there to record his ordeal, documenting every stage of the humiliation.

Nemtsov's murder has made the opposition take such threats seriously. "The failure to investigate the murder shows just how ready the Kremlin is use Kadyrov's 'death squadrons,'" Navalny said. "They exist, and they operate with impunity outside traditional law enforcement."

Dmitry Gudkov, the only remaining independent State Duma deputy, echoed his sentiment. "We are living in a country where the fear is not that you will be hit in the face with a cake, but that you will get bullets in your back," he told The Moscow Times.

Russian society is falling victim to the fear, as well, says another prominent opposition politician Vladimir Ryzhkov. According to the former deputy, people are "afraid to publicly support the opposition, to run as opposition candidates or, even, to stay in Russia." The Kremlin's campaign against the opposition has weakened it greatly, he said, and "things are unlikely to get better any time soon."

Mounting Problems

Nemtsov's murder has largely broken the opposition, but the new atmosphere of fear that it created is only half the story. Nemtsov's great strength was as a unifying figure — always

pushing for different opposition movements, parties and alliances to come together. Now that he is gone, such unity is under pressure. "It became much more difficult to negotiate with different parties and movements without him — he was the moderator," said Gudkov.

With "the moderator" absent, the opposition was unable to run on a single ticket across all elections to regional legislatures last year.

Navalny's Party of Progress, Kasyanov's PARNAS party and several other parties formed the Democratic Coalition, which put forward joint candidates for the regional parliaments of Novosibirsk, Kostroma, Magadan and Kaluga. In Kaluga, however, they faced competition from another opposition party, Civil Initiative, that refused to be part of the coalition.

The breakdown in cooperation was yet another obstacle for the opposition campaign, which was facing several legal problems. Their campaign manager in Kostroma was arrested for supposedly bribing a police officer.

Navalny's closest ally and the mastermind behind the campaign in Novosibirsk, Leonid Volkov, was subject to criminal charges for allegedly "interfering in the work" of a pro-Kremlin journalist, for which he faces up to six years in prison. And the opposition candidate in Magadan, was detained and fined 22,000 rubles ($300) after distributing brochures about the campaign.

Soon enough, all opposition campaigns were backed into a corner. In all the regions except Kostroma, opposition politicians were banned from running. And in Kostroma, where Ilya Yashin ran, the Democratic Coalition failed to pass the necessary 5 percent barrier required for representation.

This year, the stakes are higher. Opposition politicians say they are planning to run for seats in this year's parliamentary elections, despite the rising pressure. "The only way the democratic opposition can stop a full-blown civil war from happening is by telling people the truth, taking part in elections and challenging the ruling elite," Ilya Yashin told The Moscow Times.

According to the seasoned political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky, the Kremlin has demonstrated fallibility that may well offer opportunities for the opposition. In his view, Nemtsov's murder was a sign that authorities are weak and "unable control certain forces inside the country." Pavlovsky told The Moscow Times that he believed the opposition had "failed to respond adequately" to such a signal. "Will the opposition become a force strong enough to respond in future? That is the question to be answered," he said.

Parliamentary elections are scheduled for September. Rotation among lawmakers is expected to be high, since the Kremlin has hinted at the need for fresh blood. Recent experience, however, suggests the authorities will do anything in their power to stop independent voices entering the new Duma.

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