

The Man Who Definitely Didn't Kill Boris Nemtsov

As the murder trial comes to an end, Vladimir Putin seals his political pact with Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov

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Alexei Druzhinin / Sputnik, Kremlin Pool Photo via AP

There was something off about the latest meeting between Vladimir Putin and Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. In footage released by the Kremlin on Thursday, neither man seemed at ease, with Kadyrov looking around confusedly, and Putin fidgeting slightly in his seat.

Compare this scene to another video released this week, where Anzor Gubashev — another bearded Chechen man — says confidently and on the record, “We killed him and we don’t regret it. He was a Western slut from the very start.”

Gubashev is currently on trial in Moscow for assassinating Boris Nemtsov, and a verdict is

expected soon.

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“We didn’t like his remarks about our state and our ruler. Then he started talking about the Prophet Mohammed. No one has the right to talk about Him — least of all Nemtsov, that scumbag,” Gubashev says calmly in a video published this Tuesday by the newspaper Novaya Gazeta. The video shows his confession to police on March 19, 2015.

Novaya Gazeta also released a second video, where another bearded Chechen man describes in a deposition how he and two friends tailed Boris Nemtsov for nearly two months, before gunning him down on the night of Feb. 27, 2015. The man speaking is Zaur Dadayev and he says he fired the six deadly shots himself.

“We were proud that we got the chance to stand up for our Prophet,” he says.

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Dadayev is also charged with killing Nemtsov, and Novaya Gazeta shared the old footage of him and Gubashev this week because both men recently changed their stories significantly, as their trials approach verdicts.

Now Dadayev and Gubashev say they’re innocent, and they insist that police tortured and coerced them into confessing on camera.

“I didn’t shoot Nemtsov,” Dadayev, a former officer in “Sever,” Kadyrov’s personal guard battalion, said in court this week. “I don’t even know Nemtsov.”

Putin’s Full Support

“If I become president, the first thing I’ll do with Ramzan Kadyrov is interrogate him about Nemtsov’s murder,” opposition leader Alexei Navalny said in a recent interview.

Navalny’s promise isn’t out of left field; Kadyrov personally defended Dadayev after he was arrested in 2015, calling the suspected murderer “a true patriot of Russia.”

But the police never came for Kadyrov.

“Some issues are still unresolved, but they’ll be settled soon — I see it happening now — and that’s a good thing,” Vladimir Putin told Kadyrov when the two sat down together in Moscow on Wednesday, April 19. The meeting, designed to signal that Kadyrov still enjoys Putin’s full support, came as the Chechen government weathers another major scandal: reports of a violent mass crackdown on gay men by local security forces.

The Disappeared

When Boris Nemtsov was killed in February 2015, Russia’s Federal Security Service worked the murder case vigorously, arresting Dadayev and Gubashev within days. The agency’s head,

Alexander Bortnikov, reported personally to President Putin, who received regular updates about the investigation.

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According to Novaya Gazeta, all the breadcrumbs led back to Ramzan Kadyrov and his inner circle. The newspaper then published an exclusive report claiming that the man who masterminded the killing was Ruslan Geremeev, Dadayev's chief at "Sever" and a relative of two high-profile Chechen figures: Suleyman Geremeev, Chechnya's representative in the Russian Federation Council, and Adam Delimkhanov, Kadyrov's personal aide and a deputy in the State Duma.

Rumors circulated that Dadayev and Gubashev referred to Geremeev in their first depositions, but his name later disappeared from the case, as did Geremeev himself, along with his driver, Ruslan Mukhudinov, who's now wanted by police for ordering Nemtsov's murder.

The Trail Ends Here

Sources at Novaya Gazeta and The Moscow Times say Boris Nemtsov's assassination deeply shocked Vladimir Putin. The brazen crime also presented the president with a serious challenge: what would he do, if early reports were right and Kadyrov or his associates were involved in Nemtsov's murder?

Would Putin consider removing him from power, jeopardizing the Kremlin's fragile arrangement in Chechnya, where Russia has spent the past decade arming Kadyrov to the teeth? What could Moscow do, as a war raged in Ukraine and Russia's conflict with the West escalated to new post-1991 heights?

Ignoring the crime altogether, however, would send a dangerous message to Russia's elites that Chechnya's leadership is untouchable. So Putin cut off Kadyrov's access to the Kremlin. For a time, he fell out of favor. But it didn't last long.

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By late 2015, investigators fingered Ruslan Mukhudinov, Ruslan Geremeev's old driver, as the architect of Nemtsov's assassination. Mukhudinov was never found, making it impossible to connect the case further to anyone in Kadyrov's inner circle. Police now said the trail of breadcrumbs ended here.

Who Knows?

"The investigation only demonstrated that Russia's legal system is deteriorating," Zhanna Nemtsova, Nemtsov's daughter, told The Moscow Times. "In such a high-profile political murder case, they weren't able to find the people who ordered and organized it."

A year ago, Putin did something that surprised even some top officials: he offered Kadyrov another term as the head of the Chechen government — the political equivalent of a full pardon.

Last August, Putin met face to face with Kadyrov for the first time since Nemtsov's murder. All was forgiven, and Chechnya's strongman once again enjoyed the president's full support.

The meeting this week only reiterated the endorsement.

A few days earlier, Nemtsov's family lawyer, Vadim Prokhorov, was also in Moscow, questioning a state investigator in court.

"Where is Ruslan Geremeev? Why haven't you found him?" Prokhorov asked.

"We tried to locate him. We went to his village in Chechnya and knocked on the door. No one answered, so we left," the officer said.

Asked why the police never interrogated Ramzan Kadyrov, the investigator could only shrug and say, "I don't know."

The officer never said it, but one man who probably does know is Vladimir Putin.

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