



West should echo Prague's Nemtsov remembrance

February 27, 2020 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

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This week, the city of Prague will commemorate the fifth anniversary of the slaying of Russia's freedom-promoting opposition leader, Boris Nemtsov, by renaming for him the square where Russia's embassy is located.

It's a timely gesture, for it comes as freedom and democracy continue their global decline of recent years, as China and Russia promote their authoritarian models of governance to compete with democracy around the world, and as freedom promotion no longer seems central to Washington's foreign policy. It also comes as Russia's Vladimir Putin seeks to re-write Russia's constitution so that he can retain power after term limits end his presidency in 2024 and — according to the U.S. intelligence community — has returned to meddling in America's presidential elections.

At this critical moment for freedom's future, the West should not allow Prague's gesture — or the anniversary itself — to go unnoticed. In Washington, London, Paris, and elsewhere, officials should praise Prague and honor Nemtsov and, by doing so, reassert their faith in the values at the core of Western society.

Nemtsov, an atomic physicist by training, was a corruption-fighting governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region, a deputy prime minister to Boris Yeltsin, and, most recently, one of Putin's fiercest critics. A top official with the Republican Party of Russia/Party of People's Freedom, he was attacked at rallies by Putin-backing thugs who threw eggs and ammonia at him, and he was arrested many times — most recently in 2012 for joining tens of thousands of anti-Putin protestors and, a year earlier, for protesting parliamentary election results. He also played a major role in convincing the U.S. Congress in 2012 to pass the Magnitsky Act, which authorizes Washington to sanction Russian officials for human rights abuses. At the time of his death, he was reportedly investigating the involvement of Russian troops in Ukraine.

Just before midnight on Friday evening, Feb. 27, 2015, the 55-year-old Nemtsov was walking with a friend across a bridge near the Kremlin when he was shot four times in the back from a passing car. That day, he had urged his listeners over the radio to attend an upcoming opposition rally, and he told *Newsweek* that Russia was "drowning" under Putin's economic, diplomatic, and military policies, that Putin was "brainwashing" Russians with "Goebbels-style propaganda," that Moscow was assuming "the characteristics of a fascist regime," and that Putin wanted to "rebuild the world order."

Though five Chechen men were convicted of the murder, Nemtsov's family and supporters suspect that the slaying was a political hit job that was ordered, if not directed, from the top of Putin's government. That's hardly surprising, for Nemtsov was just one of Putin's high-profile opponents who, in recent years, wound up in jail — like oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky — or dead — like Russian spy Alexander Litvinenko, Communist Party member Denis Voronenkov, tycoon Boris Berezovsky and journalist Anna Politkovskaya.

Prague's City Council voted Monday to rename a plaza in front of Russia's embassy the "Boris Nemtsov Square," and the official renaming will take place on Thursday, the fifth anniversary of his murder. Behind the embassy, a street will similarly be renamed for Politkovskaya, who was murdered in 2006.

That Prague is following the cities of Washington, Kyiv, and Vilnius in naming an area near Russia's embassy for Nemtsov seems quite fitting. The Czech Republic and its predecessor, Czechoslovakia, have promoted freedom in the face of threats from Moscow for over half a century.

With Czechoslovakia a part of the Soviet empire, Alexander Dubcek launched a "Prague Spring" in 1968, lifting censorship and promising "radical reforms" — until Moscow sent a half-million troops to restore harsh communist rule. Two decades later, Vaclav Havel became Czechoslovakia's president after the "Velvet Revolution" restored liberal democracy there as Moscow's empire began to splinter.

Prague's decision is all the more significant because it comes at a time when freedom seems to be reeling. In the 2019 edition of its landmark annual report, "Freedom in the World," pro-democracy NGO Freedom House reported that political rights and civil liberties had declined around the world for the 13th straight year.

That's all the more reason why Prague should not stand alone this week. In authoritarian nations across the world, activists and dissidents today are risking their lives to bring freedom to their societies.

We can ignore them, thereby giving Moscow, Beijing, and other authoritarian regimes free rein to snuff out their efforts. Or we can voice our support for their efforts, which would help put the autocrats on the defensive. Given the stakes, we cannot keep silent.

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