



The Message Behind Nemtsov's Murder

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Russia's political opposition has been put on notice. The Feb. 27 murder of prominent opposition leader Boris Nemtsov just steps from the Kremlin marks a dramatic escalation of the Russian regime's long-running war on its opponents. Nemtsov, after all, wasn't merely a dissenting politician. He was part of the old system, having served as a deputy prime minister in the government of President Boris Yeltsin in the late 1990s. Beginning in the early 2000s, Nemtsov had moved into the political opposition, emerging as a critic of Yeltsin's successor, Vladimir Putin, and his policies. Even so, his position as a member of Yeltsin's inner circle had given him a degree of immunity from official retribution.

Until now, Nemtsov's murder marks the end of impunity for former government officials who have fallen out of favor with Putin's government. And it proves that truly no one is safe from the reach of the current regime.

Nemtsov, an outspoken opponent of President Putin, knew he was taking risks. In early February, he intimated publicly that his anti-governmental activism – which had stepped up in recent times in both scope and profile as a result of the war in Ukraine – might make him a target of the Kremlin. It did.

Of course, the Russian government has been quick to decry the murder and to denounce the killing as a "provocative" act meant to tarnish the image of the Kremlin. To add insult to injury, Putin has announced that he would be personally overseeing the investigation into Nemtsov's death – much the same way he promised justice in the 2004 gangland-style shooting of Forbes Russia editor Paul Klebnikov, the 2006 murder of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya and the suspicious demise of numerous other critics of the Kremlin over the past decade.

But virtually no one believes that Putin and his cronies are not complicit. That is because opposition politicians of any note in Russia are closely monitored – and routinely harassed – by the authorities. Nemtsov was among the most prominent, and therefore was presumably under constant scrutiny by Russia's state security services. The possibility that he was the target of a random killing unconnected to the Kremlin is therefore slim indeed. But the assassination is significant, insofar as it communicates a clear message about the Kremlin's political standing, which has become increasingly tenuous in recent times, despite Putin's continued high poll numbers.

Putin's regime has traditionally maintained its hold on power through a mix of propaganda, economic payoffs and political intimidation. This formula worked for years, establishing a modus vivendi of sorts in which Russia's rich got richer and remained safe so long as they stayed out of national politics.

But over the past year, Russia's economic fortunes have declined precipitously as a result of Western sanctions and plunging oil prices. More than \$150 billion is estimated to have fled Russia in 2014, and experts have predicted that \$100 billion more will leave the country this year. Meanwhile, Russia's economy has been downgraded to "junk" status by virtually all major credit agencies, signaling that the country is unfit for foreign investment.

This downturn has left the Kremlin increasingly reliant on repression as a means of remaining in power. By killing Nemtsov, the Kremlin has issued a convincing reminder that it controls the Russian "street," and that it will hold that position by any means necessary. It is a message intended for the numerous opposition figures – from popular blogger Alexei Navalny to former Yukos tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky to chess champion Garry Kasparov – who now represent an intellectual challenge to the Kremlin's authority. The goal is to cow those still resident in Russia into submission and deter those located abroad from returning.

Two days after Nemtsov's murder, tens of thousands of Russians rallied in Moscow to mourn the fallen politician, and to send a message to the Russian government that they are not afraid. Their courage is inspiring, but the challenge they face is daunting. Even before last week's killing, Putin's government had proved itself to be ruthless in seizing and maintaining domestic control against all comers. With Nemtsov's death, it has gone on the offensive. In the process, it has declared open season on all forms of political dissent within Russia.