

Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov assassinated in Moscow

By Andrea Peters
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Russian free-market opposition politician Boris Nemtsov was assassinated late Friday in Moscow under unclear circumstances. Though there is little hard evidence as yet, the US media and government are using Nemtsov's death to further vilify the Putin government and whip up anti-Russian hysteria.

Nemtsov was gunned down in the center of Moscow, near to the Kremlin, as he was walking home from dinner with Anna Duritskaya, a Ukrainian model. Four bullets hit the 55-year-old former government insider. According to some reports, several shots had been fired from one of three passing vehicles. Duritskaya was unharmed and was detained for questioning as a witness, along with other passers-by. According to *Vesti.ru*, however, "The 23-year-old model said that she suffered a terrible shock and could remember neither the murder nor the automobile."

A special joint investigative committee established by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) said that the attack was carefully planned. "It is very clear that the organizers and executors of this crime were informed of [Nemtsov's] proposed route," said Vladimir Markin, speaking on behalf of the official investigation.

The killing came shortly before yesterday's anti-government march called by right-wing, pro-US critics of the Putin regime who accuse the Kremlin of stoking the conflict with Ukraine.

The investigative committee has said it is exploring the possibility that Nemtsov's assassination was aimed at "destabilizing the political situation in the country." It is also considering whether the murder was the act of Islamist fighters angry over Nemtsov's support for *Charlie Hebdo*, the work of rogue elements on either side of the war in Ukraine, or tied to the opposition leader's business or personal affairs.

Putin offered his condolences to Nemtsov's family, and his press secretary Dmitry Peskov told *Russia Today* that "one can say with 100 percent assuredness that this is a provocation." Pressed by the newspaper *Kommersant* to explain this remark, Peskov pointed to Nemtsov's hostility to Kremlin policies, his open support for the US-backed regime in Kiev and the tense political situation in Russia amid the proxy war between Russia and NATO over Ukraine.

Before anything more was known, the US political establishment and media seized on the murder to demonize the Kremlin, hail Nemtsov and promote the right-wing Russian opposition. The Obama administration released a statement this weekend demanding that Russia carry out a "prompt, impartial, and transparent investigation," while former US Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul praised Nemtsov as a "real patriot who believed in Russia's greatness."

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, expressed "indignation" at the killing of a "strong advocate for a modern, prosperous, and democratic Russian Federation."

The *New York Times* endorsed the view that Russian President Vladimir Putin was morally responsible for the murder, regardless of who carried it out. In her February 28 article, *Times* correspondent Julia Ioffe approvingly cited Russian opposition activist Maxim Katz's Twitter statement that "If he ordered it, then he's guilty as the orderer. And even if he didn't, then [he is responsible] as the inciter of hatred, hysteria, and anger among the people." Ioffe added, "It's hard to argue with this last point."

Echoing this view, US Republican Senator John McCain issued a press release that said, "Regardless of who actually pulled the trigger, Boris is dead because

of the environment of impunity that Vladimir Putin has created in Russia, where individuals are routinely persecuted and attacked for their beliefs, including by the Russian government, and no one is ever held responsible.”

At this point, it remains totally unclear who carried out the killing and what their political motives were. However, the purpose to which it is being put by the US media and government is clear: to further escalate pressure on Russia, with US-Russian relations already at the breaking point over the war in Ukraine and US and NATO military deployments to Eastern European countries near Russia.

As for portrayals of Nemtsov as a persecuted Russian democrat, they are a grotesque political lies. He was one of many right-wing politicians who came to prominence by overseeing the free-market shock therapy and economic looting of Russia that followed the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism in Russia.

After serving as the mayor of Nizhny Novgorod, a position he first received through presidential appointment, he was brought into the Yeltsin cabinet in 1997 as a member of a so-called “dream team” of free-market reformers drafted to prepare a second round of shock therapy. This included, among other measures, cutting state expenditures by raising housing and utility rates to world market levels, regardless of the population’s ability to pay.

Nemtsov’s implementation of a privatization and anti-welfare state program won him the praise of reactionary figures such as British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

In their work on the restoration of market relations in Russia, Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski note that Yeltsin recruited Nemtsov “because [Nemtsov] believes in the salutary role of authoritarian institutions for Russia, be they monarchical or presidential ... This view is evident from Nemtsov’s book, in which Yeltsin is depicted as a ‘genuine Russian tsar.’”

“For Russia, the weakening of presidential power would be extremely deleterious,” Nemtsov declared in 1997. “Those who insist on transforming Russia into a parliamentary republic are consciously or unconsciously pushing the country towards chaos.”

Nemtsov only discovered his ostensible concern with “democratic” issues in Russia after he fell out of favor

with the Russian government in the early 2000s. He shifted rapidly into the camp of American imperialism. He was an ardent defender of the “Maidan revolution” and the fascist-led putsch that installed a right-wing, pro-US regime in Ukraine in February 2014. He was also a supporter the new Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko.

His brand of free-market opposition to the Kremlin is widely discredited in the Russian working class and has little support outside a small layer of affluent, middle class people.

Yesterday’s anti-government protest that Nemtsov and fellow opposition politicians were supposed to lead on the outskirts of the country’s capital was transformed into a memorial march in his name in the center of Moscow. Somewhere between five and ten thousand people attended the march, which organizers had feared would be a non-event before Nemtsov’s murder.

Press reports have estimated the turnout at around 50,000, many times more than was expected for the original march, which had failed to gain much traction in the broader population. In an article published the day of Nemtsov’s murder, the liberal daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* lamented the unpopularity of the opposition forces behind Sunday’s planned protest, noting, “[Russians] don’t have confidence in the opposition.”

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