

**307**MARCH
2015

“OPERATION NEMTSOV”: Disinformation, confusion and some worrying hypotheses

Nicolás de Pedro, Research Fellow, CIDOB**Marta Ter**, Head of the North Caucasus department at the Lliga dels Drets dels Pobles

The investigation into the assassination of Boris Nemtsov reminds previous ones on high-profile political killings, although the uncertainties grow with every new revelation. The verified, documented connection between the main suspect, Zaur Dadayev, and Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechen strongman and close ally of Putin strengthens the theory linking the crime to the Kremlin and suggests possible internal fighting within the state security apparatus.

Nemtsov joins a long list of critics and opponents who have been assassinated in the last fifteen years. Among the most prominent are: **Sergey Yushenkov**, member of parliament for the Liberal Russia party (assassinated on April 17th, 2003); **Yuri Shchekochikhin**, journalist on the *Novaya Gazeta* (July 3rd, 2003); **Paul Klebnikov**, US journalist of Russian origin and editor of the Russian edition of *Forbes* (July 9th, 2004); **Anna Politkovskaya**, journalist for *Novaya Gazeta* (October 7th, 2006); **Alexander Litvinenko**, former KGB/FSB agent (November 23rd, 2006); and **Natalya Estemirova**, human rights activist for the Chechen branch of the NGO Memorial (July 15th, 2009). Each of these assassinations has its own particularities, but none has been properly explained and all of the victims were people who discomfited the Kremlin. Despite this, political motivations and possible connections with state apparatus are the only lines of investigation that have been systematically ignored or explicitly denied in all of these cases. Given the Kremlin's initial reaction and the dominant narratives in the Russian media, similar developments in the Nemtsov case are to be expected.

As **Miguel Vázquez Liñán**, lecturer at the Universidad de Sevilla and expert on the Russian media points out that, “RT [formerly *Russia Today*] and Russian television's Channel One, along with other officialist media, have done everything possible to depoliticise the death of the opposition politician”. In this way, the demonstration on Sunday March 1st, under the iron gaze of the Kremlin, was converted by the Russian media into a “demonstration of mourning without traces of vindication”. It should not be forgotten that until Nemtsov's assassination, it was to be a protest against the economic crisis and the war in Ukraine. As has been in-

sistently repeated over recent days, the democratic opposition in Russia, of which Nemtsov was one of the most visible faces, is depleted and fragmented.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to bear a couple of things in mind. First, that the opposition retains its mobilisation capacity in Moscow and that despite Russia's size what happens in the capital is what matters politically. Second, Putin's popularity has risen to extremely high levels, but the discontent with his power structure, headed by the presidential party, United Russia, and associated with the prevailing corruption and impunity, is also high. In a context of growing economic difficulties, that is increasingly relevant. This is where the Kremlin's worry about any show of criticism comes from. If the opposition is so insignificant and support for the regime is so genuine and unwavering, why, then, do they exercise such an iron grip on the opposition? Why does the Kremlin need to mobilise its followers in the streets and organise movements such as "anti-Maidan" or *Nashi*?

An idea that has been strongly repeated since the news of Nemtsov's assassination is that the Kremlin and Putin himself had the least interest in his death. This narrative has previously been used in other political assassinations. After the assassination of Politkovskaya, Putin also declared that her death was "more damaging to the current authorities, both in Russia and the Chechen Republic, than her activities". However, the high symbolic and intimidatory value of these crimes establishes a climate of impunity and fear that is beneficial for Russia's political elites and, considering how the limits on political and press freedoms have been progressively restricted, including the question of self-censorship, the argument becomes questionable. Not for nothing does Russia occupy **sixth place** in the CPJ ranking of the countries in which crimes against journalists have complete impunity.

The few leaders of this depleted and fragmented political opposition have shown no doubt: the assassination of Nemtsov is a turning point and cannot be separated from the climate of political persecution that reigns in Russia. Nemtsov, just like the other critics and opposition figures assassinated, was, for example, on the list of "**Enemies of the Russian People**" drawn up in 2006 by Nikolai Kuryanovich, member of the Duma for the LDPR party, which is part of President Putin's "loyal opposition". This practice of drawing up "lists of enemies" has been worryingly extended since the wave of demonstrations at the end of 2011 and start of 2012 that marked the beginning of the hardening of the Putin regime, both inwardly and outwardly. Critics and opponents have become, increasingly, "national traitors", "foreign agents" or "fifth columnists". As Russian professor Andrey Makarychev points out, "**The murder was politically prepared and justified before it happened in reality**".

In the past few days, **seven Chechens** have been detained, suspected of having been involved in Nemtsov's killing. Three of them belonged to the Chechen security forces and one, Zaur Dadayev, was deputy commander of the Chechen battalion "Sever", which is dependent on the Russian Ministry of the Interior, and Dadayev himself was awarded the Medal of Valour by then-president Dmitry Medvedev. Dadayev is also a close collaborator of Alimbek Delimkhanov, the commander of this battalion, who is the brother of Kadyrov's right-hand man, Adam, a member of the Duma for the United Russia party, is suspected of having ordered a number of assassinations and was sought by Interpol in relation to an attack on a Chechen dissident in Dubai in 2009.

After learning of the arrests, Kadyrov referred to Dadayev as a "**genuine Russian patriot**" and suggested that the murder could have a connection to the comments made by Nemtsov in support of the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. Soon after, the Russian news outlet *Rosbalt* published an article in which it stated that Dadayev had **already confessed** to having organised the crime against Nemtsov because of his

criticism of Muslims. One of the weakest points of this hypothesis is that Nemtsov – in contrast to other Russian politicians – was moderate on the rare occasions he referred to Islam. Not to mention that in the Russian political sphere it is relatively easy to find offensive outbursts about the Muslim community.

In any case, just twenty-four hours later, two news items published by *Moskovskii Komsomolets* put this version into question. First, with the **images of a vehicle containing the alleged suspects following Nemtsov** in September 2014, which is to say, long before the events at *Charlie Hebdo*. And we still await clarification of how to explain the fact that during the attack the suspects used a vehicle that belonged to a state security company, something that has been confirmed by the Ministry of Finance in statements to the Russian news agency, **TASS**. Second is an interview with the three detained men (Dadayev and the Gubashev brothers), in which they claim to have been tortured and not have any link to the **murder**. Andrei Babushkin, of the human rights council affiliated to the Russian presidency, supports the credibility of these **accusations of torture**.

Recently, Boris Nemtsov had drawn attention to himself with his denouncements of the corruption surrounding the Sochi Olympics and his criticism of the Russian military intervention in Ukraine. That is to say, two particularly sensitive political issues in which not only geopolitical interests are at stake but significant amounts of money too. In fact, it turns out that at the time of his murder Nemtsov was preparing a report that documented the deaths of Russian conscripts soldiers in Ukraine and, it is suspected, the economic interests around the sending of “volunteers” to the war in the Donbass.

As a recent **article** in *Novaya Gazeta* says, the fact that Putin has put General Krasnov in charge of the investigation suggests that the Russian president really does want to discover who is behind this crime. This would mean, on the one hand that Putin did not give the order, and, on the other, that he may have lost control of part of the Russian security structure. From there the hypothesis gathers strength that the murder of Nemtsov could fit a scenario of clashes between the bodies of the Russian security (ministry of interior, FSB) and Chechen groups that have growing weight in Moscow. Without doubt, it is a worrying conjecture to be added to the indications of serious fractures within the Russian establishment resulting from the confrontation with the West and the apparent forging ahead of the Kremlin.