

# NEMTSOV: A VARIETY OF PERSPECTIVES

## BORIS NEMTSOV: A TRUE RUSSIAN PATRIOT

DAVID J. KRAMER

**I**t is hard to believe that a year has gone by since Boris Nemtsov was shot and killed just yards from the Kremlin walls. Boris' assassination reminded us that Russian critics and opponents of the Putin regime face significant danger, whether they live and stay in Russia or emigrate to seemingly safer places overseas (see Alexander Litvinenko, poisoned in London in 2006). Boris chose to stay and fight for what he believed was right. He felt it his patriotic duty and responsibility to shine a light on the abuses and outrages of the Putin clique. And for that he paid the ultimate price.

Few people were as outspoken and courageous as Boris, a true Russian patriot who sought the best for his country. Boris believed that Russia had taken a seriously wrong turn under the reign of Vladimir Putin, and he regularly criticized the policies and authoritarianism that he felt were threatening his country's future. He sought to expose the corruption and wrongdoings of the Putin regime and issued regular reports, whether on the Sochi Olympics or Putin's palaces, revealing how rotten and kleptocratic the regime had become.

At the time of his murder, Boris was working on a report, "Putin. War", on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Thanks to a number of Boris' friends and colleagues who bravely filled the void, the report was released, albeit posthumously for Boris, to expose the involvement of Russian forces fighting in Ukraine, the extent of Russian casualties, the economic and financial costs of the war for Russia, and the role of forces sent by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. It is not clear whether Boris' plans to issue the report played a role in his murder, but the possibility certainly cannot be ruled out. Despite repeated warnings that he was risking the ire of the Kremlin, Boris was determined to do what he believed was right. It is heartening to see other Russian patriots determined to bring his unfinished

---

David J. Kramer is senior director for human rights and democracy at the McCain Institute for International Leadership in Washington, DC.

work to fruition, a fitting tribute to Boris' tireless efforts.

One of the issues Boris believed in passionately was the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law and Accountability Act, which the U.S. Congress passed in 2012 and President Obama signed into law that December. On numerous occasions, Boris stressed that this legislation was not anti-Russian, but in fact was pro-Russian because it targeted individuals who engaged in gross human rights abuses, including the murder of the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. There was no better spokesman than Boris to counter nefarious Kremlin propaganda painting the Magnitsky Act as anti-Russian. In the absence of justice inside Russia, Boris believed, the Magnitsky Act was the next best thing to providing some element of accountability. Because it targeted individuals, not the country, if people did not engage in human rights abuses, they had nothing to fear from being sanctioned through a visa ban and asset freeze.

Despite considerable risk back home, Boris became an active advocate for the legislation, meeting in Washington with Members of Congress and their staffs. Boris knew that going after a corrupt, abusive Russian official's ability to travel to the United States and his ill-gotten gains was risky to his own safety. But he believed it was the right thing to do, and no risk would dissuade him from pursuing justice.

Along with others, he and I on several occasions pushed publicly for the Magnitsky legislation, and it was clear to me that Boris' advocacy made a big difference. He had an excellent reputation among Senators and Representatives, and his cogent presentations convinced Members that voting for the Act was the best way to press for rule of law and accountability in his homeland.

Throughout the years, I appeared several times with Boris on panels and at meetings, including the rollout in Washington of his report, "Winter Olympics in the Sub-Tropics: Corruption and Abuse in Sochi," which detailed allegations of rampant corruption in preparation for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. I last saw him in Sweden at an annual gathering on Visby Island in October 2014, four months before his murder. He was his usual ebullient self, with great insights into what was happening in his country and what should be done about it. He was an eternal optimist and believed that his struggle for human rights, rule of law, and a better life in Russia would pay off eventually.

On several occasions, Boris would raise with me cases of friends and colleagues who faced considerable danger and risk inside Russia and needed help. He was always looking out for others. I was at that time president of Freedom House, which had a program that could provide emergency assistance to such individuals. In retrospect, I wish Boris had availed himself of such emergency assistance, for had he done so – and had I pushed him to do so – he might still be alive today.

Some observers write off Boris, saying he had little support among average Russians. And yet doing the right thing when the government and its stooges in the media relentlessly attack you and the population seemingly ignores you makes Boris' struggle even more impressive.

Putin, whether he was directly behind the murder of Nemtsov or not, created the environment in Russia that condones, if not encourages, violence against anyone bold enough to speak out. Russian critics of the Kremlin are demonized, part of a "fifth column" or enemy of the state seeking to overthrow the government. Nationwide television, controlled by the Kremlin, paints a bull's eye on them. Thus, Putin, in my view, bears ultimate responsibility for Boris' assassination.

One of the most important ways to remember Boris is to demonstrate solidarity with Russian democracy and human rights activists who understand the threat posed by Putin's authoritarianism to their pursuit of a better future. Writing them off as insignificant, or writing off Russia as a hopeless country, would be a betrayal of the cause Boris fought for and, in the end, for which he sacrificed his life.

## **BORIS NEMTSOV: FROM KREMLIN HEIR TO DISSIDENT**

**VLADIMIR V. KARA-MURZA**

Throughout his political life, Boris Nemtsov was a maverick, a "white crow," as we say in Russian, always choosing principles over political expediency—as when he took on the Communist establishment in the last Soviet elections (and won); when, as governor, he shepherded his Nizhny Novgorod region onto the path of liberal and free market reforms; when, as deputy prime minister of Russia, he challenged the all-powerful "oligarchs" and the system of political nepotism they represented. But it was the rise to power of Vladimir Putin and the solidification of his authoritarian regime that proved Nemtsov to be almost unique among Russian politicians—including those who styled themselves as "democrats" but quickly adapted to new political realities, accepting lush positions in government and state corporations—in staying true to his beliefs, regardless of the risk.

Putin's arrival in the Kremlin in December 1999 coincided with Nemtsov's election to Parliament in what was (to date) the last genuinely competitive election for the Russian Duma. From the very start, Nemtsov Vladimir V. Kara-Murza is the coordinator of the Open Russia movement and the deputy leader of the People's Freedom Party. He was a longtime friend and colleague of Boris Nemtsov.

was suspicious of the motives of the former KGB operative and, unlike other leaders of the liberal SPS party, did not back Putin in the 2000 presidential election, voting instead for Grigory Yavlinsky. In the Duma, Nemtsov quickly emerged as a leader of the parliamentary opposition, vocally challenging Putin's Kremlin on such issues as the reinstatement of the Soviet national anthem, the closure of independent television networks, heavy-handed tactics during the Nord Ost hostage crisis, and the politically motivated arrest of oil magnate Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

As parliamentary politics in Russia fell victim to the Kremlin's authoritarian consolidation, and as the heavily manipulated elections in 2003 and 2007 purged the State Duma of opposing and independent voices, Nemtsov found himself in a new role—that of a leading dissident in an increasingly repressive and intolerant system. He did not shun this role, accepting it as necessary for upholding his views and his aspirations for a democratic Russia against an emerging dictatorship. "I have decided... that I will continue this fight," Nemtsov told *Novaya Gazeta*. "They [the authorities] want to destroy my country, they are doing great damage to Russia, they are acting against Russia's interests. And we must have people in our country who are not afraid to tell the truth."<sup>1</sup> With the parliamentary and electoral route closed, and television off-limits to him because of a blacklist imposed by the Kremlin, Nemtsov used what avenues he could to deliver his message. He became a regular participant in street protests, frequently arrested and thrown in detention cells, once spending the Christmas holidays in near-torturous conditions in police detention after taking part in a peaceful rally in support of the freedom of assembly. A firm believer that political and civic enlightenment will, in the end, break down the barriers of dictatorship, he published reports detailing the corruption and abuse of power by the Putin regime and presenting facts suppressed by government propaganda.<sup>2</sup> A poll taken by the Levada Center in 2015 showed that 11 percent of Russians (and 19 percent of Muscovites) were aware of the substance of Nemtsov's exposés—a remarkably high figure given the pervasive media censorship.<sup>3</sup> Using his high profile and his influence in the Western political world, Nemtsov vigorously campaigned for the successful passage of the U.S. Magnitsky Act that imposed targeted sanctions on Kremlin-connected human rights abusers, introducing an important measure of accountability. In Russia's traditionally fragmented pro-democracy movement, Nemtsov managed to bring together a wide

---

<sup>1</sup> Elena Masiuk. 2015. "Boris Nemtsov: Oni ne smogut zastavit' menia zamolchat', prosto ne smogut [Boris Nemtsov: They cannot force me to remain silent, they simply cannot]." *Novaya Gazeta*. March 2. <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/67457.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the report "Putin. Results." <http://www.putin-itogi.ru>.

<sup>3</sup> Levada Center. 2015. "Boris Nemtsov." 18 March. <http://www.levada.ru/old/18-03-2015/boris-nemtsov>.

coalition, Solidarity, that would play a key organizing role in the winter protests of 2011-2012. During those rallies, which brought tens of thousands of people to the streets of Moscow after a rigged parliamentary election—Russia’s largest pro-democracy protests since 1991—Nemtsov’s voice was one of the loudest. “They have proven that they are a party of crooks and thieves,” he told the 100,000-strong crowd in Bolotnaya Square on December 10, 2011, echoing Aleksei Navalny’s famous line. “We must prove that we are a proud and free nation.”<sup>4</sup>

Nemtsov genuinely liked people, and they liked him in return. He could as easily communicate with high-ranking foreign dignitaries as with a pensioner *babushka* or a local market salesman. A former governor, parliamentary leader, and deputy prime minister, once an heir apparent to the Russian presidency, who had seen the heights of power and privilege, Nemtsov did not shy away from handing out leaflets in the streets and in metro stations, or personally canvassing voters in door-to-door meetings, as he did during his last election campaign in Yaroslavl in 2013. It was a campaign he won, despite the customary media blackout and administrative pressure: the list of the People’s Freedom Party headed by Nemtsov passed the threshold required for representation in the Regional Duma, winning him his first legislative seat in a decade. With this comeback, it seemed the corner had been turned. Nemtsov, the sole opposition legislator in a 50-strong chamber, used his mandate to successfully challenge corrupt officials in Yaroslavl, forcing high-profile resignations and refuting the Russian proverb that “one on a battlefield is not a warrior.” He was planning to run for the State Duma in Yaroslavl in 2016, and his chances of success—despite the absence of a level playing field—were not insignificant. The return of Boris Nemtsov to the Russian parliament was surely not a welcome prospect for the Kremlin.

The last year of Nemtsov’s life was marked by opposition to the war the Kremlin had unleashed on Ukraine after mass protests there toppled a corrupt and authoritarian president, Viktor Yanukovich. This was an analogy too close to home for Vladimir Putin. Nemtsov was firm and persistent in his criticism of Putin’s annexation of Crimea and his proxy war in the Donbas region. “The war against Ukraine is a crime,” he wrote in August 2014. “It is not our war. It is Putin’s war for his power and his money.”<sup>5</sup> For his position, he was vilified by the Kremlin’s propaganda machine and denounced as a “traitor.” In September 2014, Nemtsov led a 50,000-strong Peace March through the streets of central Moscow. Another antiwar rally was planned for March 1, 2015; Nemtsov also began work

<sup>4</sup> Boris Nemtsov. 2011. Speech on Bolotnaya Square. 10 December. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x74T19np\\_28](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x74T19np_28).

<sup>5</sup> Boris Nemtsov. 2014. *To soldiers of the Russian Armed Forces*. 29 August 29. [http://echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov\\_boris/1389578-echo/](http://echo.msk.ru/blog/nemtsov_boris/1389578-echo/).

on a new report—this time, on Putin’s war against Ukraine. As always, he believed that the Russian people deserved to know the truth.

He also believed that, for all the repression and propaganda, Putin’s regime would eventually succumb to the forces of history, and that Russia would return to a democratic path. “When people hear the truth, those 86 percent [Putin’s official poll numbers] will fall apart. This is why... we are not allowed on television,” Nemtsov said in his last interview on Ekho Moskvyy radio, hours before he was assassinated in front of the Kremlin. “Because once people realize that everything... is built on lies, this regime will crumble to dust.”<sup>6</sup> Just as Boris Nemtsov believed, one day Russia will be free from authoritarian rule. And, although he has not lived to see that day, his contribution to Russian democracy will have been one of the most important.

## ENCOUNTERING BORIS NEMTSOV IN 1992 HOWARD WIARDA

**I**t was in a context of change and upheaval in the spring of 1992 that I first met Boris Nemtsov, the new governor of the Nizhny Novgorod region. I both interviewed Nemtsov formally and ran into him socially at numerous openings, receptions, and political gatherings in Nizhny. Then in his thirties, Nemtsov had a reputation as a young reformer committed to a more liberal philosophy and to privatization. He had gathered around him a team of like-minded reformers from the Nizhny region. With a background in physics, Nemtsov had first gained prominence by opposing the building of a planned nuclear power plant in Nizhny; in the showdown with the old-line communists a few months before my trip to Russia in August, 1991, Nemtsov had sided with the pro-reform, pro-Yeltsin forces.

In office, Nemtsov soon gained a reputation, in Russia and abroad, as a liberal agent of change. He opened up Nizhny to political debate, encouraged the privatization of small shops and businesses, and gave his approval to the opening of a Nizhny Novgorod stock exchange. His

---

<sup>6</sup> Boris Nemtsov. 2015. Interview on Ekho Moskvyy. 27 February. <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/year2015/1500184-echo/>.

---

Until his death in 2015, Howard J. Wiarda was the Dean Rusk Professor of International Relations at the School of Public and International Affairs (SPIA), University of Georgia, USA, and a Senior Scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C. He wrote this contribution about Nemtsov shortly before he passed away.

liberalizing, privatizing efforts attracted the attention of prime ministers Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Alain Juppe, as well as U.S. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, all of whom made pilgrimages to his city. Later on, Nemtsov would become the *elected* governor of Nizhny; in 1997 he moved to Moscow after having been appointed first deputy prime minister by Yeltsin. I followed his career over the years and met with him on several of his visits to Washington.

I was not as taken with Nemtsov as were others at this time. Perhaps that is my training as a political scientist; maybe it was to do with the skepticism and cynicism imbued after too many years in Washington. I found Nemtsov bubbly, enthusiastic, and personable, but also young and even boyish in his enthusiasms, inexperienced, naive, and overly romantic in his views of what could be accomplished in Russia at that time. Perhaps it was his physics background that led him to see too-simple and single-minded solutions to Russia's manifold and complex problems, without adequate focus on the means in Russia's chaotic and disintegrating economic and political system at that time to get there.

Actually, living in Nizhny at that time, I did not see much in the way of the touted privatizations of small businesses which was Nemtsov's claim to fame; in fact, mostly what I saw was the state's harassment of small businesses. And the large military-industrial complex in the city was, when I was there, in complete chaos and freefall, as it sought to transition from state control to privatization. Nor were the relations with the old-time communists with whom Nemtsov initially shared power in Nizhny managed well; eventually these reactionary forces staged a comeback, replacing Nemtsov. Meanwhile, because of excessive borrowing, Nizhny had sunk deeper into debt, there were charges of corruption under Nemtsov, and the oblast became more and more a political and financial dependency of Moscow.

I admire Boris Nemtsov because, whether in Nizhny or Moscow, he raised and carried the flame of Russian liberalism, freedom, and democracy. However, it is not enough to lift up a glorious banner; eventually as a politician you also have to deliver and provide results. But you have to be realistic about it. You cannot in the process stray too far from Russian political culture and the realities of Russian power politics; you cannot as a driver of the bus get too far ahead of your passengers or take them in a direction they no longer want to go. Nemtsov was a beacon of reform, but he was also, in Putin's Russia, a liberal voice crying in an increasingly authoritarian and autocratic wilderness. Eventually he succumbed to another Russia, one that was not peaceful, joyous, and democratic, but aggressive, brutal, mean, ugly, nationalistic, non-liberal, anti-Western, and anti-democratic.

# NEMTSOV AND DEMOCRACY IN NIZHNY NOVGOROD

## SHARON WERNING RIVERA

Just nine months after President Boris Yeltsin had appointed Boris Nemtsov as governor of Nizhny Novgorod oblast in 1991,<sup>7</sup> a respected Western journalist highlighted the “energy [that] emanates from Governor Nemtsov” and noted “[t]he proposed role for Nizhny Novgorod as a crucible of economic revolution.”<sup>8</sup> Not two years later, echoing the consensus view of the 34-year old Nemtsov prevailing at the time, another journalist characterized him as “a charismatic reform-minded governor.”<sup>9</sup> But did Nemtsov’s reformist vision filter down to the political elites whose support was needed to implement his program?

Nizhny Novgorod under Nemtsov was one of the field sites for my dissertation research on Russian elite political culture that I carried out in cooperation with the Russian Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Sociology in the mid-1990s. As my local collaborators and I fanned out to interview department heads in Nizhny’s regional administration (*administratsiya oblasti*) and deputies in the oblast legislature (*Zakonodatel’noe Sobranie*), we found that access to both government buildings and our respondents was remarkably easy to obtain. This environment provided a welcome respite from the long days we had spent in Moscow trying to secure interviews with highly placed federal bureaucrats and State Duma deputies.<sup>10</sup> It stood in even starker contrast with Tatarstan under Mintimer Shaimiev, where we were denied access to republic-level officials altogether. Instead, a representative of the republic’s presidential administration conducted the interviews for us and forbade the sessions to be tape-recorded, as had been our practice in Moscow and Nizhny.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the interviews we conducted reveal that Nizhny’s regional administrators and legislators were indeed more democratic,

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to David Rivera for his helpful comments on this article.

<sup>8</sup> Serge Schmemmann. 1992. “New Leaders of Ancient City Try to Lead Russia to Reform,” *New York Times*, 9 August.

<sup>9</sup> Alessandra Stanley. 1994. “Nizhny Novgorod Journal; Camelot on the Volga, With 2 Bold Antagonists.” *New York Times*, 29 April.

<sup>10</sup> On the challenges of interviewing Russian elites, see Sharon Werning Rivera, Polina M. Kozyreva, and Eduard G. Sarovskii. 2002. “Interviewing Political Elites: Lessons from Russia,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35 (4): 683-688.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the three samples, see Sharon Werning Rivera. 2000. “Elites in Post-communist Russia: A Changing of the Guard?” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52 (3): 413-432.

Sharon Werning Rivera is Associate Professor of Government at Hamilton College.



more market-oriented, and less willing to pursue an aggressive foreign policy in the former Soviet Union than their counterparts in both Tatarstan and the federal government. Table 1 displays results that demonstrate these attitudinal differences most vividly. Nizhny's elites were virtually unanimous that all citizens should have an equal opportunity to affect government policy, compared to slightly more than three-fourths of the Moscow sample and less than two-thirds of Tatarstan's elites. In the realm of economic policy, Nizhny officials were again the most reform-oriented: whereas three-fourth of Tatarstan's officials agreed that all heavy industry should be state-owned, only slightly more than half of those in Nizhny supported this proposition. Finally, Nizhny's political stratum categorically opposed the reestablishment of the Russian state within the borders of the former USSR, whereas this proposition enjoyed considerably more support among federal elites.

**Table 1. Attitudes of Political Elites in Nizhny Novgorod, Moscow, and Tatarstan in 1995 (% Agree)**

	Nizhny Novgorod	Moscow	Tatarstan
All citizens should have an equal chance to influence government policy.	92.0	76.7	64.0
All heavy industry should belong to the state and not be in private hands.	56.0	58.9	76.0
The Russian state should be reestablished <u>within the borders of the former USSR.</u>	8.0	31.5	12.0

Source: Author's database.

Note: Figures represent all those who selected "completely agree" or "somewhat agree," as a percentage of all responses, including "don't know" or "no answer."

In comparison to its neighbor on the Volga as well as to the "center," then, Nizhny Novgorod during Nemtsov's governorship stood out for the higher level of democratic, market-oriented, and non-imperialist values espoused by its regional leadership. To be sure, Nemtsov had not personally appointed all of the political elites in the oblast; regional deputies had been popularly elected in 1994, and Nemtsov had retained many "old cadres" in the regional administration, at least early in his tenure.<sup>12</sup> But

<sup>12</sup> On the latter point, see M. McFaul and N. Petrov, eds. 1995. *Politicheskii al'manakh Rossii 1995*. Moscow: Moscow Carnegie Center: 456, and N. Zhelnorova. 1992. "Kak zhivoyote, gospodin gubernator? [How are you, Mr. Governor?]" *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 28. July.

as governor, he surely set the tone regarding the values and priorities of his administration. Nizhny Novgorod under Nemtsov illustrates how the spirit of free market competition, pluralism, and respect for the sovereignty of Russia's neighbors can be fostered when a courageous reformer is in charge. Nizhny—and Russia as a whole—need more governors like him.

## THE LEGACY OF BORIS NEMTSOV

### STEFAN MEISTER

When I studied international relations at Nizhny Novgorod State University in 1999/2000, Boris Nemtsov had already left the city, having been appointed first deputy premier minister of the Russian Federation. While he served as governor of Nizhny Novgorod between 1991 and 1997, the region became a “laboratory of reform.” Beloved by international investors and Western politicians, his liberal reforms were often chaotic, but brought the region significant economic growth. I did internships in different departments of the regional administration during my year there and still met Nemtsov’s slowly dying ghost almost everywhere. Many young and well educated Russians, who had been appointed during Nemtsov’s two terms, were still there and tried to fight with the old bureaucrats, who had no interest in reforms, efficient structures or transparency.

But this young generation was leaving, with many going abroad. Nemtsov’s laboratory was slowly killing off all the hopes of the young, well trained people with international experience. As a member of the team working with liberal economist Anatoly Chubais, he also had to resign his position in the government following the crash of the Russian stock market in August 1998. The experiment was over. Nemtsov became one of the leading opposition politicians in the Putin era. As a former deputy prime minister, he was part of the Russian elite. That was the reason why Nemtsov was able to say and do things which other opposition politicians were never able to do without being sanctioned by the regime. His protection (*krysha*) ended on 27 February 2015.

Nemtsov stood for the group of the sometimes naive young reformers of the 1990s who really wanted to change Russia for the better. Only a few of these people were successful after 2000, when Boris Yeltsin left office. Nemtsov was one of them and, despite the growing influence of the old Soviet security mentality, he never lost his optimism. Nemtsov represented the other Russia; he had been part of the power structures, but

---

Stefan Meister is based at The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP).

never stopped dreaming about a democratic Russia which lived according to the rule of law. He was a self-made man who managed to change the former closed city of Nizhny Novgorod and its region into a prominent testing ground for new ideas. At the same time, he represents the failure of post-Gorbachev Russia. He could change positions in the administration, but was not able to change his mentality.

His murder is the victory of the cynical Russia, which has been growing under Vladimir Putin. If Nemtsov, who was linked to Putin for some time, can be killed, no opposition figure is safe in today's Russia. There is no place anymore for optimists, for politicians who want to break with the Soviet legacy. You have the choice: Either you leave the country, go into internal exile, or you might lose your life. All this stand for the beginning of a new Russia which started with Putin's return in 2012. The current era has been completely cut off from the democratic achievements of Gorbachev's time and the 1990s, a period now defined as a tragic accident of history.

## **BORIS NEMTSOV AND THE CHECHEN- RUSSIAN CONFLICT**

**MIGUEL VÁZQUEZ LIÑÁN**

**A**fter the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, Ramzan Kadyrov was quick to offer the media his version of the facts – a rather unimaginative rendering based on some of the common beliefs churned out by the Kremlin's propaganda machine. Generally speaking, what Kadyrov was saying was that the crime could have been committed by the American and Ukrainian secret services, with the help of Chechen terrorists. With a confidence born of impunity, he did not provide a jot of evidence to support his accusation.

Following a pattern that has characterized other cases, such as the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya, it was not long before the Russian police, with the habitual cooperation of the state-run TV channels, exhibited several Chechens who were presumably the perpetrators of the crime. It should be remembered that these same TV channels have over recent years disseminated “information” inviting viewers to regard Nemtsov and other members of the opposition as fifth columnists in the pay of the West and, “therefore,” as traitors to their country. This is the image – hegemonic in present-day Russia – that Kadyrov tacitly conjured up in his statements. The Chechen leader immediately put the assassination into context: this Miguel Vázquez Liñán is associate professor of journalism at Seville University.

is what happens to those who work for the West; when they are no longer useful alive, their Western friends are capable of anything, even of making them disappear and using foul play to destabilize Russia.

As in the case of Politkovskaya, the murder suspects are from the North Caucasus, specifically Chechnya. It is a sad fact that, in such a broken society as contemporary Russia, it is simple to find someone willing to pull the trigger, and complicated to conclude criminal investigations affecting the murder of journalists, human rights advocates or politicians blowing the whistle on the corruption of the country's elite.

Nemtsov was one of them. His verbal clashes with Kadyrov, which in present-day Russia constitute an act of political courage, were conspicuous. At the beginning of the second Chechen campaign, which would turn out to be crucial to Vladimir Putin's success in the upcoming presidential elections, Nemtsov was among those who, against the grain and in a context in which ethnic hatred and the association of Chechens with terrorists was the norm, endorsed a different policy, now forgotten, whose aim was to avoid a war that seemed then like the only solution.

In fact, history frequently suffers from memory failure as regards unsuccessful initiatives, namely, those that are short-lived or regarded as having had little impact on future events. But at that time, at the onset of the Second Chechen War, to denounce, as Nemtsov did, the excesses of the Russian army and the situation of the Chechen refugees, in addition to calling for negotiations with Aslan Maskhadov, then president of Chechnya, was tantamount to defending an about-face in the official line of the Kremlin as regards the conflict.

Not all the proposals presented by Nemtsov, a member of the State Duma at the time, addressing Chechnya were sound, although among his good judgements was to have known how to distinguish between the stance of Shamil Basaev, organizer of terrorist attacks such as the seizure of Moscow's Dubrovka Theatre in 2002, and the Beslan school massacre in 2003, and that of Maskhadov, who strongly condemned both atrocities. Nemtsov was fully aware that the support of the so-called "moderate" Chechens (led by Maskhadov) in favor of a compromise could have isolated the followers of Basaev and thus facilitated a negotiated solution to the conflict. In fact, in the year 2000 Nemtsov personally conducted a series of talks with Chechen MPs (elected in 1997), which were not without significant symbolic value at a time when any contact with the Chechen authorities was interpreted by the Kremlin, and the media companies under its control, as an act of treason. In the same year, the Russian government had started to implement its policy geared to "Chechenizing" the conflict, choosing Akhmad Kadyrov, the father of the current Chechen president, to oversee the process in situ.

Since then, and until his assassination in February 2015, Nemtsov

constantly railed against Kadyrov's authoritarianism and the corruption characterizing relations between Moscow and Grozny. Personally, I do not share Nemtsov's ideology. I am neither a "liberal" nor do I endorse the conventional (and reductionist, in my opinion) division that journalists and scholars make between "liberals" and "Putinists." This notwithstanding, in a context of conspiratorial silence and sycophancy towards those in power, the courage of politicians like Boris Nemtsov is nowadays essential so as to be able to look to the future in Russia with at least some degree of optimism.

## **BORIS NEMTSOV: A UKRAINIAN**

### **AFTERWORD**

**YULIA KURNYSHOVA**

If Boris Nemtsov were alive, his place would likely be in Ukraine. Just like Mikhail Saakashvili, he could become a citizen and an office holder to try to implement some of his ideas in a country that served as an important reference point for him. This move would be possible, given that the situation in Russia has reached a point where political dissent is literally becoming life threatening. Nemtsov was aware of this danger and predicted a possible assassination attempt on himself only a few weeks before it happened.

His murder has not been able to overturn his own theory of the "Teflon Putin." In an interview ten years ago, Nemtsov pointed to the fact that nothing "sticks" to the Russian President - in spite of the multiple casualties in Chechnya, or mass-scale economic and social deprivation all across the country, his approval rating remains high. This disconnect was not a paradox for Nemtsov, who put the blame on Russian media propaganda, even more cunning and malicious than under Stalinism. In Ukraine, in his opinion, the overall situation was not even close to that. Corruption - yes, perhaps as deadly as in Russia - but, at the same time, the passion for freedom and non-violence. At least that is how he saw the Orange Revolution.

Nemtsov was the only Russian politician who stood together with Ukrainians in the frosty Maidan of 2004. Together with the then leaders, Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, in an orange scarf, full of enthusiasm. For some Ukrainian politicians, his engagement with this country was even too much. In 2005, Oleg Tyagnibok, then a little-known

---

Yulia Kurnyshova is an Analyst at the National Institute for Strategic Studies, Kyiv.

right-wing politician, proposed to the Verkhovna Rada a measure that would prevent Nemtsov from continuing to serve as an official adviser to the president, since this position would be tantamount to “interference in the internal affairs” of Ukraine. Ten years later, Nemtsov became a target for Russian senators who ganged up on him due to his participation - along with the “Right Sector” - in the “Vyshivanka<sup>13</sup> March” in Odessa, protesting against Russia’s intervention in Ukraine.

After years spent in direct contact with Ukraine, Nemtsov hardly idealized its leaders. During the Euromaidan, then President Viktor Yanukovich banned him from entering the country. As for the current leaders of Ukraine, Nemtsov thought that the most essential for them would be to make a choice – to work for the country’s future, or for their electoral ratings.

His active position on Ukraine in the past year and a half elevated his dissent to a “mature opposition” to Putinism. The evolution of his views was heavily influenced by the understanding that after the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war in Donbas, Putin’s regime had crossed a red line. The liberal Nemtsov did not limit himself to mere liberal language. He not only led protests against the war in Ukraine, but also collected empirical material for an investigative report on Putin’s crimes in Ukraine. His language was not politically correct or neutral, but filled with damning contempt, which was typical for late Nemtsov. What no one dared to say publicly, he did. Even here in Ukraine, no one has written about the war better than he did.

None of the Russian opposition figures supported Ukraine so consistently and vividly. Of course, there were Garry Kasparov and Valeria Novodvorskaya, but they paid comparatively less attention to Ukraine. Nemtsov had a clear take on the annexation of Crimea and considered it a crime. Some of his predictions were quick to come true. For example, reflecting on the reasons of the current conflict, he hypothesized that the Kremlin would eventually trade a ceasefire in Donbas for lifting economic and political sanctions against Russia. In this scenario the question of the legality of Crimea’s inclusion into Russia would be removed from the agenda, and Western countries would recognize the peninsula as Russian territory, if not formally, then *de facto*. It is obvious that today the question of Crimea is practically withdrawn from the international negotiations, and the West periodically alludes to the possibility of lifting the sanctions.

Nemtsov was among the first critics of the Minsk agreements as inoperative, and called for Ukraine to wall off the breakaway regions in the Donbas: “The sooner Ukraine understands that the so-called “DNR” [The break-away Donetsk People’s Republic] is its Gaza Strip, the better.” As

---

<sup>13</sup> Ukrainian national dress with ethnic embroidery.

for Putin himself, his deeds, in Nemtsov's words, are worthy of "several Hague Tribunals." A year later, there are some modest hopes for establishing an international tribunal for one of the most audacious crimes of Putin's regime – the shooting down of the Malaysian airliner over eastern Ukraine. The rest – snipers at the Euromaidan, Ukrainian citizens kidnaped and thrown into jail by Moscow, thousands of war victims – are still waiting for punishment.

