

Murder in Moscow: Why was Boris Nemtsov assassinated?

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The assassination of Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov is a significant political event that arises out of the US-Russia confrontation and the intense struggle that is now underway within the highest levels of the Russian state. The Obama administration and the CIA are playing a major role in the escalation of this conflict, with the aim of producing an outcome that serves the global geo-political and financial interests of US imperialism.

The relations between the United States and Russia are approaching a point of breakdown, with potentially catastrophic consequences. The Obama administration has concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin must be removed from power, based on the Kremlin's refusal to accept, as a *fait accompli*, the overthrow last year of the democratically elected Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, and its opposition to the complete economic and military integration of Ukraine into the US sphere of influence.

Especially in the aftermath of Russia's interference in US plans to attack Syria in 2013 and its granting of political asylum to NSA whistle-blower Edward Snowden, Putin's continued presidency has been deemed incompatible with US geo-political interests. Thus, the decision has been made to instigate—through international political pressure, economic sanctions, and covert operations of various sorts—Putin's removal from power.

It is all but obvious that the Obama administration is hoping a faction will emerge within the Russian elite, backed by elements in the military and secret police, capable of staging a "palace coup" and getting rid of Putin. The personal fate of the Russian president—whether he goes the way of Serbia's Milosevic, Romania's Ceausescu, Iraq's Hussein or Libya's Gaddafi—is to be decided by the circumstances of his ouster.

In any event, Putin would then be replaced with a representative of a section of the oligarchy—a Russian version of the billionaire Ukrainian president, Petro

Poroshenko—who is prepared to follow the US line without equivocation. The US media, of course, would hail such a development as a "democratic revolution."

The United States is not seeking to trigger a widespread popular revolt. That is the very last thing it wants. The administration's actions are directed entirely at convincing a section of the oligarchy and emerging capitalist class that their business interests and personal wealth depend upon US support. That is why the Obama administration has used economic sanctions targeting individuals as a means of exerting pressure on the oligarchs as well as broader sections of the entrepreneurial elite.

Significantly, Garry Kasparov—the émigré Russian neo-con who speaks for the most right-wing and aggressively anti-Putin forces in the US foreign policy establishment—wrote an opinion piece appearing in Monday's *Wall Street Journal* which makes clear that the US is in close contact with the elites, discussing with them such issues as the overthrow of Putin. He calls on Western leaders to respond to Nemtsov's killing by treating the Kremlin as a "criminal rogue regime." He calls for the breaking off of negotiations between Russia and the West over the situation in eastern Ukraine and the immediate dispatch of weapons to the right-wing regime in Kiev.

Finally, Kasparov urges the US and EU to escalate pressure on the oligarchs in order to break their support for Putin. "Tell Russian oligarchs, every one of them," he writes, "that there is no place their money will be safe in the West as long as they serve the Putin regime."

It is in the context of this international power struggle that one must evaluate Nemtsov's murder. Of course, it is possible that his death was the outcome of his private dealings. But it is more likely that he was killed for political reasons. Certainly, the timing of the killing—on the eve of the opposition's anti-Putin demonstration in

Moscow—strongly indicates that the killing was a political assassination, not a private settling of accounts.

The demonstration itself has particular significance. The organization of such demonstrations has become something of a CIA specialty, serving as a vital political backdrop and pretext for the implementation of regime-change. Individuals such as Alexei Navalny and other opposition figures are trumpeted in the US media as leaders of a “pro-democracy” movement.

There are two possible plot lines (each of which has innumerable variants) behind last Friday’s assassination:

The first is that Nemtsov was killed by elements in the Putin faction—with or without the knowledge of the president—as a warning to those in the elite who may be considering jumping ship. However, it is hard to see how such a reckless action would strengthen the regime.

The second is that he was killed by elements within the anti-Putin faction as a means of providing the fake democracy movement with a martyr. It is worth noting that in his *Wall Street Journal* comment, Kasparov refers to differences he had with Nemtsov over anti-Putin tactics, with Nemtsov taking a more cautious approach than Kasparov.

“Boris and I began to quarrel after Mr. Putin returned as president in 2012. To me, the Putin return signaled the end of any realistic hopes for a peaceful political path to regime change. But Boris was always optimistic. He would tell me I was too rash, that ‘you have to live a long time to see change in Russia.’ Now he will never see it.”

This statement seems to suggest significant tactical divisions in the US-backed anti-Putin camp. Perhaps Nemtsov was seen as an impediment to the implementation of violent regime-change. In such a situation, it is hardly beyond the realm of possibility that he came to be seen as someone whose “martyrdom” could best serve the anti-Putin cause.

The figure of Nemtsov is significant, as his career is rooted in the years of Russia’s first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin. In the early 1990s, he emerged as a representative of a thoroughly corrupt layer of pro-capitalist compradors who were engaged in a fire sale of Soviet assets. Nemtsov formed close relations with US businessmen and was the subject of fawning treatment by the US press.

At the same time, Yeltsin, utterly corrupt and perennially drunk, had absolutely no concept of Russian national interests. The United States did whatever it wanted—in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia—without any opposition from Russia.

While Putin also emerged during the Yeltsin years—though in its later stages—it appears, in contrast to Nemtsov, that he represented sections of the old state intelligence agencies that were alarmed by the total abandonment by Yeltsin of any defense of Russian interests. Under Putin’s leadership, the traditional Russian preoccupation with a “strong state” has reemerged.

Eventually, this brought Putin into conflict with American—and, it must be added, European—imperialism. Clearly, Putin is trying to rally support for his nationalist-capitalist agenda. But this is inherently reactionary and politically bankrupt, involving Russia in an endless series of geopolitical conflicts for which it lacks the economic and military resources.

Moreover, the deep dissatisfaction of the working class with the outcome of capitalist restoration—devastating poverty and social inequality—will be intensified by the economic consequences of escalating military operations. Finally, Putin’s present-day allies in the oligarchy, beneath the weight of sanctions, grow increasingly disenchanted and are continually reassessing their options.

The Russian tragedy, arising out of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, cannot be resolved on a progressive basis except through the reemergence of the working class, armed with a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program. A mass movement of the working class, inspired by the political heritage of October 1917, is the only antidote to the poisonous atmosphere of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy that presently dominates Russian politics.

At the same time, the incredibly reckless operations of US imperialism, which can at any point escalate into a full-scale military-nuclear confrontation with Russia, must be opposed and ended through the development of a new mass anti-war movement, spearheaded by the working class and based on the principles of socialist internationalism.



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