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COMMENT

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The spring that never came > One year after Boris Nemtsov's murder, Russia's liberal opposition is threatened, repressed and ridiculed

A year has passed since opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was fatally shot in Moscow. The murder is now reported to have been solved, but the true motive remains unclear. Meanwhile, the Russian liberal opposition is being repressed by the state, threatened by the Chechen leader and ridiculed by the patriots.

One year ago, Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, a leading figure in the extra-parliamentary People's Freedom Party (PARNAS), was shot dead near the Kremlin in Moscow. It was evident from the very beginning that the murder was politically motivated. As a well-known opposition figure who had been conducting his own studies concerning the participation of Russian regular troops in the war in Donbas, Nemtsov was not short of potential enemies.

In January 2016, the head of the Investigative Committee, Aleksandr Bastrykin, announced in an interview that the case had been solved. Five men have been arrested and charged with the murder, whereas the man identified by the court as the main organizer has not been found. All the men are of Northern Caucasian origin.

The court has not announced the motive, but according to a widespread explanation, the deeply religious men were outraged at Nemtsov's comments in support of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, and therefore planned the killing. Serious doubts have been voiced about the explanation as well as the whole investigation. It has been pointed out both in the international and the Russian press that

the accused men – the ringleader in particular – have close ties to Ramzan Kadyrov, the authoritarian president of the Chechen republic.

Like many other political murders in Russian history, this one will most likely remain unclear to a large extent, even if officially solved. What is clear, however, is that the liberal opposition remains in the Chechen leader's sights.

In late January, after seeing the Russian liberal opposition ridiculed for months, Kadyrov's 1.6 million followers on Instagram were exposed to a photo manipulation showing opposition politicians Mikhail Kasyanov and Vladimir Kara-Murza viewed through the scope of a sniper's rifle. Both are leading figures of the PARNAS party and hence have grown accustomed to threats; last summer Kara-Murza fell into a coma for several days after allegedly being poisoned.

After Kadyrov's symbolic threat on Instagram, Kasyanov in particular has been publicly ridiculed by all sorts of nationalist activists. He was attacked in a restaurant in Moscow, where a cake was thrown in his face, while some days later, members of a pro-Putin movement tossed eggs at him in a demonstration. They also rolled out a red carpet for him to walk on – with dollar bills scattered

across it that hinted at him being a "US agent". It seems that Kadyrov's brutality has merged with the enthusiasm of Russian nationalists in the common endeavour of resisting the liberal opposition.

Both Kadyrov and the nationalist activists perceive themselves as true patriots, fighting against foreign influences in their country. Liberal opposition representatives are seen as pro-Western and thus unpatriotic, which then gives rise to various ways of ridiculing their personalities and discrediting their political claims.

It is noteworthy that these actions appear to be officially endorsed. Despite widespread allegations that Kadyrov may have gone beyond Putin's control, he remains intact, whereas the nationalist activists are probably merely more outspoken than the establishment that surely shares their views. As long as the societal (and juridical) atmosphere in the country allows the harassment of anyone considered "unpatriotic", the liberal opposition has no chance of gaining positive publicity. Moreover, liberal opposition politicians are rarely permitted to appear on the main information channels, and are forced into a defensive position in the public discussion.

To make matters worse, the liberal opposition is not only being

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ridiculed by the patriots and threatened by Kadyrov and his henchmen, but it is also falling under intense repression exercised by the state. Politically motivated criminal charges against the opposition are by no means rare, but they are not always needed: demands from the state administration to clarify the organizational structure or funding basis of any political organization or party consume time and resources, making them dysfunctional as a result.

Even though the forthcoming Duma elections in September are not expected to bring about any big changes, the preparations for them are heating up the political atmosphere. After the latest federal election round in 2011–2012 and the mass protests that followed, the Putin administration imposed comprehensive restrictions on society and the media, which puts the opposition parties in a weaker starting position compared to four years ago.

The extra-parliamentary opposition is being pushed further to the margins by limiting their possibilities in the electoral contest well in advance. Last summer, the government decided to bring the elections forward from December to September, a possible explanation

being that the ruling United Russia party wanted to make use of the wide support for the top leadership among the electorate while it lasts.

One year ago, the liberal opposition was planning a mass protest against the economic crisis in the country and the war in Donbas. They had labelled the event Vesna, Spring, thereby challenging those nationalist segments of society that perceived the conflict in Ukraine as a “Russian spring”, an uprising of the Russia-minded population.

But that spring never came. Boris Nemtsov was murdered on 27 February, and the demonstration was turned into a commemorative march. This year, the opposition has been granted permission to organize a new commemorative event on the coming Sunday in several cities across Russia. This is both sadly ironic and highly symbolic: all that the liberal opposition in Russia is permitted to do is mourn.