

# The murder of the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov

Russia turns towards dictatorship.

Boris Nemtsov had every reason to be the *bête noire* of the Russian secret services, which are the real centre of power in Moscow. A former apparatchik, he knew all the inner workings of the system; a modern politician, he embodied a credible opposition.

Organising an opposition in Russia is a challenge, given the dramatic scale of the repressive apologetics of entrenched power. It imprisons, it deals out beatings, and it has powerful secret services which constitute a political police force dedicated entirely to hunting down its opponents. And on occasion, they go as far as a political murder.

The fact was established when “Chechen terrorism” served as a scapegoat and a pretext for putting an entire population under the boot of a bloody dictator in Grozny. Anna Politkovskaya who deconstructed the machinations of all the state crimes committed in Chechenya paid for it with her life, shot down in the hall of her building in Moscow. Others have died in exile, poisoned with plutonium, or mysteriously “committed suicide” following threats from militias close to Putin. Russian power has all the ingredients for a move towards dictatorship, and, in the current context of conflict with Europe, this is going full steam ahead.

Vladimir Putin, in the logic of the war which he is pursuing by proxy in Ukraine, needs hegemony in Russia. And the Russian KGB, reconstituted as the FSB, has a terrible DNA in its genes: the practice of physically eliminating those who challenge the Kremlin’s choices too effectively.

Thus, eight days before the murder of Boris Nemtsov, at an event in support of the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine, Alexander Zaldostanov, president of a motorcycle club and public supporter of Vladimir Putin, declared that “the fear of death is the only thing that can halt the Russian opposition”. Those who have passed from the word to the deed know that they will have all the complicity needed to escape justice. And they have decided to spread fear among the Russian opposition.

Even so, tens of thousands of demonstrators have had the courage to brave the dictatorship by answering the call of Nemtsov and his friends who had planned to protest against Russia’s belligerent attitudes in Ukraine. The demonstration, transformed into a homage to Nemtsov, is the largest that the Russian opposition have ever put on. But the anti-Putin slogans stuck in the throats of almost all those there, and it was only when passing the scene of the crime that a few dared to protest openly. Few people were willing to take the stand. The “fear of death” weighed on the crowd.

The assassination of Boris Nemtsov must be seen as a particularly negative signal in the context of the war in Ukraine. It must be interpreted as a wish to make a tabula rasa of all internal opposition to Russian policy in Ukraine. The “hawks” in power in Russia, and Vladimir Putin is certainly very close to them, want their hands free to do as they will where disputes on Russia’s borders are concerned, starting with Ukraine. With what aim if it is not that of triggering a new escalation? Despite the Minsk protocol, negotiated with difficulty and little respected, the choice that the Russian authorities are bringing to the table is that of new confrontations, which may even go beyond Ukraine.

Because there are other countries with Russian-speaking minorities, some within the European Union, particularly the Baltic states. And there is a real problem of citizenship in those countries. In Latvia for example, many Russian speakers, 13% of the population, are “non-residents” deprived of rights. They have lived in the country for decades but they have no right to vote and no access to public office. This situation is also found in Estonia, and it is regularly condemned by the European Union. Putin of course makes constant use of it in his propaganda.

For the authorities in the Baltic States that came out of the independence movements of 1990, these Russian-speaking populations are the remains of a “fifth column”. But 25 years on, how can such ostracism of citizens born and bred in the area be acceptable? In a conflict which is hardening, and where Nemtsov’s

murder signals that it will harden still more, a satisfactory solution to these populations' situation must be found.

Because what the events of Moscow are signalling is at the very least a new escalation of the war of nerves between Russia and the European Union. And the determination of the Russian authorities is a fearful sight.