

## The death of a pillar.

We have often painted, rightfully so, Russia as a very corrupt country, in which politics are decided in closed doors meetings. A country in which money, fear, and decadence have often crushed, in a rather violent way, any prospect of democracy and opposition.

It could be fair to assume that very often, we have underestimated the strength of the Russian people, the existence of divergent opinions, and the sympathy of Russians, especially among the youth, for democratic ideals and freedom. In fact, even Berezovsky, one of the architects behind Putin's first election, called the Russian people, a people of slaves, which seem to accept authoritarian regimes with very little resistance, but a people, which also longs freedom and democracy. One which is tired of the engrained corruption in almost every gear of the Russian Federation's mechanism. Despite the excessive corruption, there are implied rules. A good illustration of the very complex nature of Russia's schizophrenic relationship with democracy and freedom is an old expression, which certain Russian politicians and analysts have used to describe the situation inside the country: You can stay in power, as long as you allow Moscow and St. Petersburg to have a certain margin of dissidence, rebellion, contestation and decadence - after all, it is in Moscow and St. Petersburg that most of Russia's richest and most educated live.

It is also in Moscow that Anna Politkovskaya – one of Putin's most vocal opponents – was executed, inside her residence, in October 2006. Following her death, many rumours surfaced, both in Russia and abroad, claiming that the omnipresent Putin had ordered her assassination. In fact, in a Russian Federation, heiress of a Soviet Union, in which dissidents and pro-democracy advocates often went missing or were summarily executed in broad daylight, it was only natural for us all to wonder if Vladimir Putin had not ordered her assassination. When some journalists asked President Putin to comment on the rumours, the very impatient President said something among the lines of "Why would I kill her? Her newspaper was barely selling, no one cared about her, most kiosks don't even sell her newspaper, now everyone will read her articles, and everyone will pay attention to her work".

Indeed, Putin was right. Immediately after, her work was put under the projectors, both in Russia and abroad, it helped fuel the unexpected opposition's momentum which, later on, organized movements of contestations in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. By 2011, tens if not hundreds of thousands of Russians marched and gathered to express their impatience and frustration toward Putin's regime

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The most influent decision-makers in Russia know that it is important for the power in place to leave a little room to the opposition, at least to make it look like there is a form a democracy, in order to prevent the opponents, the unsatisfied, and the pro-democracy advocates from becoming rebels. It is one of Russia's most important rule for political stability. For this very reason, there is an opposition in Russia, one which, until today, almost entirely rested on Boris Nemtsov's incendiary statements, comments, interviews, reports, speeches and protests. With Khodorkosky's exile, Berezovsky's death, Kasparov's isolation and Navalny's lack of experience and credibility, Boris Nemtsov was the pillar on which Putin relied to allow the illusion of a Russian type of democracy to endure. Nemtsov's existence allowed both Moscow and St. Petersburg to vent out their impatience and dissidence, preventing the formation of a most radical form of opposition.

For us to fully comprehend Nemtsov's death, we must examine Russia's institutionalized crime culture. In this culture, executions are almost an art. The means, the time and the place of an execution are as important as a painting's colours. You need the right colours to send the right message. The late Politkovskaya was killed at home, on Putin's birthday. Some commenters, such as Yuri Felshtinsky, stated that it could be a morbid birthday present from some members of Russia's central leadership of the intelligence services, other affirmed that it could be someone else offering him this present with the hope of receiving a favour later on. If such was the case, the gift was a very poisonous one, one which fueled the opposition and brought support to Putin's opponents. If it was not a gift, then someone wanted to pass a message to Putin, because in a State lead by a small group of individuals who all want a piece of the cake, a State in which a security or intelligence background is almost a requirement to the exercise of power, no one is immune, and the chase for the cake, can very quickly become a deadly one.

Today's events could very well suggest that someone might be trying to send a message to one of the most scrutinized head of states in the World. The death of Nemtsov, a strong opponent to the War in Ukraine, will once again fuel the fire of Putin's opponents. It will nourish the opposition, the anti-war activists and possibly fracture his image of the strong President which controls all of Russia. Killing Nemtsov next to the Kremlin is a powerful message, not only does it show that in Russia, no one is truly immune, it also indicates that not even the Kremlin – the heart of Putin's power – is out of reach.

We may never know who killed Nemtsov, nor why, but with the existing economic sanctions against some of Russia's wealthiest, a synonym for Putin's entourage, the pressure is mounting. Powerful people are losing money, aircrafts, yachts, assets, contracts and patience. Is someone sending a message to Putin's opponents or is someone sending a message to Putin, or is Putin himself convinced that without Nemtsov, he will become the only possible candidate in the years to come?

The truth will be hard to find but it is now sure that there are serious reasons to closely monitor the evolution of Russia's domestic politics, because History has shown that in Russia things can change very quickly, within days, a new State can appear, within days, a President can resign, within days, Russia can change.