

Kadyrov, FSB at War After Nemtsov Death

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The Chechen connection to the assassination of Russia's opposition leader Boris Nemtsov is pushing Russia's spooks into political battles they would rather avoid.

The FSB appears to have uncovered signs of a conspiracy that implicates Chechen leaders very close to Ramzan Kadyrov. According to *Novaya Gazeta*, investigators have found a sustained effort by elements in the Chechen security forces to track and target not only Nemtsov, but several prominent opposition figures and public personalities critical of President Vladimir Putin.

This raises the prospect of Kadyrov's direct involvement as part of his strategy to keep himself indispensable to the Kremlin as a force of violence against the regime's opponents.

If Kadyrov were indeed freelancing into political assassinations in Moscow and were allowed to walk away unpunished, he would be taking Putin and the entire Russian leadership hostage, which might be precisely his plan. This would be a threat to the Russian state that the FSB

would be legally obligated to fight.

Kadyrov has been raising his political profile and sought to position himself as Putin's most trusted lieutenant and even a peer ruler, aiming at a higher federal role. His brazen forays into Russia's foreign and security policy, and his attempts to speak on behalf of all Russia's Muslims, unnerved many in Moscow.

His political alliance with Putin's aide Vladislav Surkov, who owes his return to the Kremlin to Kadyrov's intervention, has created a lock over Putin's succession plans, where any future Russian president should be acceptable to Kadyrov. His willingness to play a central role in physically suppressing anti-Putin opposition opened a horrifying prospect of a sectarian war in Russia.

The stakes are huge. Full investigation and arrests of co-conspirators risk destabilization in Chechnya escalating into war. A decision to freeze the investigation in its tracks and cover up would be extremely demoralizing for Russia's security services and essentially signal the disintegration of Putin's power vertical. It would expose Putin's humiliating dependency on Kadyrov, raising the risks of his seizure of power in Moscow.

For the spooks this creates a loyalty test between the Russian state and its leader who may have been taken hostage by Russia's enemies. There must be rich irony in the fact that the FSB, Russia's ruthless security service, is now acting as the last best hope for Russia's democracy.

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