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By Fred Weir

For Russia's opposition, loss of Nemtsov is about more than the man

Для російської опозиції втрата Нємцова - це більше, ніж втрата людини

Опозиції належить заповнити величезний вакуум, що залишився після відходу Нємцова - людини, яка могла зібрати комуністів, лібералів і націоналістів під одним прапором. Для Кремля це може стати моментом для початку примирення.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2015/0303/For-Russia-s-opposition-loss-of-Nemtsov-is-about-more-than-the-man-video>

Moscow — Boris Nemtsov was buried in Moscow Tuesday, following a memorial service that saw thousands of mourners line up to pay their final respects to the liberal activist who was gunned down in the Kremlin's shadow last Friday.

For Russia's fractious opposition, it could be an opportunity to establish a new unity, and to harness the social outrage over the brazen assassination of a politician who had been well liked even by those who disagreed with him. But Mr. Nemstov's key role, as someone who could bring communists, liberals, and nationalists into a single big tent, is a huge void for the opposition to fill.

The tens of thousands of Muscovites who marched to Mr. Nemtsov's murder scene Sunday seemed an expression of public patience snapping — not so much with Vladimir Putin, but with the lawlessness that clearly lies just beneath the much-cultivated

appearance of total Kremlin control. Mr. Nemtsov, who spent the last 15 years of his life in the political wilderness, arguing for more political accountability and genuine rule-of-law in Russia, may have finally made his point.

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And for the Kremlin, it may be a moment to open the sort of reconciliation long sought by its ragtag opponents – or at least rethink the harsh methods by which it has driven them from legitimate political institutions, barred them from the mainstream media, and demonized them as "traitors."

There were some tentative signs that could happen Tuesday, as several top government officials, including two deputy prime ministers, attended Nemtsov's funeral and laid a wreath on behalf of Mr. Putin. State run TV, which had firmly excluded Nemtsov while he was alive, treated him almost like a national hero in death.

"Where things go from here depends mostly on the future actions of our authorities," says Nikolai Svanidze, a leading Russian TV personality and opposition supporter. "For a long time now the idea of dialogue with the opposition has been out of the question. The mass media, the courts, and all the administrative tools have been under the Kremlin's control. Will that change?"

Big shoes to fill

But with Nemtsov gone, it may be harder to open a dialogue between the Kremlin and the opposition, something that the opposition has repeatedly requested since it began protests three years ago, but to no avail.

He was a man of Russia's establishment, a former regional governor and deputy prime minister, who went into opposition after Putin came to power. He endured being driven from parliament as the Putin-era system of "managed democracy" took hold, faced huge obstacles in his efforts to participate in elections, and was repeatedly arrested for participating in peaceful street rallies.

But activists say that in late 2011, as the protest movement against electoral fraud gathered steam following disputed parliamentary elections, Nemtsov was the main mediator between disparate opposition factions, from the neo-communist Left Front, to the liberal Yabloko party, to the Progress Party of anti-corruption activist and moderate nationalist Alexei Navalny.

"Nemtsov was an engine of unity in the opposition," says Gennady Gudkov, a KGB officer-turned-parliamentarian who was expelled from the Duma in 2012 over his opposition activities. "He combined a lot of qualities, but the main one was that he could move between many different groups and talk easily with all. There is no substitute for him."

Nemtsov was one of the few opposition leaders who might have made an acceptable negotiating partner with authorities. He was frequently spotted schmoozing with leading businessmen, and even Kremlin officials, in Moscow salons, and his speeches about Russia's chances to build democracy seemed to diminish the distance between the Kremlin and the street.

"He was a unique person, who might have moderated between power and the opposition, had that opportunity ever arisen," says Nikolai Petrov, a professor at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. "As a former high official, but one with a proven track record of principled opposition, he was acceptable to both sides."

No heir apparent

Former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, a co-founder with Nemtsov of the liberal People's Freedom Party, might potentially fill that role of go-between in future, as might ex-Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin, a Putin friend who has also drifted into

opposition. "But these men lack Nemtsov's personal charisma, and are more remote. They don't rub shoulders with the leftists and the nationalists as Nemtsov did," says Mr. Petrov.

Over the past couple of years the Kremlin has sidelined most opposition leaders, who have either gone into exile or are headed for prison. Former oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, released after a ten-year stint in jail by Putin before the Sochi Olympics, declared his readiness to replace Putin from his new home in the West last September – but only if Kremlin power implodes as it did in the Russian Revolution of 1917. Another would-be leader, chess champion Garry Kasparov, told journalists in Washington this week that Nemtsov's murder means the end of hopes for peaceful transition to democracy in Russia.

Leftist leader Sergei Udaltsov is facing five years in prison, after being convicted of trying to overthrow Putin. And Mr. Navalny, who was given a suspended 3-year sentence on charges of embezzlement, is currently under house arrest, after allegedly violating his parole.

"Our opposition is fragmented, denied opportunities, and most of its leaders are out of the way now, one way or another," says Dmitri Oreshkin, head of the Mercator Group, and independent Moscow political consultancy. "Public irritation with the authorities may grow, but it's hard to see how this changes the prospects for the opposition."