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Thousands march in Moscow to honor slain Kremlin critic

A year after Boris Nemtsov's assassination, the case remains unsolved

by [Andrew Roth](#)

MOSCOW — Thousands of protesters marched through Moscow on Saturday to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Boris Nemtsov, the liberal opposition leader who was gunned down in a still-unsolved contract killing last February.

Nemtsov's assassination sent shock waves through Russia's political elite as well as grass-roots opponents of President Vladimir Putin.

"I came out here for Borya," an affectionate form of Nemtsov's first name, said Vladimir Schemeleev, a 52-year-old writer and Uber driver who is from Nemtsov's home town, Nizhny Novgorod. "I know who ordered his death. Everyone knows. That man is named Vladimir Putin."

It was an increasingly rare public reminder that there remain vocal opponents to Putin in Russia despite his popularity in opinion polls and vaunted status on national television. Alternatively harassed and ignored, Russia's pro-democracy opposition has faded into the background as national attention has instead focused on the simmering conflict in Ukraine and Russia's military intervention in Syria, as well as an economic recession that has forced Russians to cut back in their daily lives.

"It's a chance for them to look around and say, 'We are alive and not afraid,' " said Ekaterina Schulmann, a political scientist and a senior lecturer at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. She said that Saturday's rally would serve as a kind of head count for the liberal and pro-democratic opposition, which will seek new support from those angry about the economy in parliamentary elections in September.

Rally organizers estimated 25,000 people attended, while police put the count at 7,500. At the height of the protest movement in late 2011, after vote manipulation provoked public outrage, more than 100,000 anti-Putin protesters surged onto Moscow's streets.

Nemtsov, a former physicist who rose quickly in post-Soviet politics to the post of deputy prime minister, was known as a champion of democratic reforms and later as a devoted foe of Putin. Once considered a possible heir to Boris Yeltsin, post-Soviet Russia's first president, Nemtsov joined the opposition and demonstrated for liberal reform as Putin consolidated power.

Analysts expect that the economy rather than the political situation will drive protest sentiment in 2016. There have been small, scattered demonstrations already, including workers protesting cuts at a train factory in Nizhny Tagil, truckers opposed to new road tolls outside Moscow, and workers demanding their back pay at a Sbarro restaurant in Moscow. Vladimir Milov, an opposition activist and president of the Institute of Energy Policy in Moscow, said the opposition was seeking to build its base among social protesters but added "not to expect changes overnight."

"I don't see one big turning point or tipping point," Milov said. "But I see an expansion of people who realize what's really going on in this country. The numbers will grow and this will bring forces who demand a change of course in Russia into the mainstream."

Most of the demonstrators Saturday were veterans of the protest movement, bearing posters with portraits of Nemtsov or placards urging demonstrators to "struggle." Some assailed Ramzan Kadyrov, the strongman leader of Russia's volatile Chechnya region, whom Nemtsov's closest allies have accused of ordering the assassination.

Some former members of a Chechen special forces unit believed to be under Kadyrov's control have been arrested in the slaying of the 55-year-old Kremlin critic, while investigators have complained that others have disappeared or are being shielded from answering questions.

On Tuesday, Ilya Yashin, an opposition leader and a close friend of Nemtsov's, released a report called "Threat to National Security," in which he accused Kadyrov of corruption, ties to organized crime, complicity in the murders of journalists and building a 30,000-member "personal army" of fighters.

Kadyrov, who published a leaked version of the report on his Instagram, called the report "gossip" and added: "What can Yashin write? Yashin is nobody."x

In an interview broadcast Saturday evening, Kadyrov, 39, said he was seeking a successor in Chechnya and was considering resignation, saying "my time has passed."

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