

Killing of Boris Nemtsov

A watershed for Russia

The bullets that killed Boris Nemtsov, a leading opposition figure in Russia, mark a watershed. There have been political assassinations before in Vladimir Putin's Russia. The list of victims is in fact strikingly long. It includes the journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya, gunned down in October 2006, after she had reported far and wide on the war crimes of the Russian army and its local allies in Chechnya. Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian former secret service agent in exile in London, was poisoned to death with polonium the very next month. He had repeatedly accused Mr Putin of responsibility for the 1999 Moscow and Volgograd bombings that set the stage for the outbreak of another war in Chechnya and contributed to Mr Putin's political ascent.

In 2009, the lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died in prison after he had been beaten up and refused adequate medical treatment. Mr Magnitsky had angered the Putin regime by revealing large-scale frauds involving upper-ranking Russian officials. In 2009, there was also the killing of the prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov, along with the opposition journalist Anastasia Baburova, and the kidnapping and killing of the human rights activist Natalia Estemirova.

None of these cases have been seriously investigated. Yet Mr Nemtsov's killing is a watershed because it is the first political assassination since Mr Putin decided to turn Russia into an irredentist expansionist power, posing

grave security problems for Europe. Just as the Putin regime has shown in Ukraine that it will not tolerate a neighbouring country's free choice to join Euro-Atlantic structures underpinned by democratic norms, and would sooner start a war than let that happen, this assassination sends the signal that Russia will become an ever darker, more repressive place.

By placing the Russian official investigation into Mr Nemtsov's death under his direct control, Mr Putin has ensured that nothing unfavourable to him or his regime will ever come out of this inquiry. It is an egregious sign of the concentration of powers in Russia that the work of the police and judiciary should be so openly placed under the authority of the presidency.

The killing of Mr Nemtsov, whether it was ordered by Mr Putin directly or not, sheds a harsh light on the nationalist regime fuelled by propaganda that the Russian president has created, a system where the silencing of an independent democratic voice becomes almost a trophy handed to the ruler. Mr Putin has made it a staple of his rule to launch nationwide hate campaigns against those deemed "traitors" in a way reminiscent of the Stalinist era.

Mr Nemtsov was killed right under the domes of the Kremlin, in a part of Moscow that is overrun with security cameras. This says something about the sense of impunity of the murderers. And the fear they aim to sow.

Food security

Avoiding a hotter, hungrier future

By the time nations once again get round a table in Paris in December to discuss climate change, hunger should be on the menu. Researchers have just warned that a new and aggressive strain of yellow rust fungus is a threat to Britain's wheat harvest. Another team has calculated that average yields of wheat per field, which only two decades ago were rising rapidly, are now down 2.5%, and barley by 3.8%. In each case, the scientists identify climate change as a contributing factor.

The two latest bits of research are not isolated indicators of tomorrow's troubles. The big heat has yet to arrive. It will be catastrophic. Another group has studied the consequences for harvests of extremes of heat and calculated that for each 1C notch in the thermometer, global wheat yields could fall by 6%. This is very bad news: wheat is one of the world's staples, and the world's largest source of vegetable protein. There are other factors at play in the fields. Within a decade, 2.9 billion people in 48 nations will experience chronic

water scarcity, another research team warns.

In the last year, researchers re-examined UN population projections and decided that the global numbers may not peak at 9 billion. By 2100, the world could be home to 12 billion and still rising. By 2100, according to business-as-usual climate projections, temperatures will have risen by 4C and sea levels by a metre or so. So land that is ever less productive will be expected to deliver vastly more food at ever greater cost in fossil fuel energy to feed increasingly conflict-torn nation states.

Solutions exist but all will require a generous adjustment between the haves and the have-nots. That sounds like a dream, but the alternative is a nightmare. The enduring lesson of history is that drought and famine feed conflict, and conflict breeds more privation, and despair. Come December, each aspect of the climate challenge will have become more pressing, and more complex. Everything should be on the table in Paris except perhaps, symbolically, lunch.