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Russia

Alexei Navalny Taught Russia's Opposition How to Mobilize

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Alexei Navalny's movement attempted a kind of mass mobilization rare among earlier liberal dissidents. He resisted the effort to stifle Russian society — an act of defiance for which he was killed.

On Friday — unless it had already happened the day before — dissident politician Alexei Navalny was killed in a jail for high-risk prisoners in Russia's far north. The true causes of his death continue to be hidden, and it is not even known where his body is, though his parents and wife are unsuccessfully trying to get it back from authorities. Navalny may have died from a blow, from poison, or from the systematic torture to which he was subjected throughout three years in prison. We haven't been told.

Many, including myself, still find it difficult to come to terms with the thought of Navalny's death. Yet it must be admitted that this has been the expected outcome since he returned to Russia in January 2021. Back then, after miraculously surviving an attempted poisoning by Russian special services — an event that saw him hospitalized in Berlin — he flew back from the German capital to Moscow, where he was immediately arrested upon arrival. The legal grounds for his imprisonment were senseless: first he was sentenced to three years in prison, but then authorities added on a nine-year sentence for another case, and then a third for a further nineteen years. Navalny understood perfectly well that on Russian territory, his life depended only on the will of one man. In this sense, he became like any other Russian.

Navalny spent more than 250 days, with short breaks, in the so-called punishment cell — a kind of prison within a prison, detaining him in extremely difficult conditions, including a complete ban on any contact with the outside world. Yet, until his last days, he took every opportunity to read and write. As we know from history, for many political prisoners, the jail cell becomes a place of deep — often, unfortunately, final — reflections on the reasons for the defeat of the movements to which they belonged, the lessons that can be learned, and the challenges for the future.

Last August, Navalny wrote probably one of his most significant messages of this kind. Reflecting on the reasons for the emergence of Vladimir Putin's dictatorship, he came to the conclusion that its roots go back to the 1990s, the time of Boris Yeltsin's rule and the so-called market reforms. Putin and his friends from the secret services did not come to power, "pushing the democratic reformers away from it," Navalny wrote: rather, these "reformers" "themselves called them in, they themselves taught them how to falsify elections, how to steal state property, how to lie to the mass media, how to forcibly suppress the opposition, and even how to start idiotic wars." To maintain a tiny group of oligarchs' control over a vast property empire, the "democrats" of the 1990s destroyed Russia's fledgling democratic institutions and opened the way to authoritarianism. Understanding this genesis of Putinism, inextricably linked with the criminal history of the redistribution of former Soviet property, is, as Navalny noted, "the most important issue of political strategy for all supporters of democratic development of the country."

Navalny surely had to spend many years in Russian politics to come to this conclusion. In 2000, as a very young man, he joined the liberal Yabloko party, which he left a few years later, disillusioned with the dogmatism and elitism of the older generation of Russian liberals. His desire to build a broad opposition coalition led him to flirt with Russian nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, which remains one of the most controversial moments of his political trajectory. In 2011, he launched the Anti-Corruption Foundation, an organization that proved able to absorb the energy of the younger generation that was sparked by mass protests against Putin's return for his third presidential term. This marked the beginning of the story of Navalny as the main and most dangerous opponent of the Putin government — the story of Navalny of the 2010s.

Social Anger

Against the backdrop of increasing repression and the spread of apathy and conformity in Russian society, in an opaque electoral system manipulated from above, Navalny showed that even such elections can be used as a powerful expression of protest and politicization of broad layers of society. In 2013, he conducted an impressive campaign in the Moscow mayoral elections, challenging the Kremlin's protégé, and in 2018 he announced that he was running in the upcoming presidential elections. Although the authorities did not allow Navalny to stand, citing various far-fetched pretexts, his campaign in 2018 attracted 150,000 volunteers, and in fact became the most massive grassroots political organization in the history of post-Soviet Russia. Navalny's campaign headquarters, opened throughout the country, became centers for the politicization of youth. Debates were constantly held on all the topical issues of the country's life, and the generation of twenty-somethings discovered the world of political ideas (and note: some of them chose socialist ones).

Most importantly, Navalny's campaign showed tens of thousands of people that political participation is a real alternative to the narrow world of private interests and indifference into which the Putin government has so painstakingly pushed Russians for years. This success was possible because he realized that the standard set of liberal slogans — limited to demands for fair elections and guarantees of civil rights — cannot produce widespread political mobilization. He understood that in Putin's Russia, the colossal social inequality, the poverty of the majority, and the incredible wealth of the tiny minority were the main issues. The possibility of transition to real democracy depends on solving this problem. Navalny's investigations, which caused a huge public outcry, in fact spoke not only about corruption, but also about the criminal nature of the wealth of the political and economic elite as such. The social anger aroused by endless virtual tours of the secret palaces of Putin and his friends was, by and large, a class feeling.

During this period, the issue of social injustice began to occupy a key place in Navalny's rhetoric. He actively opposed Putin's neoliberal pension reform, pushing for the creation of independent unions of nurses and teachers, and criticized the government during the pandemic over the meager payments to people who had lost their incomes and jobs. Navalny was not led to these stances because he started from leftist ideas, but because of his experience of constant travel around the country and the ability to listen to very different people about their real problems. After 2018, when it finally became clear that he and his followers would never be allowed to participate in either presidential or parliamentary elections, Navalny called for "smart voting" — support for the most promising candidate capable of winning against Putin's United Russia party. This tactic has become a serious challenge to Putin's system of "managed democracy," in which all other parties exist as ornaments and are not intended to actually compete for power and political influence. The main actual beneficiary of "smart voting" was the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) — as the only force within the existing political system capable of accumulating votes that express social anger. With his call for tactical support of CPRF, Navalny not only attracted hundreds of thousands of young voters to the party, but contributed to a revival in the party itself, where dissatisfaction with the conservative and opportunistic course of the old leadership was growing.

By summer 2020, it became clear to the Kremlin: Navalny represented an existential problem that could only be solved by radical means. However, Navalny not only miraculously survived the poisoning, but also, together with his team, conducted a brilliant investigation into his own failed murder, establishing the full list of the officers the Federal Security Service (successor to the KGB) who were involved in it. January 2021 became Navalny's last battle. Tens of thousands took to the streets of major cities to demand his immediate release. These demonstrations were outlawed and harshly suppressed: hundreds were beaten and detained. At this point, Putin's Russia was already well on its way to invading Ukraine, and the elimination of any potential opposition was an integral part of this preparation. The protests on the day the war began, February 24, 2022, were poorly organized and no longer reached the scale of the previous year. Russian society plunged into an atmosphere of fear and apathy, and Navalny could only learn news in his prison cell from propaganda TV programs and letters from his comrades.

Not a Slave

Alexei Navalny was never a socialist. He fully believed in the possibility of a “normal” democracy for Russia, with the rule of law, freedom of the speech, a massive middle class, and a socially oriented market. To the end Navalny took seriously such banal principles as “government of the people and by the people.” Following Alexander Radishchev, the first Russian dissident of the late eighteenth century and fighter for liberation, Navalny wanted every Russian to feel like “not a tree, not a slave, but a human being.” And now, after the murder of Navalny, and faced with the rise of authoritarian forms of capitalism around the world, we must remember that without basic freedom of speech and assembly, the Left and the oppressed have very little chance of winning anything.

If we find ourselves confronted with a repressive apparatus armed to the teeth, which is not restrained by any legal framework, then we are unlikely to be able to build a mass movement. The participants in the recent protests in Iran know this, as do the Palestinians and Kurds, who are tortured in their thousands in prisons. Russian socialist and anarchist political prisoners know this. Navalny not only understood these simple truths, but sacrificed his life for them. He didn't do so in vain.

Source [Jacobin](#).

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