

# Russia: Navalny and Us

Monday 26 February 2024, by [GILAYEVA Grusha](#) (Date first published: 21 February 2024).

**How does the Russian left see the legacy of Alexei Navalny's politics? What role has he played in the politicization of Russian society? What might his ultimate political legacy be? Three interventions from the left**

We lived through a rehearsal of Alexei Navalny's death in the summer of 2020. At that time, Russian security services made a first, fortunately clumsy, attempt to do away with the unwanted politician. For two days he was kept in an Omsk hospital, while his family and associates were prevented from ensuring that he was treated by doctors who did not depend on the mercy of the Russian state. The news that Navalny would live, and that his treatment and rehabilitation in Germany had been successful, was received with relief by many in the Russian opposition. As if all that was not for real, Navalny had risen from the dead and would surprise us with his investigations and expose the murderers. Expectations were soon fulfilled. "[I called my killer. He confessed](#)" was the title of a legendary YouTube masterpiece that captured in real time Navalny's conversation with one of his FSB poisoners. What could the Kremlin do? It did what it always does: circulate contradictory versions and deny everything. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the investigation a fake, and Putin himself described it as "legalization of materials from the American intelligence services." In other words, Putin even acknowledged the veracity of the investigation, questioning only the copyright. He even ominously added: "If we wanted to, we would have brought it to the end."

How surprised and furious Putin must have been when Alexei Navalny returned to Russia on January 17, 2021, we can only now understand. It seems that the cowardly "boss" wanted not simply to kill his main opponent, but to torture him. Alexei's return to Russia cost him 3 years in prison, 300 days in a pre-trial detention center, endless trials and fabricated cases, imprisonment for at least 30 years, the inability to raise his children and be with his wife, and the criminal prosecution of his associates and all the lawyers involved in his defense. On February 16, Alexei Navalny's life was cut short under still unclear circumstances. What was the reason for such cruel and uncompromising revenge?

Navalny has changed the way our fellow citizens think about politics. By returning to Russia, putting his own life at stake for the future of his country, taking full responsibility for all those who believe in change in Russia and the possibility of justice, democracy, and peace in the post-Soviet space, Alexei proved that there is a place for sincere and selfless acts in politics. He proved it at the cost of his life. He is gone, but his promise remains with us: "Another world is possible."

Alexei Navalny bequeathed to the Russian opposition no clear strategy, no political doctrine, and no guide to subversive anti-Kremlin technologies. He left behind no successor or legacy that could be appropriated. But Alexei did leave us the most precious and fragile gift of all. Remember how you and I laughed when Navalny called poor Konstantin Kudryavtsev, who disappeared immediately after the investigation? Remember all those hilarious memes and songs about the "[aquadisco](#)" we sent to each other? Do you remember the yellow [rubber duckies](#), "Don'tCallHimDimon" sneakers, [golden toilet brushes](#), and many other things? These are our shared memories, our collective laughter in spite of everything. Alexei Navalny taught us to laugh and fight together despite our

differences, he gave us the experience of solidarity. And it is only in solidarity, in the ability to hear other voices and come to each other's help, that the memory of Alexei will live on.

Yes, Alexei was a strong leader. But he never sought to use that strength to consolidate his personal power. He said that if he won the presidential election, the first thing he would do would be to abolish the presidency itself. We must understand — the Kremlin has already understood this, which is why the men in black are furiously trampling flowers at spontaneous memorials and arresting those who were not afraid to bid farewell to Alexei in public — that Navalny's cause is much broader than his own organization. That's why his cause is so dangerous for the Russian regime. It is the cause of all those who want to participate in the life of their country.

Each and every voice matters. It is not for nothing that women played such an important role in Navalny's team: Lyubov Sobol, Kira Yarmysh, Maria Pevchikh (declared foreign agents and wanted by the Russian police), Lilia Chanyшева (7.5 years in jail), Ksenia Fadeeva (9 years in jail). Alexei's wife Yulia always served as a model of restraint, dignity and courage, setting an example of what it means to be together in the most difficult moments. Upon receiving the news of her husband's death, Yulia Navalny immediately declared that Alexei's cause had not been abandoned, and on February 19, she issued an [address](#) promising to continue the struggle in order to "take back our country for ourselves." Thanks to the environment that has emerged around Navalny, a woman's place in Russian politics and public space is no longer limited to the defense of "traditional family values." A woman became not just an associate, a loyal comrade, and an organizer, she now leads the vanguard in the battle for peace and the possibility of a different future. All this as the Russian parliament prepares to declare [feminism an extremist ideology](#), as the state's control over women's bodies is being [actively strengthened](#), as books "promoting LGBT" are being [withdrawn](#) from sale and library collections, and when LGBT individuals have been [outlawed](#) as an "extremist international movement."

Although both the feminist movement and the left have often criticized Alexei, it is his activities that have made this criticism, and thus self-criticism, possible. Throughout the history of his political activity, Navalny has repeatedly changed both tactics and strategy. He criticized himself and changed his views, showed flexibility and liveliness of mind, instead of hard-headed stubbornness and desire to come out of any dispute a winner, he thought about what is useful for the common cause, and refused to do what harms it. Navalny showed us how "political technologies" can be invented and used not to manipulate the masses, but to make each of us feel part of a common struggle and to act in solidarity.

And today, as we mourn his passing, we mourn not for a single leader, but for a man who gave us faith in ourselves. In the place of one will come many.

## **Kirill Medvedev**

A decade or so ago, Navalny managed to bring Russian opposition politics, which had previously boiled down to a parochial clash between anti-Soviet liberals and pro-Soviet hardliners, into a relevant global context. Back then, the world saw an emerging demand for a new populism, as 35 years of neoliberal governance had abolished the struggle of big ideas in politics, prioritized the market and technology of governance, created closed ruling castes, and emasculated the democratic process. All this led to disillusionment with politics on the one hand and growing discontent with the establishment on the other.

In Russia, such global trends are quite evident, despite their post-Soviet particulars. By the early 2010s, our country came under the rule of a corrupt authoritarian bloc that succeeded Yeltsinism, combining the continuation of market reforms with increased state control and consolidating its grip

on power, all of which was made possibly largely by the lack of interest in politics among the majority of citizens. Depoliticization was linked to the depressing memory of the 1990s, to the fear of losing some of the improvements that had come since then, and was deliberately deepened by the authorities.

Nevertheless, discontent was growing and spilling over into different segments of society. The 2011-2012 protests represented the largest public upsurge since the early 1990s. They brought Navalny to the forefront of the opposition and helped him to finish formulating his vision of a populist project on Russian soil. What does it consist of? It involves mobilizing that part of society which, if offered skillfully and respectfully, is ready to move from apolitical passivity or mindless participation in electoral rituals to the practice of cooperation. It doesn't matter what your views and values are, what matters is whether you want to remove the parasitic caste of crooks and thieves from power. It is important whether you want to love your country not as your master's fiefdom, but as a decent place for people to live. And whether you are ready to do something for this, be it to join a collective action, participate in an election campaign, or to donate money.

Politics must become competitive and tech-savvy, Navalny said, and he himself provoked heated debates and competition by covering the country with a network of campaign offices together with his team. Like Assange, he skillfully used the internet to expose hermetically sealed, powerful corporations and intelligence services to the public. While trying to build a new active majority across Putin's electorate, he also entered the leftist field: with his investigations made dislike for the rich became part of the opposition mainstream, demanded greater support for healthcare and education and an increased the minimum wage, and sought to build labor unions. Part of the left hated him impotently, and for the sake of reassuring itself, sought to frame him as an antiquated liberal, a proxy either of the West or the Kremlin. [Another part of the left](#) owes Navalny not only its [political awakening](#) but also the fact that, by adapting the practices of Navalny's activists, it grew through cooperation and competition with them.

Uncharacteristic for Russian politics, the combination of charming openness and the (self-)confidence of a successful middle-class man, infuriated his competitors but helped Navalny to overcome the opposition's unattractively pathetic image and reach audiences previously inaccessible to it.

Navalny personified various unifying ideas. Is it necessary to overcome the barrier between "the country of the iPhone and the country of chanson," a mystified division which is essential for many in the government and among the intelligentsia? Or maybe the main task is to consolidate the liberals in power and in the opposition into a single fist? The final answer today seems to be this: in order to morally and institutionally overcome the demophobic, depoliticizing legacy of the 1990s, to unite the active part of society on new foundations, it was necessary to sever all ties with the liberals who cooperated with the system, which Navalny did in one of his last brilliant [texts](#). "I frantically hate those who sold, drank away, wasted the historical opportunity that our country had in the early nineties. I hate Yeltsin with 'Tanya and Valya,' Chubais and the rest of the corrupt mafioso family who put Putin in power. I hate the swindlers, who we called reformers for some reason... I hate the authors of the dumbest authoritarian constitution, which they sold to us idiots as a democratic one, even then giving the president the powers of a full-fledged monarch." There is no doubt that this is a fundamental tenet in Navalny's political testament.

Once upon a time, in his own words, he decided to make himself into the politician he had long been waiting for. Someone who would "come to meetings in courtyards, give speeches, conduct investigations, launch interesting projects on and off the internet." Then he had to go much further and prove by his personal example that political struggle requires selflessness, courage and readiness to die. Such a strange conviction is in itself unpalatable to the authorities, who cling to the

cynicism, conspiracies, and relativism indoctrinated into society. Navalny, who was by no means a marginal fanatic, but, rather, a thoroughly successful public politician by bourgeois standards, stood by his fatal political wager to the last. And that made his blow in the “final battle between good and neutrality” particularly crushing.

Everyone would have been more comfortable if Navalny had begun his journey with something more decent than the toxic discourses of the LiveJournal of the late 2000s, hate-speech, and Russian Marches. But after the murder in the Polar Wolf colony put an end to his biography, it is no longer a question of whether Navalny could have become Navalny in any other way. Alas, he could not. Now it is up to the people who he once inspired with hope and continued to inspire, freezing in solitary confinement cells and writhing from poisons, to carry that hope forward and fill it with political content as best they can.

## **Marina Simakova**

There was no consensus on the figure of Alexei Navalny on the Russian left. Some sympathized with him as with a tireless fighter whose struggle became more fierce as Putin’s regime hardened. Others viewed him skeptically as a representative of a particular middle class of lawyers, which emerged from the fat of the oil-rich 2000s. His forceful and harsh rhetoric, his performative masculinity, as well as the recognition and support he enjoyed from the liberal opposition (which in Russia historically leaned to the liberal [right](#)) only reinforced some skeptical voices from the left. Meanwhile, the anti-corruption protests organized by Alexei and his fellows in the late 2010s united his followers, fellow travelers, and even those who doubted him together. Today, against the backdrop of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, one can recall how Putin spoke about Navalny’s protests: he warned that such actions could lead Russia to a Ukrainian scenario, prompting something like Euromaidan and effectively leading to a *coup d’état*. Putin’s comments only confirmed that those who joined the anti-corruption protests of Navalny were doing the right thing.

The importance of Navalny and his work for the left movement is not limited to his protest activity. And if the historical task of the left is to politicize social issues, it is worth saying a few words about how Navalny did it. He was not a left-wing politician. He did not employ any of the leftist ideas, be they the lessons of the past or the debates of the present. His political orientation can be defined as liberal-patriotic — it was based on a strong vision of a free and thriving Russia. A country that would one day rise after years of oppression it suffered from its political leaders. In the 90s, it was torn apart by former functionaries and future oligarchs. Later on it was looted by Putin’s bureaucrats and humiliated by the president himself as he seized all branches of power. Navalny has consistently opposed this systemic humiliation that political institutions, civil institutions, and the Russian people have continuously suffered. While Putin believed neither in the political process nor in the autonomy of society, Navalny believed in both.

Today “the people” may seem an outdated political concept. But Navalny persisted in using it. Perhaps he chose it as a lawyer: according to the Russian Constitution, the sovereign and the only source of power in the country is the multiethnic people of Russia. Perhaps he preferred it as a democrat and populist: the term suited his popular politics, which embraced people of the most diverse views and ideological habits. In fact, Navalny always stood out for his straightforward democratism. In this case, democratism should not be understood as political elasticity or reliance on a broad consensus on all issues. Navalny’s democratism consisted in his appeal to the broadest strata of the population. He always spoke directly to the masses. Ironically, the politician, who was himself a product of the mass culture of Putinism, tried to smash the political fortifications of this mass culture. Along the way, he pointed out the diseases this culture suffered from: mistrust of others, the cultivation of private zones, the fear of leaving comfortable places and losing cushy jobs, the tendency to see activism as a meaningless social burden, and the idea of politics as a dirty game.

All that contributed to the mass depoliticization of Russians.

It is no coincidence that Navalny worked not only as an investigative journalist and a politician, but in many ways and, first and foremost, as a media manager. He relied on fast and popular, that is, mass information channels, through which he debunked Putin's officials and called for protest. And this media strategy yielded results in terms of political mobilization. In the late 2010s, people who joined Navalny's team and the army of his supporters had no previous political or activist experience. Against the backdrop of the growing apathy that accompanied Russia's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, this was a success.

Navalny's democratism was anti-elitist. And one point is worth emphasizing here. During the long years of Putin's power, various groups of Russian society shared an elitist sentiment: these were the oligarchy and the nouveau riche, high-society crowds and gossip columnists, top- and mid-level managers, [systemic liberals](#) working for the state and its institutions, non-systemic liberals in the opposition media, hereditary intellectuals, and so on. Of course, each of these groups understood the elite and its attributes in its own way. But the aspiration to be one, no matter how it was understood, remained unchanged. Navalny never shared that attitude. He ridiculed elitist and bohemian leisure activities, be they conspicuous consumption, high-society gatherings, or transgressive pleasures. In the same way, in the mid 1960s, Isaac Deutscher ironized the liberated cultural bohemians who believed that a psychedelic revolution in the individual mind was a sufficient condition for universal emancipation.

Moreover, Navalny's anti-elitism was where the politicization of social demand took place. Not only was his political style anti-elitist, but so was the content of his work in investigating corruption schemes. During the conservative turn of the regime, which replaced talk of politics and material living conditions with a mantra about the importance of traditional values, the insistence on the socio-economic issue took on special weight. At the same time, the investigations conducted by Navalny and the [ACF](#) not only repeatedly revealed how corrupted Russian officials and the president's inner circle were. Their investigations expressed a simple idea: the property of the Russian authorities is nothing but theft. The scale of this theft was so vast that its discovery inevitably made people see how vast the scale of social injustice was. Those at the top of the Putin regime had stolen means sufficient for a decent life for all — and they stole from Russian citizens an entire country. The time is ripe to take it back. In this light of struggle for social justice, one of the points of Navalny's 2018 election program — organizing a special system for distributing the proceeds of the unjust privatization of the 1990s — becomes even clearer.

Those who took part in rallies and anti-corruption protests may remember Navalny shouting "Who is the power here?" This question was always followed by the answer "We are the power here!" — this was what the protesting public shouted back along with Navalny himself. This chant was usually repeated several times during every rally. Having emerged during the protests of 2011–12, the slogan "[We are the power here!](#)" has long remained in the repertoire of participants in subsequent protests — it could be heard during mass actions against the atrocities of the regime, against the political persecution and repression that later fatally impacted Navalny himself.

"We are the power here!" is not only a loud and demanding slogan. It is also an iconic illustration of the political impact of Navalny's work on Russian society. Contrary to the post-Soviet allergy to any form of collective self-understanding, Navalny has managed to do something very important. He managed to give politically frustrated but extremely divided people the object of their loss — their political "we". And also to remind them that power can be taken or constituted but not given. On February 24, 2022, the Kremlin unleashed a criminal war against Ukraine and stole this "we" by putting the inhabitants of both countries at risk of physical annihilation and destroying hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians. The fierce struggle for "us" has become a matter of life and

death, and Navalny's murder is one of the tragic episodes in this struggle. Arguably, the task of the left is to expropriate what has been stolen — to take the “we” away from the deadly regime and bring it back to life.

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