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The peak of repression

Navalny's death is a deep blow for the Russian opposition. Still, not all is lost

The death of Alexei Navalny in the IK-3 prison camp, in the permafrost region above the Arctic Circle, is a dramatic, sinister event. This is hardly surprising, and yet hard to believe. A few days before Ukraine's withdrawal from Avdiivka and shortly before the anniversary of the murder of Boris Nemtsov, the news of Navalny's death read like a bad joke.

Alexei Navalny's death is the third shock to the latter-day system of Putin in a short period of time. Almost two years after the attack on Ukraine and eight months after the Wagner revolt, these days, once again, offer proof of the extent to which public events in Russia are dominated by sudden, shocking, clandestine occurrences. Violence appears to be the last remaining mode of politics. Russian society has no choice but to watch Putin, Prigozhin and Navalny in their triumphs and tragedies.

For a quarter of a century, the Kremlin has been working to conceal the actual mechanisms of power – first and foremost from its own citizens – behind a thick smokescreen of staging and manipulation. In Russia, politics is theatre – a proven strategy that feeds cynicism and encourages apathy. However, the increasing shocks of recent times are too powerful to be kept under control by censorship and propaganda. Each time, whether or not by design, a previously underestimated weakness of the system is revealed.

Belief over truth

People have long believed in the collective nature of decision-making within the Russian leadership. One popular thesis was that Putin's rule was so long-lived and unchallenged because he was able to manoeuvre and mediate skilfully as an arbiter between different groups in the elite. After 24 February 2022, however, Russia and the world have learned that landmark decisions are made in a much narrower circle than is generally assumed — perhaps even entirely autocratically. A system dominated by only one man in his way is fatally tied to his life cycle.

The uprising of the Wagnerites also shook up an old Russian axiom of power: Russia is a strong state because its monopoly on the use of force is so cost-intensive and excessively organised. There are over a dozen responsible services, authorities, and private security companies, several million men under arms, constantly increasing security budgets – and yet not a single man in uniform stands in the way of the Prigozhin column out of his own free will and with a genuine sense of duty as long as there are no unambiguous instructions coming from Moscow. Could it possibly have taken so long because the circle of final decision-makers has become so small? And aren't members of the police and army anything but immune to the paralysing influence of the omnipresent political orchestration?

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However, the death of Alexei Navalny eludes the Kremlin's prerogative of interpretation. Large parts of Russian society see it as a murder. This is not surprising given the disgraceful game of hide-and-seek about his body and the clear acceptance of a fatal outcome due to the continually worsening conditions in prison. An actual, repeated attempt on his life is also conceivable, although the truth will probably never be known. However, like the question of whether Prigozhin's plane really fell out of the sky on its own, this is now immaterial. People believe what is irrefutably intuitive. In a system of staged, fake politics, the only thing that matters is what people believe. And for the vast majority of people, it went like this: Vladimir Putin, the autocrat of Russia, first hid his most important adversary Navalny as far away as possible and then had him executed. Does this appear as a sign of strength and sovereignty, especially in the eyes of the ruling political elite?

A human example of resistance

The answer is: yes. The death of Alexei Navalny is deeply disheartening for Russian dissidents who, in exile and in Russia itself, found support and orientation in his person. Like no other, Navalny had sensed how much dynamism and protest potential there was in the supposedly apathetic Russian society. He successfully built alliances between the fragmented opposition, revitalised public policy through street

campaigning and debate formats, helped inspire mass demonstrations, and repeatedly invented innovations that appealed to young, non-cynical supporters – sometimes on YouTube, sometimes through a network of activist staff.

He did not allow himself to be tempted into becoming a politician of Moscow, the capital city, but instead invested a great deal of time and energy into constantly maintaining contacts in different parts of the country. Most importantly, he repeatedly countered the fatalism of the disappointed and the elderly with working strategies, almost getting himself elected mayor of Moscow, and thus clearly showed why action is not pointless. In short, he showed an entire generation of his compatriots exactly what the Kremlin was trying to hide, namely what future-oriented, republican, hopeful politics open to dialogue could look like.

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Navalny has also shown an ability to learn from the crudeness of his early nationalist tendencies – for example, while incarcerated he learned a smattering of the Kyrgyz language from Kyrgyz fellow inmates, and most recently, he campaigned for the rights of discriminated Muslim prisoners. His work and his life are now a publicly accessible didactic collection of concrete examples showing that Russia is not susceptible to the inevitable cultural curse of autocracy and does not have to remain a society of subjects that is incapable of democracy.

The Kremlin has recognised these capabilities and strategies – and correctly assessed them as threats. Navalny's organisation has been brutally dismantled. Further investigations and proceedings against its members are expected. In this respect, the death of Alexei Navalny forms the logical culmination of repression, a final rejection of tolerance for potentially powerful alternatives.

In a month's time, Putin will be confirmed as President of the Russian Federation by a plebiscite, as planned in advance. According to the constitution as he himself modified it, he will then have until 2036 to realise everything he could possibly want to do. His public, historicising statements, delivered with élan, are a clear indication that even an end to the Russian-Ukrainian war does not necessarily mean that Putin's geopolitical reorganisation ambitions will be satisfied.

A newfound courage

What Putin obviously no longer wants to concern himself with is the fine-tuning of the domestic political power apparatus: the election campaign is being run in a rather complacent way by his presidential administration, the ballot slip is shorter than ever, and even the experimentation with a quasi-alternative candidate like Boris Nadezhdin was quickly shelved.

And now there emerges a shadow play of rumours and conjecture that can no longer be cleared up and contained, a new doubt about the quality of the decisions from the very top (whereas in the USSR, precautions would have been taken to prevent the 'accidental' loss of such a VIP prisoner), and a martyr shortly before the election date. Moreover, as an energetic, authentic representative of Navalny's political legacy beyond the reach of the Russian secret services: Yulia Navalnaya's brilliant, perfectly staged performance will go down in the history of political manifestos. She manages to not only absorb and accept the grief and shock of her audience of millions, but also does not shy away from appealing to the rage, anger and even hatred that so many of Navalny's supporters are currently feeling. Therapeutically speaking, this is an essential step on the path from hopelessness to newfound courage. No one else from the Russian opposition has had the credibility, the communication skills, the team, the resources, and the right timing for such an offer of consolidation.

In his obituary for Navalny, the left-wing sociologist and philosopher Grigory Yudin quotes Theodor Adorno (who in turn quotes Christian Grabbe) as saying, 'for nothing but despair can save us.' One must shake off illusions, reach the deepest level of despondency and despair, before regaining the ability to act again, before one can no longer be held back by self-reassurance – 'how old can Putin get?', 'the war will soon be over anyway', 'what can I do as an individual?'

Navalny used to say about his wife: 'she is much tougher than I am.' She can really use this toughness. She may not be on the ballot, but suddenly she is something of a presidential candidate for an alternative Russia. And this just three days after her husband's death – as if in the meantime she had read Adorno.

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