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## FEATURED REVIEW

# Alexei Navalny vs. Vladimir Putin: When Politics Enter the Epic Realm

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Dollbaum, Jan Matti, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble. *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. xii + 252 pp. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-761170-8.

Ofentimes asking good questions is more important than the answers that follow.

More than twenty years ago the world's attention was on the question: Who Is Mr. Putin?, urged by the dramatic rise of a previously unknown KGB officer to the presidency of a country as large and as important as Russia. The answers to that question have abounded and keep on coming still, even though the urgency of the question has, arguably, been resolved. Vladimir Putin has had more than sufficient time in public limelight to show what he is about and what values motivate his leadership. As the Russian leader slowly ages and expectations of his eventual departure grow, an increasing number of observers of Russian politics focus on the potential outlines of the post-Putin era. The more optimistic observers see the potential for political change and democratic reform in Russia. They highlight the regime fragility and, at times, place their hopes with the younger generations—those who grew up in the “fat” and relatively free 2000s.<sup>1</sup> The more pessimistic observers argue that in the absence of a vibrant civil society, and in the context of widespread disappointment with democratization and liberalism of the 1990s, any hopes for progressive political changes are misplaced.<sup>2</sup>

Jan Matti Dollbaum, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble reflect on Russia's new political exigencies. The question they ask and respond to in this book sets a new agenda: Who Is Alexei Navalny? It is a timely question. Navalny's return to Russia on January 17, 2021, after his recovery from being poisoned in August 2020, his immediate arrest at the border, and the release of the investigation about Putin's Palace the following day, combined to start a new political moment in Russia, one that catalyzed several important shifts in Russian politics. If Putin's persona acquired a symbolic role after the Crimea annexation in 2014, Navalny attained a new symbolic status following his brave (even heroic) decision to return

<sup>1</sup>Anders Åslund and Leonid Gozman, “Russia after Putin: How to Rebuild the State,” Atlantic Council, February 24, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/russia-after-putin-report/>.

<sup>2</sup>“Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia: How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can Be Done,” Chatham House, May 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-16-what-comes-after-putin-must-be-better-putin>.

to Russia. His choice to return in the face of authorities warning him not to, consolidated his image as a defiant leader of political opposition in Russia. He is the central symbol of anti-Putinism in contemporary Russia and the political figure around which the opposition to the current regime in Russia can consolidate. Navalny's popularity is likely to grow further as soon as he reappears in the public space. The Kremlin undoubtedly realizes this and will do everything to keep him in prison as long as it can. Nonetheless, the symbolic shift from a political landscape with one leader—Putin—to one divided between two leaders appears irreversible.

Nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, Navalny is the main political prisoner of the Russian state today: he continues to influence Russian politics even from his prison cell, and barring some world-shattering event in Russia, his political presence will not go away any time soon. His political team deployed a “smart voting” mechanism for coordinating voters' choices that thousands of Russian voters used during the most recent parliamentary elections in Russia in September 2021. The Kremlin rushed to block access to “smart voting” websites and applications that contained information about the candidates.

Navalny may not have received the Nobel Peace Prize, but as the public controversy over the Nobel winner unfolded, news broke that Navalny had been awarded the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. This Western recognition of Navalny—alongside his domestic non-recognition and persecution—has turned into yet another sign of the deep geopolitical fracture between Russia and the West. It is as if history repeats itself and the individual stories of exceptional Soviet citizens disagreeing and actively opposing the Soviet regime are being repeated all over again—this time in a new, more globalized context and new, non-ideological Russia. Besides the geopolitical repercussions of Putin-Navalny standoff in Russia, the Navalny issue is also the issue of Russia's political future. The dynamics of the recent events in Russia and the ever-narrowing space for political opposition lay bare the social and political constraints to political change in the country and posits a searching question as to where such change might originate from.

*Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* gives a three-part answer to the central question “Who Is Alexei Navalny?” and looks at three central components of his career path. Navalny's persona is considered through the frame of his careers as an *anti-corruption activist*, a *politician*, and a *protester*. What do we learn from each of these stories about Navalny?

The story of Navalny the anti-corruption activist is about a man of principles and courage. Navalny started out around 2007 as a minority shareholder in Russian companies who demanded access to companies' annual reports and questioned management decisions on dividend payments. His personal awareness of being wronged as a minority shareholder was quickly transformed into his more systematic work on exposing those wrongs in his personal blog. The audience of his blog grew rapidly, with about 55,000 reading the blog daily by the end of 2011 (p. 23). Encouraged by the success of the blog, in late 2010, Navalny launched a new website, “RosPil,” to investigate corruption in state procurement, financing the venture through crowd-funding and engaging other people interested in this issue. A bit more than a year later, in February 2012, Navalny brought his multiple projects under the umbrella of Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), a more formally designed NGO where he gathered together his core team of lawyers and other experts. That Russian moment of public activism, new online projects, and NGOs pursuing the objective of government accountability around 2010–12 culminated in the protests of 2011–12. That historical

moment contained the promise of a new era of Russian reforms similar to American Progressivism in the first decades of the twentieth century, a reform movement that tackled the widespread political corruption and corporate abuse prevalent in the United States. Russia's crony system proved much more stable, however, while societal forces quickly retreated. The Kremlin—under Putin's leadership from 2012—found new rhetorical, institutional, and political tools to maintain the system's stability. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was a culmination of the Kremlin's new strategy of legitimization.

The second story focuses on Navalny, the politician. Navalny's first trial in politics took place in 2013, when he ran for mayor of Moscow and won 27 percent of the votes (much more than what the authorities expected him to get). In December 2016, Navalny launched a presidential campaign aimed at the 2018 elections. His presidential ambition was cut short, however, when the authorities barred him from running. The book carefully traces Navalny's political leanings and provides a much-needed discussion of Navalny's attempt to blend liberalism and nationalism. Starting out as a businessman in the 1990s, Navalny is very much a self-made man who believes in market economy, embraces individual autonomy, and provides a role model of a responsible citizen who cares about his surroundings. At the same time, Navalny was intensely attuned to the *Zeitgeist* of the first decade of the twenty-first century: the rise of national-patriotic ideas of different types channeled through various groups and organizations in the country. Navalny's association with nationalist ideas—along with his participation in nationalist rallies and his famous slogan, "Stop feeding the Caucasus"—would become a political burden later on, but he never openly disavowed nationalism. A pragmatic politician, Navalny saw a widespread disenchantment with liberalism, which had failed to deliver on the promise of prosperity. He recognized this disenchantment much earlier than other political observers, such as Ivan Krastev and others, who, faced with rising populist challenges in Europe, have recently focused their attention to these issues.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, by the time of the 2011–12 protests "For Fair Elections," Navalny took the helm as one of the leaders of the liberal opposition. Along with other leaders such as Nemtsov and Kasyanov, he tried to build a democratic coalition in 2015. That coalition collapsed under the weight of public scandals and disagreements among the leaders in 2016.

With neither nationalism nor liberalism playing to his political advantage, Navalny abandoned their advocacy and focused on issues of social inequality in Russia. In the atmosphere of growing economic stagnation and falling income levels, the rise of poverty and sharp inequality in Russia brought social issues to the center of the political agenda. From around 2018, Navalny's political activism began to highlight social issues. His actions in this sphere illuminate his third persona discussed in the book: Navalny as a protester and a protest leader. The authors outline "Team Navalny's" methodical approach to developing a nationwide network of pro-Navalny political activists. Team Navalny purposefully recruited activists into regional offices (*shtaby*) to channel messages and policies from the central headquarters, to mobilize a wider group of supporters, as well as to organize protests and actions locally.

All three stories of Alexei Navalny—activist, politician, protestor—reflect the technocratic tools used by a very professionally oriented Team Navalny (sometimes referred

<sup>3</sup>Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, "How Liberalism Became 'the God that Failed' in Eastern Europe," *The Guardian*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/24/western-liberalism-failed-post-communist-eastern-europe>.

to as “Collective Navalny,” echoing Mikhail Zygar’s 2016 references to “collective Putin”).<sup>4</sup> Navalny and his team’s professionalism and creativity in addressing the numerous problems they are challenged by at different levels is an important aspect of their multifaceted work in fighting corruption, building an opposition movement, and organizing electoral campaigns. The Kremlin’s latest round of repressive actions—directed at Navalny personally, his team members, and the network of his supporters in the regions (analyzed in one of the last chapters in the book)—are also a reflection of Navalny’s political success and perceived threat to the Kremlin. His intentional actions of exposing Russia’s corrupt elites, building a nationwide opposition network, and mobilizing electoral vote against the party of power through his “smart voting” campaign have disturbed the status-quo. Putin’s very intentional and long-standing refusal to say Navalny’s name aloud signifies the extraordinary character of Navalny political phenomenon.

The book is not very ambitious analytically in terms of advancing a theory of political contestation, protests, or leadership in authoritarian regimes. It sets its objectives at a more descriptive level: the public deserves and needs a more nuanced, balanced, and comprehensively framed discussion of who Mr. Navalny is. On that front, the book delivers very well. All parts of the book evince a richness and nuance that comes from the team effort of writing a book by three scholars who have been studying Russia independently. Such pulling of intellectual resources for writing a book on a burning topic is a model case by itself. The book’s turn-around time was just a few months, and it landed on bookshelves at a time when the interested audience was most ripe.

It is not simply a political biography. Besides its focus on Alexei Navalny, the book also provides an excellent glimpse into the dynamics of Russian politics during 2011–12 and its changes after the annexation of Crimea. It elaborates on the Kremlin’s governance mechanisms, on Putin’s popularity after Crimea, and the various motivations driving Navalny supporters. Analytically important is the discussion of the interactive dynamics between Navalny and the Kremlin. Not only has Navalny evolved from an anti-corruption activist, to a politician, and then to a protester, the book argues; but the Kremlin has also evolved to adapt to Navalny, however often it might claim that Navalny is irrelevant in Russia (p. 171). This argument has been developed in full in a recent path-breaking study by Regina Smyth, who employs game theory to explore the extent to which the opposition in authoritarian regimes can innovate strategically and convert protest activity into electoral resources, thereby forcing regime incumbents to reveal more information, which in turn increases opportunities for further opposition action.<sup>5</sup>

In the end, the book makes very clear, as its title suggests, that the story of Alexei Navalny has high pertinence for Russia’s future. Navalny himself regularly speaks about the “beautiful Russia of the future”: where there is no corruption, nepotism, or cronyism; where state institutions and state officials work for the benefit of the people; where citizens have opportunities to realize themselves in business, or other spheres of life; where politics are competitive; and where Russia acts on the global arena as a state that thrives through its human capital and knowledge-based economy. Through his own belief and determined action, Navalny posits himself as a leader who is directly opposed to Vladimir Putin, who has built his rule on a very different message, including one in which corruption, cronyism,

<sup>4</sup>Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>Regina Smyth, *Elections, Protest, and Authoritarian Regime Stability: Russia 2008–2020* (Cambridge, UK, 2020).

and authoritarianism are unavoidable and present everywhere, not only in Russia. With his remarks in the courtroom in February 2021 referring to the biblical, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied,” Navalny’s persona has entered the realm of the epic and legendary. The continuous public attention to Navalny at the present moment of his unjust imprisonment is imperative. Among its other virtues, this book contributes to that noble goal as well.