

NAVALNY OR THE WIDENING CRACK OF THE PUTIN REGIME

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Social discontent is spreading in Putin's Russia, giving a clear impetus to protest demonstrations that have been crushed with brutality that is unprecedented in the last twenty years. Against this backdrop, Alexei Navalny is focusing his fight against the regime on unceasing denunciation of corruption in the highest echelons of power. More than anything else, this has been the basis on which he has been constructing his popularity for some time now.

*"And the crack in the teacup opens
A lane to the land of the dead."*

W.H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening*

Never have there been so many flowers on the Moscow Bolshoy Moskvoretsky bridge as those left on 27 February 2021. This is where Boris Nemtsov was shot in the back of the neck on the same date in 2015. At the time, his friend Alexei Navalny was serving one of his various prison sentences. The floral tribute has grown exponentially this year as this is another way—that hasn't yet been banned—for people to pay tribute to a democrat murdered with a nod from the powers that be as well as for expressing, once again, their rejection of Navalny's imprisonment and their opposition to the regime.

President Putin appeared on television stating that Navalny poses no danger to him or to the stability of the country, adding in a condescending tone that if the Russian secret services had wanted to kill him, they would have already done so. Why, then, did he not defuse the Navalny phenomenon even more by letting him come quietly back to Russia without putting on a show at the airport when he only had to let a few days go by until the media fuss died down before starting the usual police harassment?

Though unwitting, there is some truth in the Russian president's words. The main danger isn't Navalny since, for the moment, his real influence in the country as a whole seems to be quite limited and it's too soon to know what kind of impact his arrest will have. However, the country's situation of economic stagnation and decline in the quality of social life has fuelled general discontent in a broad section of the population. This is what explains the magnitude of the protests the length and breadth of Russia. Concern over the so-

cioeconomic deterioration has been clearly expressed for some months now in public opinion polls carried out by the independent **Levada** centre. Hence, in September 2020, interviewees identified rising prices (61%), increasing unemployment (44%), and impoverishment (39%) as the country's most serious problems. And in January 2021, in response to the question, "What do you believe has led people to protest?" 41% mentioned in first place "general dissatisfaction with the situation of the country" while, in 2017, a year that also saw mass demonstrations, this response took second place with a meagre 18%. It's not surprising, then, that even if 49% of respondents think that the country is on the right track, a significant 40% believes the opposite.

Against this background, the battering ram of Navalny's actions against the regime, namely his unceasing denunciation and documentation of corruption in the highest echelons of power, is having a growing impact and, more than anything else, this has been the basis on which he has been constructing his popularity for some time now. Then again, Alexei Navalny's public career, which doesn't fit any of the models of the Russian political scene in the last twenty years, projects a very mixed image of his personality. In the past, he has defended positions that are clearly Russian nationalist, participating in the campaign called "Russia for the Russians" or calling for the expulsion of illegal immigrants from Central Asia. He has also defended the use of arms, giving as an example the fight against terrorism which, in Russia, tends to be blamed on the mostly Muslim population of the Caucasian republics. Navalny might have distanced himself from this past but neither is he hiding from it. He therefore declines to withdraw two videos of appallingly kitsch aesthetic that attest to these ideas because he believes that he must take responsibility for them. Although there's no doubt that his personality has matured, he's always been a controversial figure both in the Liberal media in Russia and outside.

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Nevertheless, in 2013, Navalny achieved his biggest political success in the Moscow mayoral elections, the only ones he wasn't barred from standing in, and in which he obtained a very creditable 27% of the votes. His popularity has been growing ever since, making him one of the most prominent figures of the real opposition. In October 2014, he gave an **interview** to *Ekho Moskvy*, the only remaining independent radio station, in which he denounced the Kremlin's policy towards the neighbouring ex-Soviet countries. And here, once again, his contradictory ideas are evident. "There's nothing more detrimental to the interests of the Russian people than this imperial chauvinism", he declared, adding that, "It isn't in the interests of Russians to take over neighbouring republics. It's in their interests to struggle against corruption, alcoholism et cetera, and to solve internal problems." Yet he also defends Russia's position in the war against Georgia in 2008 and, although he denounces the illegal nature of the annexation of Crimea, he considers it to be a *fait accompli* that should be left as it is. He concludes that, "the matter of illegal immigration is a hundred times more important than any Ukraine".

The advantage of this heterogeneity is that it effectively makes Navalny a different opponent from the usual liberals who many still identify with the turbulent 1990s. And it brings him closer to ordinary citizens who can feel they are reflected in him. Moreover, Navalny's nationalist past makes it more difficult for the Kremlin to openly accuse him of being a "foreign agent" in the service of hostile powers. Accordingly, a campaign to discredit him has now emerged, apparently spontaneously, following Amnesty International's questionable decision not to recognise him as a prisoner of conscience, even while accepting that he is a person who is being persecuted because of his political convictions. The AI decision was made in its London headquarters and conveyed to Moscow after the organisation received a series of emails reminding it of Navalny's past, as if this hasn't always been in the public domain. Most of these messages came from people—not only Russians—who sympathise with Putin's regime or who are at its orders, which is the case of *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*). The eminent columnist of *The New Yorker* and LGBTI activist Masha Gessen, who was previously highly critical of Navalny because of his nationalist ideas, has thoroughly **investigated** the matter and has uncovered details of this skilful defamatory operation orchestrated from above.

The problem for Navalny is that the struggle against corruption isn't sufficient to construct a true political alternative and this must be reassuring for the Kremlin. However, as the expert commentator Kadri Liik **observes**, the attempt to kill Navalny draws attention more to the weakness of the regime than to Navalny's strength as an opponent. The system's inability to renew itself—or its fear of doing so—is becoming a dangerous lacuna for power itself. Yet, returning to the country, knowing the risk he was taking, was a great act of courage on Navalny's part because anything can happen in a Russian prison colony. And this will probably earn him more sympathy and respect from the people. So, perhaps Putin is giving Navalny's political career the boost it needed.