

What Navalny's death means for Russia, Putin and the world

Fear and greed drive Russia's regime. The opposition leader struck at both



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Alexei Navalny did not like tragedies. He preferred Hollywood films and fables in which heroes vanquish villains and good triumphs over evil. He had the looks and talent to be one of those heroes, but he was born in Russia and lived in dark times, spending his last days in a penal colony in the Arctic permafrost. A fan of “Star Wars”, he described his ordeal in lyrical terms. “Prison [exists] in one’s mind,” he wrote from his cell in 2021. “And if you think carefully, I am not in prison but on a space voyage...to a wonderful new world.” That voyage ended on February 16th.

Mr Navalny's death was blamed by Russian prison authorities on a blood clot—though his doctor said he suffered from no condition which made that likely. Whatever ends up on his death certificate, he was killed by Vladimir Putin. Russia's president locked him up; in his name Mr Navalny was subjected to a regime of forced labour and solitary confinement. Mr Navalny will be celebrated as a man of remarkable courage. His life will be remembered for what it says about Mr Putin, what it portends for Russia and what it demands of the world.

A man of formidable intelligence, Mr Navalny identified the two foundations on which Mr Putin has built his power: fear and greed. In Mr Putin's world everyone can be bribed or threatened. Not only did Mr Navalny understand those impulses, he struck at them in devastating ways.

His insight was that corruption was not just a side hustle but the moral rot at the heart of Mr Putin's state. His anti-corruption crusade formed a new genre of immaculately documented and thriller-like films that displayed the yachts, villas and planes of Russia's rulers. These videos, posted on YouTube, culminated in an exposé of Mr Putin's billion-dollar palace on the Black Sea coast that has been watched 130m times. Despite the palace's iron gates, adorned with a two-headed imperial eagle, Mr Navalny portrayed its owner not as a tsar so much as a tasteless mafia boss.

Mr Navalny also understood fear and how to defeat it. Mr Putin's first attempt to kill him was in 2020, when he was poisoned with the nerve agent Novichok smeared inside his underwear. By sheer good luck Mr Navalny survived, regained his strength in Germany and less than a year later flew back to Moscow to defy Mr Putin in a blast of publicity.

He returned in the full knowledge that he would probably be arrested. On the way back to confront the evil ruler who had tried to poison him he did not read Hamlet. He watched Rick and Morty, an American cartoon. By mocking Mr Putin, he diminished him. "I've mortally offended him by surviving," he said from the dock during his trial in 2021. "He will enter history as a poisoner. We had Yaroslav the Wise and Alexander the Liberator. And now we will have Vladimir the Poisoner of Underpants."

Mr Navalny was sentenced to 19 years in jail on extremism charges. He turned his sentence into an act of cheerful defiance. Every time he appeared in court hearings via video link from prison, his smile cut through the walls of his cell and beamed across Russia's 11 time zones. On February 15th, on the eve of his death, he was in court again. Dressed in dark-grey prison uniform he laughed in the face of Mr Putin's judges, suggesting they should put some money into his account as he was running short. In the end there was only one way Mr Putin could wipe the smile off his face.

In his essay "Live Not by Lies", in 1974, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Nobel-prize-winning Soviet novelist, wrote that "when violence intrudes into peaceful life, its face glows with self-confidence, as if it were carrying a banner and shouting: 'I am violence. Run away, make way for me—I will crush you.'" Mr Navalny understood, but instead of running he held his ground.

His great strength was to understand Mr Putin's fear of other people's courage. In one of his early communications from jail he wrote that: "it is not honest people who frighten the authorities...but those who are not afraid, or, to be more precise: those who may be afraid, but overcome their fear." That is why his death portends a deepening of repression inside Russia. Mr Navalny's murder was not the first and it will not be the last. The next targets could be Ilya Yashin, a brave politician who followed Mr Navalny to prison, or Vladimir Kara-Murza, a historian, journalist and politician who has been sentenced to 25 years on treason charges for speaking against the war. The lawyers and activists who continue to defend these dissidents are also in danger. Since Mr Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the number of prisoners has increased 15 times. Even as the remnants of Stalin's gulag fill with political prisoners, professional criminals are being recruited and released to fight in Ukraine.

Mr Navalny's death also casts a shadow over ordinary Russians. In Moscow and across Russia, people flooded the streets at the news. Before the police started to arrest them, they covered memorials for previous victims of political repression in flowers. Yet that repression is intensifying. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, 1,305 men and women have been prosecuted for speaking out against it. A wave of repression is also swallowing up people who never before engaged in politics. The president will shoot into the crowds if he must.

For the West, Mr Navalny's death contains a call to action. Mr Putin considers its leaders too weak and too decadent to resist him. And for many years Western politicians and businessmen did much to prove that fear and greed work in the West, too. When Mr Putin first bombed and shelled Chechnya in the early 2000s, Western politicians turned a blind eye and continued to do business with his cronies. When he murdered his opponents in Moscow and annexed Crimea in 2014, they slapped his wrist. Even after he had invaded Ukraine in 2022, they hesitated to provide enough weapons for Russia to be defeated. Every time the West stepped back, Mr Putin took a step forward. Every time Western politicians expressed their "grave concern", he smirked.

The West needs to find the strength and courage that Mr Navalny showed. It should understand that Mr Navalny's murder, the soaring number of political prisoners, the torture and beating of people across Russia, the assassination of Mr Putin's opponents in Europe and the shelling of Ukrainian cities are all part of the same war. Without resolve, the West's military and economic superiority will count for nothing.

Western governments should start by treating people like Mr Kara-Murza as prisoners of Mr Putin's war who need to be exchanged with Russian prisoners in the West or prisoners of war in Ukraine. They should not stigmatise ordinary Russians living under a paranoid dictator and his goons, or put the onus on ordinary people to overthrow the dictator who is repressing them.

The best retort to Mr Putin is by arming Ukraine. Every time America's Congress votes down aid, Russia takes comfort. The leaders assembled at the Munich Security Conference, who heard Mr Navalny's wife, Yulia, speak of justice for her husband's death, need to stiffen their resolve to see through the war. For their part Ukrainian politicians must see that standing up for Russian activists and prisoners is also a way of helping their own country—just as Mr Navalny called for peace, for rebuilding Ukraine and the prosecution of Russian war crimes. Liberating Ukraine would be the best way to liberate Russia, too.

The voyage ends

After he had been poisoned, Mr Navalny returned home because he believed that history was on his side and that Russia was freeing itself from the deadly grip of its own imperial past. "Putin is the last chord of the ussr," he told *The Economist* a few months before he took that last fateful journey. "People in the Kremlin know there is a historic current that is moving against them." Mr Putin invaded Ukraine to reverse that current. Now he has killed Mr Navalny.

Mr Navalny would not want Mr Putin's message to prevail. "[If I get killed] the obvious thing is: don't give up," he once told American film-makers. "All it takes for evil to triumph is the inaction of good people. There's no need for inaction."

Mr Navalny's death has seemed imminent for months. And yet there is something crushing about it. He was not alone in believing that good triumphs over evil, and that heroes vanquish villains. His courage was an inspiration. To see that moral order so brutally overturned is a terrible affront. ■

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