

## Chronicle of a death foretold. Putin gets rid of Navalny

Maria Domańska, Marek Menkiszak, Katarzyna Chawryło

On 16 February, the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service announced that Alexei Navalny, the leading figure of the Russian democratic opposition, had died in a penal colony. The circumstances of his death remain unclear, and the official report contains inconsistencies that suggest attempts at manipulation. Without an independent investigation (which is unlikely), it is impossible to decide whether Navalny's death was due to 'natural' causes resulting from prolonged physical ill-treatment, or a premeditated murder ordered by the Kremlin.

Putin's responsibility for the demise of Alexei Navalny, who had long been a long-term political challenge for Russia's president, is beyond doubt. This death has provoked displays of grief and mourning among those Russians who are critical of the Kremlin, but it will not destabilise the domestic political situation, and will in fact weaken the Russian opposition operating in exile. Despite the outrage and condemnation expressed by Western leaders, it will not significantly affect Western policies towards Moscow.

### Circumstances of death: manipulation by the authorities

According to the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service, Alexei Navalny, the most prominent leader of the Russian opposition, died on 16 February at 2.17 pm local time. The politician, who had been imprisoned since January 2021, was in Penal Colony No. 3 in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug near the Arctic Circle. The authorities claim that Navalny became unwell after a walk and lost consciousness almost immediately, and that prolonged attempts at resuscitation were ineffective. However, in the days leading up to the tragedy, there was no indication that the politician's health had deteriorated. On 15 February, he took part in a court session by videoconference, and appeared to be in good condition at the time.

Almost immediately after the news of the death was published, the state-controlled media stated that it had been caused by a 'blood clot'. This cause is very often written into the death certificates of prisoners in Russia; however, it cannot be confirmed without an autopsy. Meanwhile Navalny's mother, who arrived at the penal colony with her lawyer, was informed that Navalny had died as a result of 'sudden death syndrome'. There were unofficial reports that bruises were visible on the body of the deceased, possibly indicative of convulsions, as well as traces of heart massage.



The authorities have so far not released the body to the family, and hid its whereabouts for the first two days. It is currently being kept in the morgue of the district hospital in the city of Salekhard where, according to the official version, a medical examination to determine the cause of death is underway. According to regulations, in such a case the family may not receive the deceased's body for up to 30 days.

Practically from the moment of his imprisonment, Navalny, whom Putin considered a personal enemy, was harassed and tortured in the

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penal colonies where he served his long prison sentence. The conditions of the prisoner's detention were determined by the authorities in Moscow. This included frequent solitary confinement (on 14 February, Navalny was sent there for the 27th time, and spent a total of 308 days in isolation over the past three years), psychological pressure, denial of medical care, regular sleep disturbance, detention in cold temperatures without appropriate clothing, and being forced into the company of prisoners with infectious diseases.

Unofficial information obtained by independent journalists (based, among other things, on a conversation with an inmate of Penal Colony No. 3) indicates that Navalny could have died as early as the evening of 15 February or the night of 16 February, but the information was withheld pending guidance from Moscow. The sudden step-up of security procedures in the colony would seem to confirm this. According to a source in Penal Colony No. 3, no ambulance arrived at the colony on 16 February, while several cars from outside did arrive there during the night.

### **Reactions by the authorities and propaganda: conspiracy theories**

Russian government officials (including foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova and State Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin) almost immediately blamed the West for Navalny's demise. According to Volodin, Washington and Brussels, and specifically the leadership of NATO and the US, the German Chancellor, the UK Prime Minister, and the Ukrainian President, were responsible, as this death benefits them and allows them to justify their "misguided, aggressive" policy towards Russia. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described statements by Western politicians condemning the killing as "rabid and unacceptable".

The news of Navalny's death was immediately reported in the news programmes on the main TV channels, albeit in a perfunctory manner limited to the official report from the Federal Penitentiary Service. In a political talk show hosted by Vladimir Solovyov on 18 February, a version was presented according to which the death had been planned by the Russian opposition to hit the Kremlin after the huge success of Tucker Carlson's interview with Putin and before the March presidential 'election'. A coordinated disinformation campaign to discredit Yulia Navalnaya, the wife of the deceased opposition activist, was also launched.

The aim of the propaganda was on one hand to report the death of the politician in such a way as to send a warning signal to Russian society, and especially to those groups sympathetic to Navalny, that any opposition activity in Russia is currently not allowed and will be ruthlessly repressed (including through the physical elimination of opponents). On the other hand, the incident was not widely publicised so as not to provoke reflexes of resistance and consolidation among the public, and not to foster the image of Navalny as a martyr, which would be an undesirable reaction from the Kremlin's point of view.

## The reaction of the intimidated public

On 16–18 February, scattered actions of commemoration and expressions of mourning for Navalny took place across Russia, mainly in the form of laying flowers at monuments to victims of totalitarian repression (this form of public activity is not formally prohibited in Russia). These demonstrations were all small in scale, totalling only a few thousand people across the country. The bridge in Moscow where Boris Nemtsov was killed in 2015 also saw a commemoration of Navalny. Some of the spontaneously created tokens of remembrance were immediately removed by the police. The authorities warned schoolchildren and students against taking part in the commemorations of Navalny taking place over the weekend; the threats against the latter included expulsion from university, which could mean conscription into the army. Roskomnadzor, the Russian federal executive agency responsible for monitoring and censoring Russian mass media, began removing the online content relating to Navalny.

According to OVD-Info, 400 people were detained at memorials to Navalny in 36 Russian cities during the first three days. The police often used brute force to break up the demonstrations. A petition addressed to the Russian Investigative Committee for the release of the politician's body to his family was created on the OVD-Info website, and as of the morning of 19 February it had been signed by at least 46,000 people.

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On 16 February, spontaneous demonstrations condemning the Putin regime and expressing mourning for Navalny's death were also held in many cities outside Russia. The largest of these (several hundred people each) took place in places with significant concentrations of Russian political émigrés: Berlin (Germany), Tbilisi and Batumi (Georgia), Yerevan (Armenia), Tel Aviv (Israel) and London (UK).

## International reactions: outrage, condemnation, but... no announcement of sanctions

The news of Navalny's death provoked significant reactions in the West. Outrage dominated the statements made by politicians and officials. Condolences were offered to Navalny's family and his heroism was emphasised, while the Putin regime, which was held responsible for the politician's death, was roundly condemned. However, the reactions did not include any announcements of concrete actions, such as sanctions.

In a brief speech President Joe Biden expressed outrage, paid tribute to Navalny, highlighting his heroism in the fight against corruption and violence in Russia, and offered condolences to his family. He condemned the Russian regime, holding Putin personally responsible for his death. In connection with this, he called for an urgent increase in support for Ukraine as it defends itself against Putin's "vicious onslaughts and war crimes". Biden said that Russia has already suffered "devastating consequences" (which he announced in 2021 in the event of Navalny's death), and that various options for further steps are now being considered. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke in a similar vein, adding that Navalny's death and one man [Putin's] fear shows the weakness and rottenness of the Putin system.

In a joint statement the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell expressed shock and sadness, paid tribute to Navalny and expressed sympathy to his family. They stated that Navalny "was slowly murdered by President Putin and his regime, who fear nothing more than dissent from their own people".

They demanded that Moscow disclose all the circumstances surrounding the politician's death and called for the release of political prisoners.

Leaders of Western countries (including Chancellor Olaf Scholz, President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Rishi Sunak) expressed their grief and outrage at Navalny's death in brief posts on X (formerly Twitter), paying tribute to him and offering their condolences to his family and the Russian people. Among other reactions, one that stood out was that of Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs, who on X stated that Navalny had been "brutally murdered by the Kremlin", demonstrating the true nature of the current regime in Russia. He added, "The only thing the Russian thugs care [about] is us being strong. The only way to send a message to Putin is by supporting Ukraine so that Russia loses".

## **Conclusions and outlook: the Kremlin confident, the opposition weakening, no change in the West**

It is unclear whether Navalny did indeed die of natural causes caused by the extremely difficult conditions of his imprisonment, or whether he was murdered; both options must be considered. But in either case the responsibility for the murder lies with Putin, who had sought to kill Navalny since at least 2020 (when the FSB undertook a failed attempt to poison him). There is no doubt that the Russian authorities deliberately used harassment and torture against the oppositionist, reckoning with his death.

The results of the official autopsy will be completely unreliable, and the lack of immediate access by independent experts will effectively allow all traces of violence and abuse to be covered up. It is highly likely that the authorities will want to avoid releasing the body to the family and prevent the funeral before the presidential 'election' (15–17 March) to prevent crowds from gatherings. In the event that Navalny died of non-natural causes, retaining the body will also aid in covering up traces of the crime.

**” Navalny's death demonstrates Putin's ruthlessness and impunity and will strengthen his position in the system he has built on intimidation and repression, at least in the coming years.**

Navalny's death a month before the 'election' creates an image problem for the Kremlin, which it had hitherto neutralised quite successfully. The authorities need not fear that the situation will get out of hand and disrupt the 'election' or negatively affect its legitimacy in the eyes of the public. On the contrary, this show of ruthlessness and impunity will strengthen Putin's position in the system, built on intimidation and repression, at least for the next few years.

If Navalny's death on 15 or 16 February was indeed a case of premeditated murder, it would testify to the regime's self-confidence in its decision to eliminate Russia's most charismatic and recognisable opposition figure. Firstly, it is a signal to anti-regime and anti-war circles to abandon any hope of change in Russia, where the dynamics of domestic politics are determined by war and Putin's neo-totalitarianism. Secondly, it is a signal towards the West that there is no chance of a 'post-Putin' Russia, so negotiations on Ukraine and the security architecture in Europe should begin immediately, and on the terms imposed by the current Russian leadership from a position of strength.

After the 'elections', even harsher and more widespread repression is to be expected, which will be calculated to consolidate the neo-totalitarian course in domestic politics. In particular, the most active groups of the democratic opposition and civil society in exile may be targeted. The lives of well-known opposition figures imprisoned by the regime, including Ilya Yashin (sentenced to eight and a half years in prison) and Vladimir Kara-Murza (25 years in prison), are also at risk.

According to October 2023 data from the organisation Memorial, a total of at least 185 people detained for political reasons are currently in Russian prisons.

The death of Navalny, who had unequivocally condemned the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, is another in a long line of political assassinations under Putin's rule.

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For the first time, however, it has been wielded against a politician who could have become the only potential alternative to the current president in the entire democratic opposition, should the Kremlin's control over the situation in the country weaken. This is a serious blow to the liberal-democratic opposition and that part of society which had pinned its hopes for change in Russia on Navalny. At the peak of his popularity, at the end of 2020, he was reaching 20 per cent support in polls by the independent Levada Centre. The attractiveness and effectiveness of his strategy consisted in pointing out the possibility and necessity of dismantling the two pillars of Putinism: the lack of a political alternative and the disenfranchisement of the citizens. He also repeatedly attacked the Putin system's kleptocracy and rampant corruption – a slogan that well resonated among the Russian public.

Before his imprisonment in January 2021, he had spent years building up efficient political structures in most Russian regions (the regime outlawed them in 2021 as 'extremist'). Although his prolonged isolation in the penal colony had weakened his political position, his undeniable courage and charisma, as well as his good sense of the public mood, made him the dominant figure on the Russian opposition scene. Even in prison he remained active, communicating with his supporters through lawyers and associates.

Currently, there is no one in the ranks of the democratic opposition (who are mainly in exile) who could quickly replace him, although one potential opposition leader is Yulia Navalnaya, who announced on 19 February that she would continue her husband's activities and appealed to Russians to join her. However, continuing anti-regime and anti-war activities will require a profound reformulation of political strategy. There is a serious risk that Navalny's death will lead to further weakening and divisions within these groups, reinforcing apathy and fear among the ruling elite and the wider public, as well as the conviction there can be no alternative to Putin's leadership.

The future of Navalny's group is unclear: it will probably continue its current activities, but the death of their leader may have a discouraging effect on their supporters. This will strengthen Putin's chances of staying in power for life and continuing the war of aggression (both against Ukraine and – quite possibly – also NATO) without significant resistance from within the country. No negative domestic political consequences for the Kremlin should be expected as long as the widespread impression persists that the regime remains strong and will stop at nothing to retain power.

The only chance for political change in Russia, then, remains the unequivocal defeat of the Russian military in Ukraine, which would undermine the Kremlin's ideology and international policy. However, both the West's tardiness in providing military aid to Ukraine and the ritual expressions of outrage over Navalny's death, which have not been followed by any announcements of sanctions for massive human rights violations, reinforce the Putin regime's self-confidence and its determination to pursue goals that pose an existential threat to Western democracies.

Navalny's death will not significantly affect the policy of Western states and organisations towards Russia. Political assassinations are the norm in contemporary Russia, and Western political elites have no illusions about the dictatorial and criminal nature of the Putin regime. Moreover – as seems to

be the Kremlin's intention – the death of the Russian opposition leader will undermine the already faint hope that Russia can be democratised in the longer term. On an *ad hoc* basis, it may influence the expansion of the EU's individual sanctions lists as part of the ongoing talks on its thirteenth package. However, no major changes should be expected in the restrictions against Russia, in which the reluctance of individual Western states to bear their costs and the fear of Moscow's reaction are playing an increasing role.