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Alexei Navalny's Opposition Movement and Its Impact on the Political Transition in Putin's Russia

Abstract: In recent years, Alexei Navalny has emerged as the most prominent Russian oppositionist and the main critic of Vladimir Putin's regime. He undertook extensive efforts aimed at building civil society in Russia. His uncompromising attitude earned him recognition in the West, including Poland. Navalny's critics pointed to his nationalist and imperialist views and the almost uncritical support for his activities often expressed by world leaders and international institutions. The main goal of the article is to analyze the Alexei Navalny's opposition efforts as he sought to transform the Russian political system. The hypothesis suggests that despite numerous initiatives by Navalny's supporters and the backing of the international community, his activities failed to bring about the expected changes on the Russian political arena. The tightening of Vladimir Putin's regime led to an increased repression against citizens opposing the government, significantly hindering opposition's efforts and ultimately contributing to Navalny's death.

Key words: Navalny, opposition, Russia, regime, Putin

Introduction

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation has faced numerous internal and external challenges. However, these difficulties have not translated into a significant decline in public support for the state apparatus. In recent years, the primary issues affecting the Russian state have included the ongoing war in Ukraine, widespread corruption, electoral fraud, the suppression of opposition movements, and the repression of those who dissent from the policies pursued by President Vladimir Putin and the ruling party, *United Russia*. Despite large-scale electoral fraud, designed to consolidate society around the ruling elite, there



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is credible evidence to suggest that the genuine support for the Russian government remains strong. This suggests that Putin and his inner circle would likely continue to win successive elections. Equally important in this context is the Russian public's perception of Vladimir Putin as a guarantor of state stability. The crisis of the late 1990s, which affected Russia's financial sector and consequently led to the state insolvency, left a lasting impression on the population. In the years following, Russians came to appreciate the consistent, albeit low, benefits there were paid regularly. Consequently, this experience fostered the development of an informal alliance between citizens and the state. Its main principle of this unspoken agreement was the public's tacit acceptance of actions taken by the authorities, in exchange for the state assurance of their basic livelihood. By giving the leaders considerable freedom in policy-making, this informal alliance helped to stabilize the state system. However, the turning point came with the rigged parliamentary elections of December 2011, followed by the controversial decision to re-elect Vladimir Putin as president of the Russian Federation after his four years as prime minister. As a result, thousands of disillusioned citizens took to the streets of Moscow, demanding new elections. The protests in Bolotnaya Square were the largest public demonstrations in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. One of the leading figures in the protests was Alexei Navalny, a lawyer and prominent blogger who gained widespread attention for exposing crimes committed by key figures within the state. Over the years, Navalny's activism have ignited numerous discussions about the condition of the Russian state and the actions of President Vladimir Putin and his inner circle.

This article focuses on analyzing Alexei Navalny's activities. Through his broad-based opposition efforts, primarily aimed at fostering the development of civil society, Navalny sought to transform the Russian political system. His goal was to challenge the system dominated by oligarchs and individuals originating from the security services, commonly referred to as the *siloviki*. The main research question addressed in the article is whether Alexei Navalny's opposition activities have led to significant changes in the Russian political system. The main hypothesis posits that, despite numerous initiatives spearheaded by his supporters and backing from the international community, Navalny's efforts have not resulted in the anticipated transformation of Russia's political landscape. The gradual tightening of Vladimir Putin's regime, including the gradual subjugation of the state apparatus, the dismantling of unfavorable institutions, and the introduction of laws that restrict key areas of independent civic activity, led to heightened

repression of those who opposed the policies of Russia's leadership. These actions significantly hindered the effectiveness of opposition efforts and ultimately contributed to Navalny's death. This article employs a systematic approach, utilizing content analysis as the primary research method.

The beginnings of Alexei Navalny's political activity

Alexei Navalny, a trained financier and lawyer, began his political career in 2000 within the liberal *Yabloko* party, founded by Grigory Yavlinsky. Despite *Yabloko's* liberal orientation, sometimes called a liberal-socialist party, Navalny openly identified as a nationalist. He described himself as a supporter of civic nationalism, otherwise known as liberal nationalism, referring to himself as a "modern nationalist". Liberal nationalism merges the concept of national identity with a belief in popular sovereignty. It is a universal principle that promotes the rights of all citizens, without prioritizing interests of one nation over others. Civic nationalism asserts that every nation has the right to freedom and self-determination. According to this ideology, all nations are equal, and the ultimate aim is to create a world made up of sovereign nation-states (Heywood, 2008, pp. 139–140). Navalny's opposition activities largely focused on criticizing migration from Central Asia to Russia. He also condemned the corruption surrounding labor migration, which enabled certain interest groups to profit at the expense of the newcomers.

In 2007, Navalny was expelled from the *Yabloko* party for "causing damage to the party with his nationalist activities" (Dollbaum, Lallouet, Noble, 2022, p. 92). Following this, he became one of the co-founders of the NAROD (Russian National Liberation Movement). Navalny viewed Russian nationalism as a positive and constructive ideology. The founders of NAROD described it as a "national-democratic" movement, aiming to create "conditions conducive to the preservation and development of the Russian people, language, and historical territory" (Dollbaum, Lallouet, Noble, 2022, pp. 90–93).

Anti-Corruption Foundation

After leaving the *Yabloko* party, Navalny shifted his focus to anti-corruption efforts, founding the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) in 2011.

His expertise in law and finance enabled him to uncover irregularities, primarily within state-linked companies involved in government contracts. Navalny strategically bought small shares in major state-owned enterprises such as Gazprom, VTB, Transneft, and TNK-BP. As a shareholder, he gained access to their financial documents, which he meticulously analyzed to expose corruption. He then published these findings on his blog (Kołodziejcki, 2021, p. 200). Navalny gained widespread attention for revealing that nearly \$4 billion had been embezzled during the construction of an oil pipeline in the Far East by the state-owned company Transneft. Navalny revealed that the embezzled funds had been funneled to businessmen with close ties to the power apparatus. His investigations prompted Vladimir Putin to order an audit of the contract in question. Although those responsible for the embezzlement were never held accountable, Navalny's revelations forced high-ranking officials to publicly acknowledge that corruption in Russia extends to the highest levels of government (Kacewicz, 2011). Navalny's investigations implicated several of the most powerful figures in the country, including Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, Yuri Chaika, Dmitry Peskov, and Mikhail Mishustin. In some cases, his efforts even led to the cancellation of government contracts.

Alexei Navalny's involvement in protests in Russia in 2011

In 2010, Navalny launched a grassroots initiative aimed at dismantling the ruling party, United Russia, which he justified as essential for preserving the country's democracy. He famously labeled United Russia as the "Party of Crooks and Thieves" (Myers, 2022, p. 517), a term that quickly became a permanent part of Russian political discourse. Navalny skillfully capitalized on growing public dissatisfaction with the system entrenched in the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament. As his criticism of the government resonated with more people, he steadily gained popularity and began openly discussing his plans to form a political movement capable of bringing about necessary reforms in Russia.

In the parliamentary elections held on December 4, 2011, the United Russia party secured victory with 49.5% of the vote. This marked a significant decline in support compared to the 2007 elections, where the party won 63%. In some regions, United Russia's support barely exceeded 30%. In response, the state apparatus intensified its interference in the electoral process. The widespread manipulation and rigging of the

elections sparked protests on a scale unprecedented in post-Soviet Russia (Rogoża, 2011). The day after the elections, thousands of disillusioned citizens took to the streets of Moscow, expressing their dissatisfaction with the results. One of the key leaders of the demonstrators was Alexei Navalny, known for his charisma and strong self-confidence. The scale of the protests prompted a forceful response from the security services. Navalny, along with dozens of other protesters, was arrested on charges of resisting law enforcement. However, the threat of reprisals did not deter the crowds gathered in Bolotnaya Square in central Moscow. The protests reached their peak on December 24, when a massive demonstration took place on Andrei Sakharov Avenue. According to various estimates, nearly 100,000 people attended, including Navalny, who had been released from detention (Myers, 2022, p. 520).

Despite numerous declarations and a nationwide debate on the state of the country, the “Mud Revolution,” as the Moscow protests came to be known, failed to bring about the anticipated changes. However, the unprecedented scale of the demonstrations instilled genuine fear in the ruling elite. One key factor was the ability of the anti-system opposition, with Alexei Navalny at its forefront, to harness the protest movement to some extent. This allowed opposition candidates to achieve notable successes, such as winning mayoral elections in cities like Yaroslavl and Yekaterinburg (Secrieru, 2015). The recognition of Alexei Navalny, both within Russian society and internationally, grew significantly during this period. In a survey conducted by the Levada Center, one of Russia’s leading independent polling organizations, Navalny was known to only about 6% of respondents in April 2011. By October 2013, this number had surged to approximately 54% (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2014, p. 5). Internationally, his prominence was also recognized when *Time* magazine included him in its 2012 list of the 100 most influential people in the world (Moen-Larsen, 2014, p. 549). As Navalny’s popularity increased, the Russian government launched a campaign to discredit him, aiming to undermine his credibility as an effective social activist and a potential presidential candidate.

Russian government effort to expel Alexei Navalny from public life

The first official attempt by the Russian state to exclude Alexei Navalny from public life occurred on July 18, 2013, when a court in Kirov sentenced him to five years in prison. The case, brought by the Investi-

gative Committee of the Russian Federation, accused Navalny of embezzlement dating back to 2009, when he was serving as an advisor to Kirov Oblast Governor Nikita Belykh. Investigators alleged that Navalny persuaded the management of the state-owned Kirovles timber company to sign a contract that was financially damaging to the company, resulting in a loss of 16 million rubles. From the outset, many observers noted the absurdity of the charges, viewing them as politically motivated and made at the Kremlin's behest to undermine Navalny's growing influence as an opposition leader. The sentence against Navalny was announced just one day after he was officially registered as a candidate for the Moscow mayoral election (Krawczyk, Magdziak, 2013). In the days that followed, the decision was made to suspend the sentence, allowing Navalny to participate in the election, which was scheduled for September 2013. In what was the first democratic mayoral election since the Beslan tragedy in 2004, Navalny secured nearly 27% of the vote. He lost to the incumbent mayor, Sergei Sobyenin, who won the election in the first round with 51% of the vote (Alieva, Moffitt, Carley, 2022, p. 5). Navalny's performance in the Moscow mayoral election caused quite a stir, as he won significantly more votes than pre-election polls had predicted. However, Navalny and his supporters challenged the fairness of the election, alleging irregularities in the voting process (*Kreml wygrał...*, 2013). His protest was ultimately rejected. The political "experiment" of allowing Navalny to run in the election demonstrated that, despite the general passivity of the Russian public and its susceptibility to state propaganda, genuinely fair elections pose a substantial risk to Russian decision-makers (Menkiszak, Szeptycki, 2014, p. 220). This outcome underscored the necessity for the regime to take measures to limit or prevent the activities of activists like Navalny, who challenge the legitimacy and functioning of the Russian system.

Another significant attempt to marginalize Alexei Navalny politically occurred in late 2014. On December 30, Alexei and his brother Oleg were convicted in the so-called Yves Rocher case. The case revolved around events from 2008, when the Navalny brothers' company, Main Subscription Agency, signed a contract with the French cosmetics company Yves Rocher to transport products from Yaroslavl to Moscow. Over four years, the Navalny company earned more than 55 million rubles from the transportation of these cosmetics, of which 31.5 million rubles was paid to AvtoSAGA, the main subcontractor for the order. On December 10, 2012, Bruno Leproux, the head of Yves Rocher's Russian subsidiary, reported the

Navalny brothers to Russia's Investigative Committee, alleging that they had embezzled funds from the corporation. However, shortly after filing the complaint, Leproux left the company and disappeared from the public eye. Remarkably, within a few hours of the report being submitted, Russian authorities had already prepared a case with "evidence" purportedly proving that the Navalny brothers had committed a crime. Meanwhile, Yves Rocher's headquarters in La Gacilly, France, decided to conduct an internal audit of the case. The audit did not support the version presented by Russian law enforcement agencies. Despite this, the Navalny brothers were found guilty of embezzling the corporation's funds by the Russian courts. Both were sentenced to 3.5 years in a penal colony, though Alexei Navalny received a suspended sentence (Krzysztożek, 2021).

Shortly after Alexei Navalny's conviction in the Yves Rocher case, the Russian government passed a law prohibiting individuals convicted of serious crimes from running in elections. Embezzlement was classified as such a crime under Russian law. Many immediately pointed out that these legal changes were deliberately implemented to block Navalny from running in future elections, particularly the 2018 presidential election. The new law was dubbed *Lex Navalny* by commentators on Russian political affairs. As a result, when Navalny submitted his candidacy for the 2018 presidential election in December 2016, the Russian Central Election Commission rejected it. The Commission cited his conviction in the Yves Rocher case in 2014 as the primary reason for the disqualification. According to the ruling, Navalny would be barred from running for any political office until 2028 (Donaj, Kusa, 2018, pp. 24–25). The actions against Alexei Navalny, largely driven by the Kremlin, effectively obstructed his political activity and prevented him from participating in elections. However, these efforts did not lead to Navalny's resignation or withdrawal from political life. Despite the obstacles, he persisted in exposing corruption and crimes committed by Russia's top leadership, while continuing to influence the political views and choices of his fellow citizens.

Alexei Navalny's opposition activity in 2017–2019

The steadfastness of Alexei Navalny, who has been arrested numerous times over the years for participating in protest actions, has earned him recognition from many organizations advocating for human and civil

rights. Each time he was released from detention, Navalny initiated further actions against Vladimir Putin's regime.

The activities of Alexei Navalny and his team led to the establishment of a broad network of regional organizations across all major Russian cities in 2017, which proved effective in organizing nationwide protests. The genesis of Navalny's movement can be divided into four stages (Савенков, 2018, p. 157). The first stage, from December 2016 to June 2017, focused on setting up headquarters in major cities and mobilizing citizens to participate in a nationwide civic movement. The second stage (June 2017–December 2017) marked a shift from focusing on anti-corruption debates to actively demanding Alexei Navalny's nomination as a candidate for the presidential election. In the third stage (December 2017–March 2018), following the refusal to register Navalny as a candidate, the movement shifted its efforts towards organizing actions to boycott the presidential election. It also focused on training election observers. In the final stage (March 2018–November 2018), the number of regional headquarters was reduced, and the scope of protest actions became more limited, primarily shifting to social media platforms. These actions mainly addressed local issues and organized nationwide rallies in opposition to government policies and unpopular reforms, such as the controversial decision to raise the retirement age (Савенков, 2018, pp. 157–158).

In March 2017, Navalny released a video on YouTube titled *On wam nie Dimon*. In this video, the opposition leader revealed the alleged vast assets of then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, reportedly acquired through questionable political deals and state loans. The film had a significant impact on Russian society, sparking widespread anti-corruption protests. During these demonstrations, many people were arrested, including Navalny himself once again (Bondarenko, 2020). Demonstrations were held in more than 80 cities, with tens of thousands of protesters participating (in Moscow alone, several thousand people joined the protests) (Jaskulski, 2018, p. 62). According to Navalny, one of Dmitry Medvedev's residences even featured a pond with a duck house, which became a focal point of ridicule. Many protesters carried rubber ducks as a symbol of opposition to the extravagant wealth of the Russian leadership. The widespread geographic scope of the protests, the activation of politically passive regions, and the substantial participation of young people are seen as key factors in the authorities' decision to refuse Navalny's registration as a candidate for president of the Russian Federation (Menkiszak, 2017, p. 235).

In April 2017, during a rally, Alexei Navalny was attacked with a powerful antiseptic known as *zelyonka*, which left him with partial vision loss in one eye. Although the attack was captured by nearby cameras, the footage was conspicuously blurred, obscuring the identity of the perpetrator. The responsibility for the incident was widely attributed to high-ranking Russian officials connected to the Kremlin (Radziwinowicz, 2017).

Anti-corruption protests inspired by Navalny's activities continued across Russia until the end of 2017 and resumed in the lead-up to the 2018 presidential election, marked by a voter strike organized by Navalny's supporters. Spontaneous protests occurred in more than 100 cities across Russia, though they were on a smaller scale compared to the previous year. The authorities responded relatively mildly to these demonstrations, with most of those detained, including Navalny, being released on the same day they were arrested (Domańska, 2018).

Alexei Navalny, barred from running in elections, shifted his focus to supporting opposition candidates through a strategy he developed called "Smart Voting." This approach aimed to weaken the ruling party, United Russia, by encouraging citizens to vote for the strongest opposition candidate – regardless of political ideology – who had the best chance of defeating the candidate fielded by United Russia in regional and local elections. This tactical voting method sought to consolidate the opposition vote and challenge the dominance of the ruling party in various elections. The strongest candidate was selected based on previous election results and current sociological research (Savenkov, 2019, p. 204). Despite facing criticism from other anti-Kremlin circles, Navalny's strategy produced the desired effect in several regions. In cities like Novosibirsk and Tomsk, United Russia lost its majority in the city councils due to citizens adopting the smart vote principle. In 2019, Navalny began constructing party structures with the goal of preparing for the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021.

Poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August 2020

On August 20, 2020, during a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, Alexei Navalny lost consciousness. The plane made an emergency landing in Omsk, where he was taken to a local hospital with symptoms of severe poisoning (Popiel, Wojtalewicz, 2023, p. 101). It is emphasized that if not for the pilots' decision to land in Omsk – despite a false bomb alert at

the airport – and the administration of atropine by medics suspecting poisoning, Navalny would likely have died (Menkiszak, 2021, p. 264). His condition was described as severe but stable. A day later, the head of the Omsk hospital stated that metabolic disorders were the cause of Navalny's health problems, ruling out poisoning. Navalny's wife, Yulia, began efforts to have him transported to a foreign clinic for treatment, while sharing evidence she had that confirmed Navalny had been poisoned (*Alexei Navalny...*, 2020). On the same day, a special plane from Germany arrived in Omsk to transport Navalny to Berlin for further treatment (Domańska, Rogoża, 2020). After initial resistance from the Russian authorities, who cited Navalny's poor health as a reason to deny his transfer, they eventually agreed to allow him to leave the country. On Saturday, August 22, Navalny arrived in Germany (ШЕВЧЕНКО, 2022, p. 133). Two days later, the Berlin hospital where he was admitted issued a statement confirming that Navalny had been poisoned.

On September 2, 2020, German government spokesman Steffen Seibert announced test results indicating that Navalny had been poisoned with a powerful nerve agent from the Novichok group. This was the same agent used in the 2018 poisoning of former Russian agent Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England (Bolt, Hengstler, 2022, p. 1137). Seibert added that the findings from German doctors had been shared with the Russian ambassador in London, as well as NATO and the European Union. The German government also demanded an explanation from Russian authorities. In response, Russian officials pointed to a lack of evidence supporting the conclusions of the German doctors. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov strongly denied allegations of an assassination attempt on the opposition figure, stating that all accusations against Russia were baseless (*Rzqd federalny...*, 2020). On September 7, 2020, German doctors announced that Navalny had awakened from a coma and immediately began rehabilitation (*Russia's Navalny...*, 2020).

On September 15, 2020, Navalny announced his intention to return to Russia, while simultaneously taking steps to identify those responsible for his poisoning. In December 2020, the results of an extensive journalistic investigation were published, conducted in collaboration with Christo Grozev of "Bellingcat", a British investigative journalism website. The investigation revealed that the Federal Security Service (FSB) had been conducting a targeted operation against Navalny since early 2017, when he declared his intention to run in the 2018 presidential elections. The involvement of toxicologists and chemists in the opera-

tion indicated that the purpose was not merely to monitor Navalny, but to prepare for his assassination at a time chosen by the Kremlin (Menkiszak, 2021, p. 264). FSB officers specializing in chemical agents reportedly visited nearly 40 locations Navalny had traveled to during that period (*Russia's Navalny...*, 2020). Navalny's findings were further substantiated through a phone sting. During the call, Navalny, posing as a fictitious aide to Federal Security Service director Nikolai Patrushev, spoke with one of the officers involved in the assassination attempt, extracting details of the operation. The entire phone conversation was recorded and later published on Navalny's YouTube channel. The planning and execution of the provocation were also portrayed in the 2022 documentary *Navalny*, directed by Daniel Roher.¹

Global reaction to the poisoning of Alexei Navalny

The confirmation by German doctors on September 2, 2020, of Alexei Navalny's poisoning triggered a wave of reactions from the international community. Both state representatives and international organizations condemned the actions of the Russian services. A statement issued by the European Council highlighted the existence of reasonable grounds to believe that the poisoning of the opposition leader could not have occurred without the consent of the Russian authorities (Dewey, 2022, p. 174). British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the UK government would collaborate with international partners to hold those responsible for the poisoning accountable. German Chancellor Angela Merkel explicitly stated that an attempted murder of an opposition figure had taken place, describing the actions of the Russian services as "despicable and cowardly" (*"Sprawców należy..."*, 2020). North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg urged Russia to conduct a full and transparent investigation into Navalny's poisoning and announced consultations within NATO regarding the incident. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen emphasized that those responsible for the act should be brought to justice. US National Security Council spokesman John Ulyot announced that the United States would cooperate with international partners to apprehend those responsible for Nav-

¹ The film *Navalny*, directed by Daniel Roher, was awarded an Oscar in the feature-length documentary category at the 95th Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Awards ceremony for 2022.

alny's poisoning. The Polish Foreign Ministry called for an international investigation to clarify the case and ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable ("*Sprawców należy...*," 2020).

The attempted poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August 2020 significantly worsened relations between the Russian Federation and Western countries. Russia's efforts to persuade the European Union to ease sanctions – imposed after incidents such as the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2018 – and to resume EU-Russia dialogue were rendered ineffective. Furthermore, the European Parliament decided to impose additional sanctions, primarily targeting individuals directly responsible for the attempt on Navalny's life. In response, Russia retaliated by expelling Western officials. Additionally, Russian authorities employed a familiar tactic of counter-accusations, suggesting that the Germans might have been involved in an attempt to assassinate the oppositionist.

The return and arrest of Alexei Navalny

After months of rehabilitation, Navalny announced his return to Russia on social media in early January 2021. The Kremlin quickly reacted to his decision. Russian authorities decided to leverage the Yves Rocher case against him, focusing on his suspended sentence. The probationary period for this sentence was set to expire on December 30, 2020. Navalny was ordered, with little notice, to return to Russia and complete the necessary paperwork related to the suspended sentence, a requirement he was unable to fulfill. The Russian authorities used Navalny's failure to complete the paperwork as grounds for detaining him upon his return from Germany. Additionally, they accused Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation of embezzling approximately \$5 million in donations from supporters. Despite being aware of the imminent arrest, Navalny chose to return to Russia. On January 17, 2021 (Śledź, 2022, p. 498), upon landing at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport, he was detained by Russian authorities during passport check-in and subsequently taken into custody (Bryc, 2021). On February 2, 2021, a Moscow court converted Navalny's suspended sentence in the Yves Rocher case into a 3.5-year prison term. The court cited multiple violations of his probation period, which had expired on December 30, 2020. Navalny was ultimately sent to a penal colony in Pokrov, in the Vladimir region, to serve 2 years and 8 months, as his previous house arrest was credited toward the sentence (Domańska, Rogoża,

2021). On February 20, the court rejected Navalny's appeal, making the sentence final.

Navalny's detention and conviction triggered mass protests in his defense, spreading to nearly 100 Russian cities and towns. These demonstrations were organized despite assembly bans, which were primarily justified by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Demydova, 2021, p. 1975). Notably, images of Yakutsk residents protesting in -53 degrees Celsius temperatures gained widespread attention. Across the country, nearly 150,000 people participated in the protests, with approximately 17,000 individuals detained (Menkiszak, 2022, p. 305). The protests coincided with the release of another video by Navalny, titled "Palace for Putin", which exposed the immense wealth of Russian leadership. In the film, Navalny presented evidence of a lavish mansion, valued at nearly 100 billion rubles, located on the Black Sea and allegedly belonging to President Vladimir Putin.

Shortly after Navalny's arrest and initial sentencing, the Russian authorities moved to ban the structures he had created, labeling them as extremist organizations. According to the Russian government, these organizations, "under the guise of spreading liberal slogans," were involved in "creating conditions for destabilizing the socio-political situation in Russia" and sought to "change the foundations of the constitutional order" (Domańska, 2021). According to a motion filed on April 16, 2021, by the Moscow prosecutor's office, involvement in organizations labeled as extremist could result in years of imprisonment. On June 9, 2021, the Moscow City Court officially declared the structures linked to Alexei Navalny's organizations as extremist. Navalny's arrest subsequently led to a decline in public interest in opposition activities among Russian citizens, a trend confirmed by research conducted by the Levada Center (Abassy, 2022, p. 69). This decline was likely influenced by the increasingly repressive measures taken by the Russian government against those associated with the country's most prominent opposition figure.

On March 2, 2022, at an off-site session of Moscow's Lefortovo court, Alexei Navalny was sentenced to an additional nine years in a maximum-security penal colony. After this sentence, he was transferred to a harsher penal colony in Melechovo, also located in the Vladimir region (Przebinda, 2023). On August 4, 2023, another verdict was delivered in Navalny's case, this time on charges of extremism, resulting in an additional 19-year sentence in a penal colony (Rosenberg, Goksedef, 2023). In December 2023, associates of Alexei Navalny reported that they had lost contact

with him for several days, sparking a search for the opposition leader within the Russian penitentiary system. After nearly three weeks, Navalny's spokesperson, Kira Yarmysh, confirmed that he had been located in a penal colony in the village of Kharp, in the remote Yamal-Nenets Autonomous District (*Алексея Навального...*, 2023).

The opposition leader, increasingly cut off by authorities from contact with his family, lawyers, and doctors, experienced a noticeable decline in his health. Alarming reports of his condition occasionally reached the public. On February 16, 2024, the Federal Prison Service announced the death of Alexei Navalny, citing a blood clot as the official cause of death (Chawryło, Domańska, Menkiszak, 2024, p. 2). The inhumane conditions in the cells where Navalny was held, along with alleged human rights violations committed by the staff of the penal colonies, have been cited as the true cause of his deteriorating health and subsequent death. Many key world leaders, including U.S. President Joe Biden, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, have labeled Navalny's death as murder, holding Russian President Vladimir Putin responsible (Mazzini, 2024).

The controversy surrounding Alexei Navalny: Nationalism, imperialism, and the Ukrainian question

Alexei Navalny's involvement with the Russian far right remains one of the most controversial aspects of his political career. The NAROD movement, which he co-founded, openly rejected the concept of a "multi-national" Russia, a notion Navalny referred to as a "chimera" (Dollbaum, Lallouet, Noble, 2022, pp. 90–93). During his time with the NAROD movement, Navalny produced several overtly nationalist films. In one of them, while disguised as a dentist, he used metaphors to compare the structure of a tooth to the state of Russia. Navalny argued that just as a tooth dies without its root, Russia too would be doomed without its "Russian roots." To preserve these roots, he advocated for the deportation of illegal immigrants (Dollbaum, Lallouet, Noble, 2022, pp. 90–93). For many years, Navalny also participated in the annual Russian March, an event organized by far-right groups to commemorate National Unity Day, celebrated in Russia on November 4.

Navalny has openly endorsed Russia's imperial policy on numerous occasions in his speeches and blog posts. Like President Vladimir Putin,

he believed that Russia was naturally predisposed to play a significant role on the global stage. He supported the so-called Five-Day War, which erupted in Georgia in August 2008, and advocated for the recognition of independence and military support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, disputed territories formally part of Georgia. Navalny viewed Russia as a state with the right to intervene in the internal affairs of the former Soviet republics (Piecha, 2023).

In October 2014, Navalny stated in an interview that if he had become president of the Russian Federation, he would not have returned Crimea, which had been annexed earlier that year, to Ukraine. He remarked that Crimea “is not a sausage sandwich or something like that, to pass it back and forth” (Pawłowska, 2024). Navalny expected Ukrainians to abandon hopes of reclaiming Crimea and accept that it now belonged to Russia. He acknowledged that the peninsula had been occupied by Russia in violation of international law. Navalny also supported the idea of holding another referendum to determine Crimea’s status. He believed that the result – wherein the peninsula’s residents would once again choose to align with Russia and secede from Ukraine – was predictable (Pawłowska, 2024). As recently as 2019, Navalny maintained the necessity of holding a new referendum, arguing that such a vote, whose results could not be contested, would definitively settle the question of Crimea’s affiliation. However, in 2023, in a social media post titled “15 Points of a Russian Citizen Wishing His Country Well”, Navalny for the first time unequivocally emphasized the need to return annexed Crimea to Ukraine, advocating for a return to the 1991 borders of both Ukraine and Russia. In his manifesto, published while he was in a penal colony, Navalny also called for reparations to be paid to Ukraine and for an investigation into war crimes committed by the Russian army during the conflict. He asserted that full responsibility for the aggression against Ukraine lay primarily with Russian President Vladimir Putin (Bieliashyn, 2023).

Although Navalny’s circle tried to present him as a leading opponent of the war, he remained an unpopular figure in Ukraine. His October 2014 statement on Crimea, in which he refused to support its return to Ukraine, left a lasting negative impression on many Ukrainians. Additionally, Ukraine’s experience of war and exposure to war crimes has shaped a perception of Russians as inherently imperialistic, further diminishing Navalny’s appeal. Even after his death, there is little indication that Ukrainian attitudes toward him will change significantly in the near future.

Conclusions

Alexei Navalny's political activities can be interpreted in two distinct ways. On one hand, he demonstrated immense courage, risking his health and life to expose the harmful policies of Russian elites and draw citizens' attention to the actions of their leaders. Navalny also sought to raise awareness among Russians about the possibility of political choice, countering the Kremlin's narrative that Russia cannot exist without Putin, and challenging the portrayal of Putin as the only viable or non-alternative option for the country's leadership. The narrative crafted by the authorities aimed to reassure citizens that only Putin could guarantee the survival and global standing of the Russian Federation. Those like Navalny, who opposed the party line, were immediately labeled enemies of the nation. They were portrayed as a "fifth column" – foreign agents or saboteurs working against their country under the influence of the West, particularly the United States. However, it is important to remember that Navalny was, above all, a politician, and many of his actions were strategically designed to achieve specific political outcomes. This was particularly evident in Navalny's stance on issues central to Russian society, such as imperialism and nationalism. For example, his opposition to Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, was rooted not in a rejection of imperialism per se but in his concerns about the war's consequences, particularly for ordinary citizens. Navalny believed that the war would lead to significant losses for Russia and weaken its standing on the international stage. Similarly, he viewed the rampant corruption at the highest levels of power as another major factor undermining Russia's potential. In his view, corruption not only eroded domestic governance but also hindered Russia's ability to effectively pursue a superpower agenda.

A kind of dualism in the perception of Navalny's activities also shaped his image outside of Russia. Navalny had numerous supporters as well as opponents, including in Poland. Liberal circles, in particular, were favorably inclined toward him, while more conservative groups kept a certain distance. In particular, the sympathy of France and Germany toward Navalny was viewed critically. In Poland, a country that has experienced Russian imperialism, Navalny was frequently criticized for his stance on the annexation of Crimea. The West's unqualified support for his struggle against Putin's regime was also viewed as problematic, particularly given that Navalny and Putin held convergent views on certain issues. There was also concern that if Navalny were to come to power, it would not

necessarily lead to an abandonment of policies detrimental to the interests of Western countries.

What is beyond debate, however, is Navalny's courage, as he was willing to risk his life in the fight against the regime – a sacrifice that ultimately cost him his life. The possibility that Navalny's decision to return to Russia involved some degree of calculation will remain a matter of debate. One possible motive was the belief that his arrest on Russian soil could spark a revolution and, ultimately, lead to a change of power in Russia. This is one of the hypotheses put forward by Navalny's supporters, who reject criticism of his return to Russia as a sign of extreme stupidity or irresponsibility. Theories about the oppositionist's real motivations should be viewed as potential strategies aimed at achieving a larger goal, in this case, the overthrow of Vladimir Putin's regime.

Russia's presidential election, held a month after Navalny's death, unfolded as expected, ensuring President Putin's re-election. To achieve this, the Russian regime implemented a series of measures that made it difficult for independent opposition candidates to participate. In the months leading up to the election, the Central Election Commission rejected the candidacies of Ekaterina Duntsova and Boris Nadezhin, the only candidates outside the circle of the so-called systemic opposition. As a result, the March 2024 presidential election featured only candidates, aside from Putin, who were designated to lose, providing a façade of democracy. The actions taken by the Russian leadership against the opposition had a clear impact. They effectively eliminated inconvenient counter-candidates while simultaneously intimidating their supporters. Among Boris Nadezhin's backers, there were concerns that the rejected lists of support for the opposition could be used to repress citizens viewed as hostile to the government. As a result, appeals from the opposition in exile, urging their supporters to adopt Navalny's smart voting strategy (voting against Putin) or to gather en masse at specific times in front of polling stations, failed to achieve the desired effect. Above all, the death of Alexei Navalny has not been leveraged in any significant way in the ongoing struggle to overthrow Vladimir Putin's regime. As such, his death is unlikely to bring about a shift in Russia's political situation or increase opposition mobilization in the near future. Instead, it should be viewed as a consequence of the progressively tightening grip of Putin's regime over the years. In an effort to suppress any form of opposition activity or dissent, the Russian leader has increasingly resorted to more ruthless methods in the execution of domestic policy. The death of Alexei Navalny should also be seen as a stark warning to

other opponents of the regime about the dangers of speaking out against the authorities. So far, these actions are achieving the intended effect for the Russian ruler. Most of Navalny's closest associates, including his wife and children, have left Russia, seeking safety abroad. However, they remain at risk, as evidenced by the failed assassination attempt on Leonid Volkov in Vilnius, which occurred after Navalny's death. Russian opposition activists active abroad – encompassing a diverse range of individuals such as activists, journalists, academics, and politicians – are primarily concentrated in Germany. However, their activities are often limited, a situation influenced by several factors, including significant variations in the levels of integration among different groups and an unstructured network characterized by loose ties. Moreover, those who present themselves as leaders of the Russian emigration, including figures like Garri Kasparov, often lack essential leadership qualities and the necessary skills for effective mobilization. In the case of Kasparov, one of history's most renowned chess players, celebrated globally for his remarkable achievements, the glaring absence of viable opportunities for political influence serves to underscore the profound challenges faced by Russian oppositionists in exile. They are further hindered by the constant danger posed by the regime, even outside their own country. Consequently, the declarations made by Navalny's wife, Yulia, regarding her commitment to continue her mission as an opposition figure may prove exceedingly difficult to implement in practice. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Navalny's endeavors will persist as a potent symbol – a kind of myth – upon which, under favorable circumstances, future initiatives or movements aimed at facilitating a change of power in Russia could be built.

When contemplating potential political changes in Russia, it is crucial to focus on the distinctive characteristics of the Russian political system, which diverges significantly from Western democratic standards. First and foremost, it is essential to recognize that any change of power would merely serve as a prelude to the broader transformations necessary for aligning the Russian political system with Western norms. This raises a separate issue regarding the rationale and feasibility of such transformations within the Russian context. Consequently, any discussion regarding the overthrow of the Putin regime and the future of Russia must be examined through the lens of Russian conditions. Failing to consider these specific circumstances leads to a misunderstanding of the actions undertaken by the Russian government and perpetuates the notion of their irrationality. Moreover, this oversight fosters the belief that there are certain red

lines deemed unacceptable and unlikely to be crossed. A notable example of such a “crossing” is the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has been ongoing since February 2022, despite numerous warnings and predictions to the contrary. Navalny’s death can be perceived as crossing yet another permissible boundary within the context of Russian politics. It serves as a stark confirmation of the ruthlessness of Vladimir Putin’s regime and underscores his willingness to continue transgressing such boundaries to maintain power. While this act might represent a critical turning point by the standards of Western democracies, for the Russian regime, it is merely another tactic employed to achieve a specific objective – in this case, the methodical elimination of political opposition.

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Ruch opozycyjny Aleksieja Nawalnego i jego wpływ na przemiany polityczne w Rosji Putina

Streszczenie

Aleksiej Nawalny w ostatnich latach uważany był za najważniejszego rosyjskiego opozycjonistę oraz głównego krytyka reżimu Władimira Putina. Podejmował szeroko zakrojone działania zmierzające do budowy społeczeństwa obywatelskiego w Rosji. Swoją bezkompromisową postawą zyskał uznanie na Zachodzie, w tym w Polsce. Krytycy Nawalnego zwracali uwagę na jego nacjonalistyczne i imperialistyczne poglądy oraz niemalże bezkrytyczny stosunek dla jego działalności wyrażany często przez światowych przywódców i instytucje międzynarodowe. Celem artykułu jest analiza działalności opozycyjnej Aleksieja Nawalnego, który w swoich działaniach dążył do przemian rosyjskiego systemu politycznego. Jako hipotezę przyjęto założenie, zgodnie z którym działalność opozycjonisty, mimo podejmowania przez jego zwolenników licznych inicjatyw oraz poparcia środowiska międzynarodowego, nie przyniosła oczekiwanych zmian na rosyjskiej scenie politycznej. Zaostrzenie się reżimu Władimira Putina doprowadziło do wzrostu represji wobec obywateli sprzeciwiających się władzy, co w znacznym stopniu utrudniało prowadzenie skutecznej walki opozycyjnej oraz przyczyniło się do śmierci Nawalnego.

Słowa kluczowe: Nawalny, opozycja, Rosja, reżim, Putin

