THE LEGACY OF ALEXEI NAVALNY

BY YANA GOROKHOVSKAIA

After being poisoned with a banned chemical weapon in August 2020 and imprisoned amid mass protests in January 2021, Alexei Navalny is today the most internationally recognizable leader of Russia's opposition. Whatever the outcome of the peril he faces at the moment, Navalny's career has already greatly altered Russia's political environment. The three aspects of the oppositionist's legacy that are particularly likely to shape the country's politics in the future are Navalny's multimedia messaging style, the political infrastructure he's created, and the wider societal impact of repressive measures used against him.

NAVALNY'S MEDIA APPROACH

For 15 years, Navalny has been speaking to Russians about corruption and bad governance via an array of social media platforms. Over time, he has amassed an impressive following, broadcasting his message to more and more Russians despite his long-standing, enforced absence from traditional media.

Navalny began writing about politics on the popular Russian blogging platform LiveJournal in 2006. He exposed corruption and malfeasance in Russia's natural energy sector by purchasing a small number of shares in oil and gas companies and using his status as a minority shareholder to gain access to financial reports. Navalny's readership and following grew steadily over the next few years, in large part thanks to his knack for conjuring up memorable catchphrases. For example, in the run-up to the December 2011 parliamentary election, Navalny urged people to vote for anyone but the ruling Kremlin party, United Russia. While discussing his proposed strategy during a live radio interview on Echo of Moscow, Navalny called United Russia the party of "crooks and thieves." It was an offhand remark, but the label resonated. After election monitors reported widespread fraud, and evidence of electoral malpractice

Opposite page: Alexei Navalny at a Moscow rally in 2011. Photo by Dmitry Aleshkovskiy/ Wikimedia Commons.

spread on social media, Navalny's slogan turned into a rallying cry during months of massive anti-fraud protests that winter. A year later, public opinion polls showed just how far the label had penetrated the public conversation: 51 percent of respondents agreed that it was an appropriate characterization of United Russia.

More recently, Navalny has made YouTube his main media platform. There, with the help of his team at the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), he regularly posts video investigations of Russian politicians, bureaucrats, and oligarchs that have high production value, slick graphics, drone-assisted aerial shots, and acerbic narration. A 2017 investigation documenting Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev's luxurious lifestyle garnered over 42 million views. And the two-hour "Putin's Palace" exposé, which showcased a $1.3 billion palace on the Black Sea allegedly belonging to Vladimir Putin, was viewed over 110 million times within one month after its release in January 2021.

Navalny's success in spreading his message online is especially significant in light of the nature of Russia's media landscape, which is dominated by state-controlled federal television channels and state-aligned national newspapers. As a recent report from the Harvard Kennedy School observed, censorship is widespread in traditional media and enforced by a variety of actors, including media owners and a network of state regulatory agencies.

Faced with a choice between state-controlled television and a relatively free internet, many Russians are increasingly choosing online sources for news and information. Recent public opinion polling shows a steady overall decline in television consumption and an increase in reliance on the internet and social media for breaking news,[1] a trend that is even more pronounced among young Russians aged 18 to 24.[2] Online, the informational playing field is not only less censored but also more even in terms of resources, allowing opposition voices to compete with state-sponsored ones. Navalny's YouTube channel boasts almost 6.5 million subscribers, as compared to the state-funded and state-controlled Russia Today, which has 4.1 million subscribers.

The extent of Navalny's online reach has forced authorities to issue scores of official rebuttals to his investigations, a tendency that recently reached the very apex of power. In late January, Putin, who has never publicly uttered Navalny's name, directly responded to claims contained in the "Putin's Palace" video in a teleconference with university students, saying, "Nothing that is listed there as my property belongs to me or my close relatives, and never did."

NAVALNY'S POLITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Navalny's innovative approach to media, which seeks to bypass traditional roadblocks to speak directly to Russians, mirrors his approach to formal politics. Russia's political system is a kind of "hybrid" regime, meaning that it combines authoritarian practices with democratic institutions. This allows authorities to continue to claim the mantle of democracy while undermining democratic norms—such as free and fair elections—in order to stay in power. While formal democratic values like government responsiveness and representation remain in place within the system, authoritarian practices seek to insulate the politicians as much as possible from the influence of voters. Over the course of his career, Navalny has found ways to turn the surviving democratic elements of Russia's political system against the authorities. Along the way, his organizational efforts have both

Above, top: Alexei Navalny and his wife, Julia Navalnaya, at the Nemtsov Memory March (February 29, 2020). Photo by Gregory Stein/ Alamy Stock Photo.

Above, middle: Navalny speaking at a concert rally (September 6, 2013). Photo by Putnik/ Wikimedia Commons. *Bottom*: Navalny marching on Tverskaya Street (March 26, 2017). Photo by Evgeny Feldman/ Wikimedia Commons.

connected citizens more directly to politics in a novel way and attracted scores of people to political activism.

One of Navalny's first efforts to empower citizens was the RosPil.net website, which collected and posted information on violations of government procurement rules that signaled corruption within the state purchasing system. The project both furthered Navalny's existing anti-corruption campaign and also seemed to answer the government's own anti-corruption rhetoric advanced at the time most prominently by Prime Minister Medvedev. The site was effective; several state agencies canceled tenders for purchases that were highlighted by the project hours or days after their publication.

Navalny's subsequent RosYama project (literally, "Russian Hole"), combined the targeting of existing democratic rules with an effort to generate greater citizen engagement. The website automatically sent uploaded pictures of potholes, unmarked speed bumps, and other road hazards to the responsible local authorities—usually the traffic police—who had 37 days to address the problem before it was forwarded to prosecutors. RosYama automated complaint-making, simplifying the process for citizens who now only needed to share a picture and geolocation details, while also taking advantage of existing guarantees of government responsiveness to citizens' complaints enshrined in Russian law.

In 2018, Navalny introduced an initiative called Smart Vote that aimed to harness voter discontent and overcome the authoritarian elements of Russia's electoral system. Due to decades of reforms that whittled down the number of legally allowed political parties and to various forms of electoral malpractice, opposition-minded voters routinely faced a field of equally unappealing candidates at the ballot box. Unable to agree on a single opposition candidate, voters unwittingly split their vote, allowing United Russia candidates to win despite a widespread lack of support. Smart Vote aimed to overcome this problem.

The idea behind Smart Vote is both simple and effective. Voters register on Smart Vote's website and, shortly before election day, the system sends them the name of the person deemed to have the best chance of unseating United Russia's candidate in a particular district. The recommended person need not be an oppositionist—a point of some criticism among activists—but must only be a member of a political party other than United Russia. Smart Vote does not purport to help voters elect the most genuine members of the opposition. Instead, it systematizes and automates Navalny's decade-old call to "vote for anyone but United Russia" by directing voters to alternative candidates. Smart Vote works. A recent peer-reviewed study showed that it helped elect recommended candidates and reduced overall votes for United Russia in the 2018 regional elections.[3] In 2019, Smart Vote helped the liberal democratic Yabloko Party regain seats in Moscow's city council for the first time in fifteen years at the expense of United Russia incumbents. The platform's next big campaign will take place during the September 2021 parliamentary election.

While Navalny's various online initiatives help people to exert influence on an authoritarian system designed to strip away their political agency, his network of campaign offices offers an opportunity for education, training, and network building for young activists. Shortly after he announced his plan to participate in the last presidential election, Navalny began to open campaign headquarters across Russia's 85 regions. These local offices (*shtaby* in Russian) helped him collect the

300,000 signatures he needed to register as an independent candidate. Ultimately, the central electoral commission used a legal technicality to bar Navalny from actually appearing on the ballot.

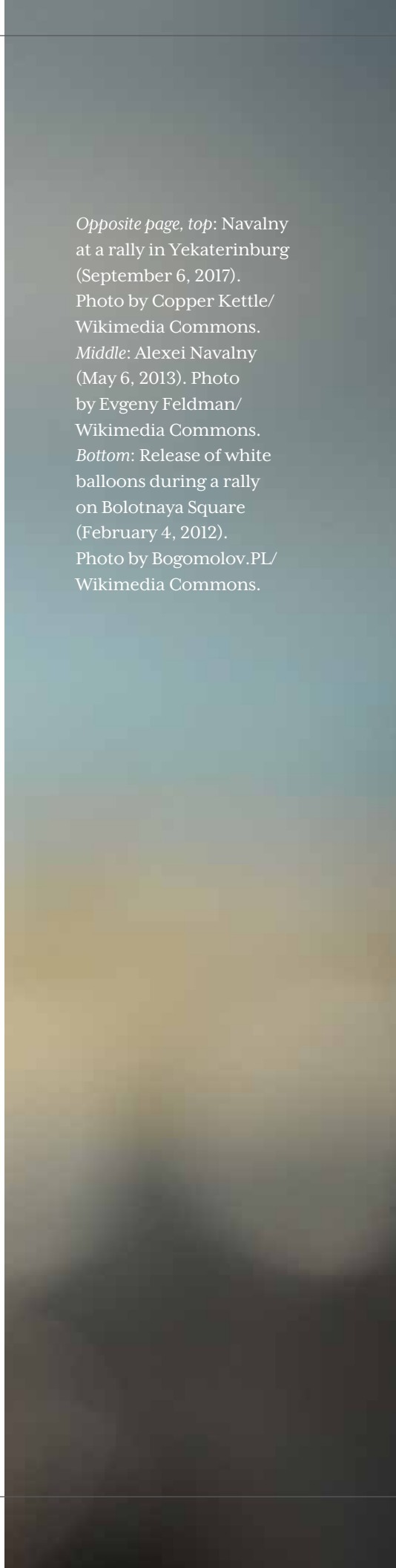
Despite Navalny being out of the race, the regional headquarters stayed open. They worked on anti-corruption investigations, helped organize protests, and supported the electoral campaigns of local oppositionists. After interviewing the staff and managers of these offices, researchers have found that they attract a wide assortment of activists with differing political orientations that are "socialized" into political activity.[4] The offices help normalize political activity among young people, especially in the regions, which is important in overcoming the long-standing notion among many Russians—born of years of experiencing an unstable and increasingly repressive political system—that participating in politics is both dangerous and futile. Today, with Navalny in prison and most of his closest associates also in detention or under house arrest, the regional offices continue in their activism even in the face of serious pressure from authorities.

REPRESSING ONE POLITICIAN RISKS POLITICIZING A WHOLE SOCIETY

Navalny has shaped Russia's political system in important ways. But it is the regime's treatment of him and his supporters that may ultimately have the biggest impact on Russia's political ecosystem, because suppressing a protest with overwhelming, brutal force risks spreading discontent beyond those who are already directly involved in the opposition movement.

Navalny's return to Russia in January 2021 and immediate arrest led to two weekends of mass protests across the country. Since the rallies were unsanctioned—meaning that they lacked official permission from the authorities—the size of the protests can only be estimated; however, reliable sources have claimed that at least 100,000 people came out to protest on January 23. Importantly, the demonstrations spread across more than 100 cities—previous movements had largely been confined to major urban areas. Riot police set arrest records, detaining nearly 10,000 people across the country. Moscow's jails ran out of space and shipped people to immigration detention centers outside the city, where many had to wait for hours in unheated police vans for their turn to be processed. In addition to arresting thousands, authorities also went to extreme lengths to discourage mass assembly. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, police cordoned off the city centers to both car and pedestrian traffic for hours. Seven stations in the Moscow metro system were shut down completely—a measure not seen since World War II, when the city faced imminent invasion by Nazi forces and authorities contemplated blowing up the Metro to keep it out of German hands.

Scholars have long agreed that protests convey important information, such as the extent of public support for an idea or movement. The same can be said of police responses to protests; militarizing city centers inconveniences the entire urban population and alerts people to the fact that something of note is happening. A recent survey showed that 80 percent of Russians have heard about the protests.[5] Arresting thousands of people impacts the lives of tens of thousands of their friends and family members, while images of police brutality transmitted via social media can cause moral outrage among the wider public. To see the potential consequences of protest repression, one need only look to Russia's neighbor Belarus, where



Opposite page, top: Navalny at a rally in Yekaterinburg (September 6, 2017). Photo by Copper Kettle/ Wikimedia Commons. *Middle*: Alexei Navalny (May 6, 2013). Photo by Evgeny Feldman/ Wikimedia Commons. *Bottom*: Release of white balloons during a rally on Bolotnaya Square (February 4, 2012). Photo by Bogomolov.PL/ Wikimedia Commons.

Alexander Lukashenko's crackdown on election protests in August led to a mushrooming of protests that have lasted for nearly six months.

Repression can produce other ripple effects. Since Navalny's arrest, donations to his Anti-Corruption Foundation have doubled. The *Bell* reported that Russia's largest and most well-known independent news network, Dozhd, gained thousands of monthly and annual paid subscribers after its extensive coverage of the protests and Navalny's court hearings. Mediazona, an independent news outlet focused on legal reporting, saw its monthly donations almost double. OVD-Info, an organization that provides legal help and information to people detained at protests, saw its Telegram and Instagram followings triple between the end of January and the beginning of February. The growth in donations to civil society organizations and increased consumption of independent media is so striking that media has dubbed it "the Navalny effect."

NAVALNY'S POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE MAY BECOME MORE EVIDENT IN THE FUTURE

The outcome of the current confrontation between Navalny and the Kremlin is difficult to predict. In the last five years, a cascade of new laws has greatly increased the already substantial restrictions on Russia's civil society organizations, independent media, activism, freedom of assembly, and judicial independence. Amendments to the constitution adopted during an economic downturn, and following pandemic lockdowns this summer, opened the door for Vladimir Putin to remain in power until 2036. Nevertheless, Russia's political system is not a static behemoth. Alexei Navalny and his supporters have already influenced it in important ways: leading the way in producing online political media, building channels through which ordinary Russians can influence the political system, and spreading their message into increasingly broader circles of Russian society. Crucially, some of the most far-reaching consequences of Navalny's activism—the political change spearheaded by the next generation of Russia's opposition—may only become evident in the years to come. ■

Editor's note: On February 1, 2021, the Harriman Institute hosted a webinar, "Navalny and the Kremlin: Politics and Protest in Russia." Gorokhovskaia was a participant. You can watch the event on our YouTube channel.

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[1] https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/28/ggh.

[2] https://www.levada.ru/2018/09/13/kanaly-informatsii.

[3] Mikhail Turchenko and Grigorii Golosov, "Smart enough to make a difference? An empirical test of the efficacy of strategic voting in Russia's authoritarian elections," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 37, no. 1 (2021): 65–79.

[4] See Jan Matti Dollbaum, Andrey Semenov, and Elena Sirotkina, "A top-down movement with grass-roots effects? Alexei Navalny's electoral campaign," *Social Movement Studies* 17, no. 5 (2018): 618–625; and Jan Matti Dollbaum, "Protest trajectories in electoral authoritarianism: From Russia's 'For Free Elections' movement to Alexei Navalny's presidential campaign," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2020): 192–210.

[5] https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/02/11/january-protests.