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OPINION

Navalny gave Russians hope — they must hold on to it

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ОБ ЭТОМ НИКТО НЕ УЗНАЕТ

Если об этом никто не напишет. Подпишитесь на регулярные пожертвования ОВД-Инфо, чтобы плохие дела не оставались в тишине.

ПОДПИСАТЬСЯ

In the wake of the news that Alexei Navalny died in the darkness and bitter cold of Russia's remote Polar Wolf prison, a chill of despair has become palpable among some thinkers and activists. Some have even gone as far as to **claim** that any hope for a better Russia died with the opposition leader. But this is wrong: the dream of Navalny's 'beautiful Russia of the future' will only die if the international community and

Russian civil society let it. This would be the ultimate betrayal of Navalny's legacy, which is why now is the time to focus our efforts on keeping that legacy alive.

Western analysts have often thought of Navalny as a traditional politician: they have analysed his platforms, his aides and his debate partners. But this is a mistake. Navalny should instead be viewed as a symbol integral to that 'beautiful Russia of the future' — the term he coined during his 2017 political campaign. At the many Navalny-related protests I have attended in Russia, only a handful of people have known what Navalny's policies were. It did not matter. What was important was Navalny's status as a resilient figure of resistance against the Kremlin, a symbol that communists, liberals and nationalists could all begrudgingly get behind. For them, Navalny symbolised hope.

But did Putin kill this hope? It is beyond doubt that Putin killed Navalny the person — whether by wearing him out with unliveable prison conditions, with poison, or something else. On the day of the murder Putin was giddy, perhaps relieved that he would no longer be haunted by Navalny's name — a word he was barely able to utter in public. But to think he killed Navalny off entirely is another mistake, for how does one kill a symbol?

His murder turned Navalny from a mortal man into an invulnerable idea. Putin unknowingly created for Navalny what Russian poet Alexander Pushkin called 'a monument not made by human hands' — a place in the collective imagination of the nation and the world. This eternal monument to Navalny is echoed in improvised memorials around the world: heaps of flowers and printed photographs laid anywhere from a snowy park in Tashkent to the fence of the Russian Embassy in Buenos Aires.

But what about inside Russia? Some initially thought that Russians would only lay tributes to Navalny in major cities, perpetuating the old stereotype of his popularity being

limited to wealthy urbanites. In fact, memorials have appeared throughout the country. In downtown Moscow, yes, but also in a Karelian forest, in provincial Saratov, in war-scarred Belgorod and many more. The police keep destroying them, but ordinary people restore them over and over again despite the brutal detentions, beatings, and torture unleashed on them for doing so.

Those decrying Russians as a congenitally slavish or apathetic nation will overlook these monuments. They will cite the Potemkin popularity of Putin's policies — doctored approval ratings, rallies which state employees are mandated to attend, well paid propagandists, fake elections — as evidence that Russians are willing and enthusiastic participants in the Kremlin's regime. They will ignore the data that shows that as of October 2023 only 12 per cent of Russians support the war in Ukraine and they will ignore the testimonies of activists and everyday citizens in Russia.

The argument that any hope for Russia died with Navalny rests on this idea of Russia as a nation of apathetic slaves. This argument is not only harmful because it is untrue, it is harmful because it risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pro-democracy Russians in the country have seen for years that the international community is reluctant to help them beyond offering strongly-worded rhetoric. While Putin was strengthening his repression and his forces were beating protesters in the streets, London remained a laundromat for the dirty money of Russian oligarchs. The German arms manufacturer Rheinmetall provided equipment to help train the Russian military ahead of their invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The husband of the Estonian prime minister Kaja Kallas is connected to a company that sells tear gas to Kremlin's forces. The list goes on.

The Western response to the wave of Russians fleeing mobilisation and repression has only helped Putin: the EU shut its doors to many Russian exiles. Some politicians

painted Russians as inherently suspicious and went as far as to propose surveillance on those who are permitted to enter. This plays into the hands of Kremlin propagandists who want to show that the West wishes nothing but despair and death for Russians.

The apathy Russians feel is therefore reinforced not just by Putin's repression but also by the West's own apathetic indifference. If the global community continues this trend and decides now that hope for Russia has entirely gone along with Navalny, it will only push Russians into losing the hope they still have.

Navalny's murder, paradoxically, gives the West a second chance. A chance to show Russians that they are not alone. A chance to welcome exiles and make the lives of political prisoners, of whom there are over 1,000 throughout the country, into one of key points of communications with the Kremlin.

Peace in Eastern Europe is impossible without a democratic Russia at peace with itself and its neighbours. A democratic Russia, the 'beautiful Russia of the future', is impossible without a successful grassroots movement for democracy within Russia. This movement is impossible if the current anti-war and pro-democracy Russians give up — and they might give up if faced with indifference and mistrust from the West on the one hand and unimaginable cruelty from the Kremlin on the other.

So instead of seeing Navalny's death as the death of hope for Russia we should see it as a stark warning of what happens when we abandon hope. We should remain hopeful and empower the Russians who still dare to stand up to Putin's regime. Just like Navalny asked us to, we should never give up.

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ЧТО Я МОГУ С ЭТИМ СДЕЛАТЬ?

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ПОДДЕРЖАТЬ