



# *The Return of Alexei Navalny*

## Expert briefing

28 January 2021

### BACKGROUND

Alexei Navalny – a leading Russian opposition figure – was detained on his return to Russia on Sunday 17 January 2021, following treatment in Berlin for poisoning. An investigation by Bellingcat provided evidence that Navalny was poisoned by the Federal Security Service (FSB) in Tomsk, Russia, in August 2020 with a nerve agent of the Novichok group.

The day after Navalny returned to Russia in January this year, a judge ordered that he be detained on remand until 15 February, given the Federal Penitentiary Service's claim that he violated parole conditions while in Germany, following a suspended sentence handed down to him in 2014. A court hearing is scheduled for 2 February that should make clear whether he will be sent to prison, with his suspended sentence turned into a custodial sentence. He also faces the possibility of an additional 10 years in prison for a separate case initiated in December 2020.

On 19 January, Navalny released a video linking Vladimir Putin to the construction of a \$1.35 billion dollar palace on the Black Sea

coast. The video on YouTube has so far been watched nearly 100 million times.

Navalny called for mass street protests on Saturday 23 January, which resulted in demonstrations across the country. Senior Russian politicians have framed the 23 January protests as an attempt by Western powers to destabilise Russia through Navalny. Information collected from participants at the protests suggests that many protestors came out in response to factors beyond – and, in some cases, in spite of – Navalny personally.

A panel discussion was held by UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) online on 27 January 2021 to discuss these developments. This briefing documents summarises the main points made by the panellists.

### WHY NOW?

**Professor Mark Galeotti – UCL SSEES;  
Royal United Services Institute**

**KEY POINT** The 'Siloviki' – Russian law enforcement actors – are evidently taking a more aggressive stance towards Navalny.

1. There are certain limitations to the level of repression the state can impose on Navalny. It is important for Putin to uphold a veneer of democracy for legitimacy's sake. However, the regime is becoming progressively less interested in allowing the opposition to have a voice. The August poisoning of Navalny suggests that it might be shifting towards a more authoritarian stance. However, it is too early to tell if the Kremlin is shifting away from a 'hybrid' system to pure authoritarianism.
2. The narrative that Navalny acts as an agent of the West is a convenient way of delegitimising him, and actors within Putin's inner circle have helped to exacerbate this rhetoric of Navalny being an enemy of the state. Some of them even believe it.
3. United Russia – the Kremlin-backed 'party of power', currently with a super-majority in the national legislature – is in the electoral doldrums. In this situation, it relies on fragmentation of the opposition to maintain dominance. Navalny's encouragement of 'smart voting' (encouraging people to vote for any party but United Russia) in past elections is, therefore, very problematic for the regime and may have tipped the balance towards eliminating him, as otherwise he can cohere a 'coalition of the fed-up' against the regime.

the protest mood surrounding national elections in 2011 and the Moscow City Duma elections of 2019.

1. The 'Crimean consensus' – political unity seen following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 – started to break down in 2016. United Russia has not gained in popularity since the 2016 parliamentary elections. Since then, public trust in the president as a politician and as a political institution has steadily but irreversibly declined.
2. We can compare the current political climate in Russia with that of 2011 when mass protests broke out. In the 2011 parliamentary elections, there was a high voter turnout and a high level of protest voting that benefited the systemic opposition. The widespread suspicion of major electoral falsification provoked protests across the country. United Russia managed to preserve its majority in the State Duma – the lower chamber of the national legislature – but it only won 49% of the vote, as compared to 64% in the previous elections in 2007.
3. Another useful comparison is with the Moscow City Duma elections in 2019. Navalny's supporters and other non-systemic opposition politicians were unable to register as candidates, which provoked numerous and massive protest demonstrations. 'Systemic' candidates that became city parliamentarians with the support of Navalny's 'smart voting' project behave like genuine opposition in making the City Duma more vocal, politically combative, and publicly visible, although the Moscow government has managed to preserve the loyal majority it needs in order, for example, to pass the city budget.

## UPCOMING ELECTIONS

**Dr Ekaterina Schulmann – Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences; Chatham House**

**KEY POINT** With parliamentary elections approaching, we can draw parallels between Russia's current political context and that of

4. The 2011 elections demonstrated the combination of high voter turnout and protest voting. The Moscow City Duma elections of 2019 showed how the loss of mandates by the ruling party together with the protest movement opened up the scope for political discussion. Both are possible scenarios for 2021. 'Smart voting' has channelled the generalised protest mood into a political instrument that has the potential to influence election outcomes. United Russia will need a majority in the September elections to maintain any degree of legitimacy, but public dissatisfaction threatens this prospect.

2. The protest is broad. The protesters did not primarily consist of young people, or of intelligentsia. It was a far wider range, and across the country. Again, it makes it harder for the Kremlin to know how to pitch its response.
3. The protest is happening outside the usual arenas in which the state operates. Unlike China, the Kremlin has failed to place effective limitations on the Internet early on and, therefore, struggles to grapple with social media. It has no monopoly on this space and lacks the vocabulary. The sense of community that social media has facilitated means it is easier for people to organise themselves and sustain the conversation about grievances, including Navalny's imprisonment. This can encourage more people to get involved as the movement continues. Social media has already effectively broadcast marches, allowing vicarious participants to join in.
4. The Kremlin has shown itself unable to comprehend and inflexible in its reactions. Little compromise and more repression. We saw a large presence from heavily armed OMON (riot police) at the 23 January protests. They arrested children.
5. A ratcheting up of violence, even if that includes protesters fighting back, will not necessarily play in the Kremlin's favour.

## PROTEST IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Clara Ferreira Marques – Bloomberg Opinion

**KEY POINT** To understand the Kremlin's response, it helps to think of the nature of this protest. Hong Kong is one helpful point of comparison.

1. The protest is cumulative. The current demonstrations are the result of political and economic grievances that have accumulated over the last few years and that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It's the continuation of past demonstrations. Navalny is seen as the one trigger by the regime, while the general public has been brought out by many more aspects. It makes it harder for the government to respond in a targeted way.

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**FURTHER INFORMATION**

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