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Russia

Navalny's Return and Left Strategy

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Russia has had an eventful week and it's not even finished. First, Alexey Navalny flew back to Moscow, then he was immediately arrested upon crossing the border, and the next day his team published a video illustrating Vladimir Putin's own corruption and calling upon all citizens to come out to the streets against the government on January 23. What is the Russian left to think of all this? Navalny is certainly not its own, but should it stay away from the protests and the brewing political crisis? LeftEast asked Ilya Budraitskis, Ilya Matveev, and Kirill Medvedev, for their opinion.

Ilya Budraitskis, Moscow-based historian, political writer, and co-author of the [Political Diary podcast](#).

Alexei Navalny's arrest at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport on January 17, minutes after his return to Russia, was not only the expected, but also the only possible reaction of the Russian authorities. At the beginning of this year, after the summer Constitutional amendments opened up the possibility of Putin's unlimited personal power, his regime had clearly entered a new phase: a virtually open dictatorship, based not on passive support from below but on repressive power. In this new configuration, there is no place either for the marginalized liberal opposition or for the systemic "managed democracy" parties, which have kept United Russia's absolute monopoly in check and have created limited opportunities for expressing electoral discontent. The attempted assassination of Navalny by the Russian security apparatus last August fits perfectly into this picture. From the perspective of the authorities, the main threat posed by Navalny is the tactic of "smart voting"—the accumulation of all the protest votes by the candidate who stands the best chance of defeating United Russia's nominees. In a situation where support for the ruling party is rapidly declining (currently it is no more than 30%), the "smart voting" threatens the approved scenario for the parliamentary elections scheduled for September of this year and, in the long run, the triumphant re-election of Putin himself to a new term.

Navalny's bold and precise populist strategy is in fact aimed at creating a protest coalition, with an important place reserved for the representatives of the system parties (above all, the Communists), who will refuse to play by the Kremlin's rules and are able to conduct lively and offensive electoral campaigns. A key element of this strategy is Navalny's rhetoric, in which the issues of poverty and social inequality have taken the place of liberal-democratic values. The high-profile anti-corruption investigations that have earned him popularity have an emotional impact on a huge audience (for example, his latest film about Putin's palace, costing 100 billion roubles, was viewed over 50 million times by Friday), since they directly indicate the extreme stratification of Russian society. In an environment of openly falsified elections and unprecedented police pressure, electoral protest can only have an effect if it is supported by a mass non-parliamentary street movement. And only such a movement can determine Navalny's personal fate today — if hundreds of thousands across the country do not stand up for his immediate release in the coming weeks, he will surely face a long prison term.

In my view, participating in such a movement — with our own program and demands — is today the only chance for the Russian left. Moreover, it is the left that can most coherently express the sentiments that are increasingly pushing people to active protest: social inequality, the degradation of the social sphere (especially health care, which became dramatically apparent during the pandemic), police violence, and the absence of basic democratic (especially labor) rights.

Ilya Matveev, a researcher and lecturer in political economy based in St. Petersburg and co-author of the [Political Diary podcast](#)

At first, Navalny's decision to return to Russia was bewildering. What did he expect to happen? The state had clearly decided to put him behind bars, disregarding international pressure (in any case, after the highly publicized assassination attempt, the reputation of the Russian authorities could hardly get any worse). In prison, Navalny could claim the moral high ground, but he could not be an effective communicator of anti-corruption investigations and political campaigns (his most important activity). Navalny's decision seemed almost irrational, a stubborn show of defiance. However, very soon it became clear that there was an element of political calculation to this. Once Navalny was arrested, his team released a new investigative video. It was one of a kind – Navalny's first big investigation targeting Putin directly. The video was destined to attract a huge audience. Navalny's calculation was to provoke an immediate and severe political crisis – both with his own arrest and with the new explosive investigation. This crisis would have a street dimension – on Saturday 23 January, Russian cities will witness unsanctioned rallies – and an electoral dimension.

2021 is in fact the year of parliamentary elections in Russia. Russia has a mixed electoral system – one half of the parliament is elected on proportional basis, another half in single-member districts. While elections are tightly controlled and falsifications have reached an unprecedented level during the vote on constitutional amendments in 2020, parliamentary elections could still pose a problem for the regime. Party list voting faces the problem of deep unpopularity of United Russia, a ruling party. And in single-member districts, the regime faces the so-called 'smart voting', Navalny's highly advanced tactical voting scheme. A political crisis triggered by Navalny's arrest and his new anti-Putin video hits both targets – lowers the vote for United Russia even further and promotes 'smart voting' in SMDs. It could be a heavy blow for the regime, especially combined with street protests. In short, Navalny's return to Russia was a calculated gamble. The ball is now in the court of the ordinary members of the opposition.

A few words on the new video itself. It does not present a lot of new facts – Putin's personal palace first appeared in the news in 2010. Nor is it significant simply because it is a direct challenge to Putin. What is striking about the video is that it creates a consistent narrative. In this story, Putin's defining characteristic is his absurd, comical lust for material wealth. According to Navalny, Putin has always been guided by this lust alone. He wanted things when he was a KGB agent in Germany, he wanted things in Anatoly Sobchak's administration in St Petersburg in the 1990s, he wanted things while moving to Moscow and eventually becoming president and he still wants things, even after building a \$1,5 billion palace with the seal of the Romanov dynasty at the entrance. In my opinion, this is not an accurate description of Putin's mindset or motivation. Nor can the Russian regime be reduced to this caricature. Nevertheless, Putin's decisions in recent years (starting with his return to the presidency in 2012 all the way to canceling term limits for himself in 2020) made such a depiction of his life and work inevitable. For this one-dimensional account of his life, Putin has no one to blame but himself.

Kirill Medvedev, activist of the Russian Socialist Movement, musician from the Arkady Kots Band, editor of Zanova-media

With his return, Navalny has taken an important step towards a new understanding of politics in Russia and a new round of politicization. Previously, there had been a fairly clear "division of labor" in protest: activists take risks motivated by a certain idealistic civic impulse while politicians pursue their own, often purely selfish, interests. Navalny has drawn this line, showing that politics can and should be valiant and technological at the same time. Importantly, in the new videos, he continues to develop the image of Putin not as a politician, but as a corrupt functionary who, having gained enormous power through shady arrangements, continues to act in the same old manner of a rogue post-Soviet official with ties to the FSB.

But the more convincingly Navalny works with the theme of corruption and the ostentatious consumption of top officials, the more the limits of this rhetoric are exposed in a country like Russia, exhausted by inequality and permeated by class contradictions. Now the situation looks like this: Navalny is showing us the palaces of the rulers, playing with the fire of class resentment, while at the same time (together with his comrades-in-arms) promising businesses complete freedom in the Beautiful Russia of the Future. They say that the problem is not the palaces and

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gigantic fortunes per se, but where they come from. But of course, with the further development of this populist line, it will no longer be easy to separate the corrupt "friends of Putin" from those whom Navalny calls "honest businessmen," but whose fortunes are just as huge, and similarly generated by illegal schemes from the 1990s and 2000s and, of course, by over-exploitation of workers. All of this opens up great opportunities for leftist politics, which, with an equally skillful combination of valor and rationality, could produce a far more powerful wave of discontent and a far more coherent program of change than Navalny's eclectic populism.

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