

Remembering Alexei Navalny



Alexei Navalny with Yulia and Zakhar in Berlin in October 2020 as he recovered from having been poisoned by Russia's FSB in Tomsk in August.

Today is an immensely sad day – especially, of course, for Yulia, Alexei Navalny's spouse, and Zakhar, their son, and their daughter Daria. But it is an immensely sad day also for all those who worked with Alexei in his quest to transform Russia into a free and democratic state and for all those who knew him and knew how committed and courageous he was in his work to make Russia a better country. It is an immensely sad day for Russia. And it is an immensely sad day for those of us who got to know Alexei when he spent time at Yale as a World Fellow in 2010.

The last several years were immensely difficult for Alexei, beginning with a near-fatal poisoning by the Russian Security Service (FSB) in 2020 and concluding today with his death in a maximum-security prison in the Arctic North. On August 20, 2020, Alexei became violently ill on a flight to Moscow from Tomsk, where he had been campaigning in advance of Russia's regional and local elections in September. After an emergency landing in Omsk, he was hospitalized and put in a medically induced coma and on a ventilator. The medical staff at the hospital rejected the suggestion that he had been poisoned and claimed his condition might have been caused by a "metabolic disorder" caused by low blood sugar. They also rejected pleas for him to be transferred to a hospital where he could be properly diagnosed and treated. Finally, after German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to allow him to be transferred to a hospital that could diagnose the problem and treat him, German doctors were allowed to examine him and, after determining that he could be transported, arranged for him to be flown on August 22, 2020 to Berlin, where he could be treated at the Charité research hospital.

On August 24, 2020, Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas announced that, "according to the Charité medical team, clinical findings indicate that Alexei Navalny was poisoned." On September 2, the German government announced that tests conducted by a military lab in Munich found "unequivocal proof of a chemical nerve agent from the Novichok group." Novichok, which means "newcomer" in Russian, is the name of a family of chemical

weapons developed by the U.S.S.R. and banned by the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention. A nerve agent from that group had been used by officers of Russia's GRU (military intelligence) to poison Sergei Skripal, a former GRU officer who had been a double agent for the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6), and his daughter in Salisbury, England in March 2018.

After learning what the German lab found, Merkel said, "Alexei Navalny is a victim of a crime. It was an attempt to silence him. I condemn this in the strongest possible terms on behalf of the entire German government. There are very serious questions now that only the Russian government can answer and must answer... The crime against Alexei Navalny was aimed at the fundamental values and rights for which we stand." Germany announced it intended to discuss the matter in both the EU and NATO and would notify the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) of the lab findings.

Meeting as the European Council on October 1-2, 2020, the EU leaders condemned the assassination attempt, said the use of a chemical weapon constitutes a serious breach of international law, called upon Russia to fully cooperate with the OPCW to ensure there would be an impartial international investigation and that those responsible for the poisoning would be brought to justice. On October 6, the OPCW confirmed the German analysis. The next day Maas and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian issued a joint statement in which they said "there is no other plausible explanation for Mr. Navalny's poisoning than a Russian involvement and responsibility" and said they would share with the other EU member states proposals for additional sanctions that "will target individuals we consider responsible for this crime and violation of international norms, based on their official function, as well as an entity implicated in the Novichok programme."

On October 2020, the EU foreign ministers, meeting as the Foreign Affairs Council, agreed unanimously to impose sanctions consisting of asset freezes and travel bans on a number of Russian officials who were part of the presidential administration or security apparatus as well as an asset freeze on the entity that was responsible for the storage and destruction of chemical warfare agents. Importantly, the Council placed responsibility for the poisoning clearly and unambiguously in Putin's office: "It is reasonable to conclude that the poisoning of Alexei Navalny was only possible with the consent of the Presidential Executive Office." And, it said, "taking into account that Alexei Navalny was under surveillance at the time of his poisoning, it is reasonable to conclude that the poisoning was only possible with the involvement of the Federal Security Service." The FSB is the principal internal security agency in Russia, the successor to the internal section of the former KGB. Those sanctioned included Andrei Yarin, the chief of the Presidential Domestic Policy Directorate in Putin's Executive Office and a member of a task force in the office whose purpose was to counter Alexei's influence through operations meant to discredit him; Sergei Kiriyyenko, the First Deputy Chief of Staff in Putin's Executive Office with responsibility for domestic affairs, including political groups and activities; Sergei Menyailo, the Plenipotentiary Representative of the President in the Siberian Federal District; Aleksandr Bortnikov, the Director of the FSB; and two deputy ministers of defence. Yarin, Kiriyyenko, and Menyailo were responsible for "inducing and providing support to the persons who carried out or were involved in the poisoning." Bortnikov was responsible for "providing support to the persons who carried out or were involved in the poisoning." The two deputy ministers were responsible for "assisting the persons who carried out or were involved in the poisoning." The State Scientific Research for Organic Chemistry and Technology (GosNIIOkht) was sanctioned because "the deployment of a

toxic nerve agent of the Novichok group would only be possible due to the failure of the Institute to carry out its responsibility to destroy the stockpiles of chemical weapons.”

There were many in Europe and the U.S. who hoped that, when fully recovered, Alexei would not return to Russia. But he believed that, despite the considerable risk of either imprisonment or another attempt to kill him, he should return to Russia. And so, on January 17, 2021, he returned. Landing at Sheremetyevo, he was immediately detained and, at a hearing the next day, was remanded in custody for 30 days pending a court appearance for failing to appear periodically for meetings as required when his three and one-half year sentence following his 2014 conviction for embezzlement was suspended. At the court hearing on Feb. 2, 2021, the Federal Penitentiary Service, claiming Alexei had failed to appear periodically after his 2014 sentence was suspended, asked for the original 3½-year sentence to be reimposed. The judge did so, subtracting the ten months he had spent under house arrest prior to having the sentence suspended, which meant he would face two years and eight months in prison. Russia typically doesn't announce where a person is imprisoned until the person has arrived and been there awhile. But reports on official Russian news outlets suggested he was sent to Penal Colony No. 2 (IK2) in Pokrov, about 60 miles east of Moscow. It's a penal colony with a well-deserved reputation for strict enforcement of its rules and harsh treatment of the inmates.

In February 2022, Alexei was tried on charges of embezzlement and contempt of court, and in March 2022, he was found guilty and sentenced to nine years in a maximum-security prison. Two months later, he was charged with extremism, for which the sentence would be an additional 15 years in prison. Later that year, he was placed in solitary confinement, during which he was deprived of medication after having caught the flu. In January 2023, he was transferred to an isolated punishment cell for several months. Last August, after being tried in a closed trial in Moscow, he was found guilty of extremist activity, sentenced to an additional 19 years, and sent to a “special regime” prison, the harshest type, in Kharp in the far north of Siberia. He died there today.

Today is a very sad day – most of all, of course, for Yulia, Daria and Zakhar, but also for Russia.

David R. Cameron
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