

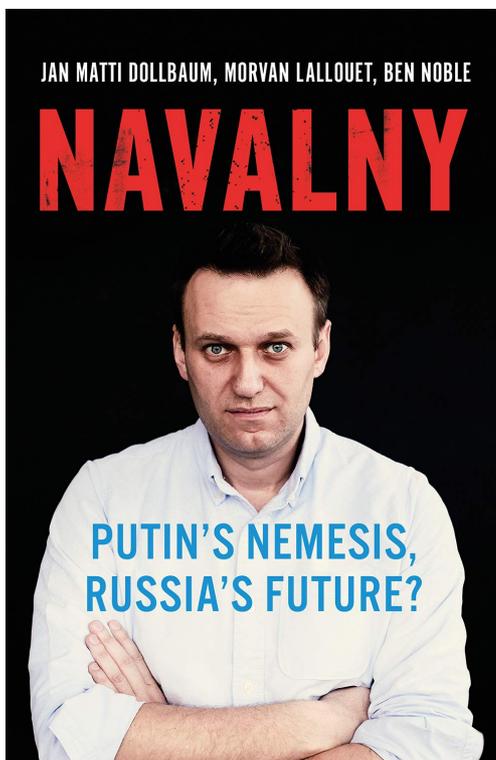


Book Review

Dollbaum, Jan, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble. 2021. *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* London: Hurst.

Jardar Østbø

Institute for Defence Studies, Norwegian Defence University College



Aleksei Navalny – Putin’s nemesis, according to this recent book by young researchers Jan Matti Dollbaum, Morvan Lallouet, and Ben Noble – is a unique phenomenon in Russian politics. Through years of hard work, many trials and lots of failures, he carved out a space for opposition politics where there was almost none. Navalny has engaged activists and fought for votes in a country where this is increasingly hard. After many cases of harassment, years of administrative impediments, and legal persecution, he gained global fame after he was poisoned, barely survived and then imprisoned for violating his parole while receiving treatment in Germany. But who is Mr. Navalny?

When Vladimir Putin had recently assumed the presidency of the Russian Federation, having been quickly but thoroughly groomed and approved by the violently infighting elite as the consensus candidate, a participant at World Economic Forum’s 2000 conference in Davos famously posed the blunt, even simple-minded question: ‘Who is Mr. Putin?’ Few, if anybody, knew. For years, his profession had been to be a nobody. Or anybody. In Dresden, as the iron curtain fell, he probably saved his life by lying to the angry mob outside the KGB office that he was an interpreter. In the beginning of his presidency, he had the luxury of being able to make everyone happy, rhetorically as well as materially. More to the point, being such a clean slate, he had several public ‘personae’ that he alternated between; statist, history

man, survivalist, outsider, free-marketeer, or case officer (Hill and Gaddy 2013). Linguistic analysis even identified distinct communication styles in his speech: the technocrat, the security service official, the businessman, the patriot, and the *muzhik* (Russian macho) (Gorham 2005). By a combination of historical and geopolitical preconditions as well as his own and his adversaries' choices, he has now – not unlike the rat he famously chased as a child – been driven into, if not in a corner, then a place where the options are significantly more limited than two decades ago.

For a good half of that time, Aleksei Navalny has, in a sense, gone in the opposite direction, making a political career out of exploiting the few and limited opportunities there have been. As a result, he has become a lot of things. In Russia, there are many political bloggers and vloggers. There are many anti-corruption activists. There are many street protesters. Even in authoritarian states such as Russia, where the regime has gone from a sometimes highly sophisticated and careful stick-and-carrot approach towards blunt and heavy-handed repression, there are several opposition politicians, most of whom face serious obstacles, and some of whom have been physically attacked, imprisoned and even sought assassinated. Some of them are recognised 'prisoners of conscience' by Amnesty International. Navalny is all of the above, at once. Ideologically, among Russian opposition activists and politicians, there are liberals, nationalists, or leftists. Navalny is both a liberal and a nationalist, and has, in later years, included certain social demands in his platform.

For his supporters, and in Western discourse, Navalny is a courageous anti-corruption activist. His nationalist activities in the past, when he participated in the notoriously xenophobic 'Russian marches' and posed on YouTube as a dentist comparing immigrants to caries and recommending the deportation of 'unnecessary elements' are seen as disturbing but a thing of the past and/or less important than his fight against the main two-headed enemy, namely the Putin regime and corruption. Many of the activists, and even Navalny himself, see ideological and political divisions as unimportant at this stage. Either you are with Navalny, or you are with the regime, either you are in favour of democracy, or you support the authoritarians. 'Normal politics' are to be left to the next stage. By contrast, in Russian state-controlled media, Navalny is framed as a nobody, an attention-seeking 'blogger' who disrespects the Russian nation, serves the interests of the CIA, and is himself guilty of corruption.

Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future? is an excellent exploration of the question of who Aleksei Navalny 'is'. Attentive to the power, implications and the dynamics of the prevalent black-and-white picture, the authors steer clear of simplistic answers. While rich in details and descriptions of events, the book also provides a general analysis, structuring itself around Navalny's three most important public roles, as anti-corruption activist, politician, and protester. There is also a chapter on the struggle between Navalny and the Kremlin, and an assessment of the future prospects.

This is not a full biography as such but a very good overview of Navalny's career and his public persona(e). The book is both well-researched and written in an accessible style, and should be of great interest to an enlightened audience interested in anti-corruption, protest politics in authoritarian states, and the political use of social media. Russia specialists, for whom this book is a required reading, will not find a lot of new details. Nor do the authors seek theoretical innovation as such. But the book's great strength lies in its balanced approach and its sensitivity to the complexity of the dynamics in Russia's political life. The authors take issue with, without denouncing certain merits of, the simplistic and stereotypical views of Naval'nyi as (only) a courageous liberal idealist, (only) a power-hungry opportunist, or (mainly) a nationalist. The authors show that Naval'nyi has, since the very beginnings, stayed faithful to his liberal (or even neo-liberal) outlook, especially in economic matters. Nevertheless, disappointed with the traditionally uncompromising high-brow liberals, he had no qualms incorporating strongly nationalist elements in his platform in order to rally support. The social demands, however, are very moderate and also late-comers to his agenda, representing an attempt to tap into wider social strata.

Perhaps the most interesting novelty in the book is the analysis of Navalny's relationship with his supporters. State-controlled media have often accused him of leading the country's youth astray, cynically exploiting them for his own political purposes. As the authors state, this of course rests on the traditionally Russian view of politics as 'dirty' and dangerous, best left to professionals. More interestingly, the authors' interviews with Navalny's activists reveal that strikingly many of them have a *utilitarian* approach to Navalny. For them, working for him is the best or even the only way to express their resistance and act on it. One of them even referred to Navalny as their 'tool'. This, of course, turns the Kremlin's rhetoric on its head. But it is also more dangerous for the regime – when even some leftists support Navalny the neoliberal nationalist out of pure hate of the present regime, discontent has grown strong. Such a left-right alliance we have also seen in the past, but Navalny has been more successful.

In the chapter 'Navalny v. Kremlin', the authors show how Navalny and his modus operandi have been shaped by the Kremlin's actions. As a product of his times, having grown up in the Soviet system but been forced to survive in the chaotic transition period, Navalny has shown remarkable flexibility and ability to spot the opportunities, however limited, when others would see only problems. Is TV blocked for opposition politicians? Use your blog. Are you barred from running in the elections? Device a system to vote *against* the ruling party. Are you attacked physically? Put a spin on it in social media. Did they try to kill you? Identify your killer, call him up on the phone, chastise him for poor execution (pun intended), and post the conversation on YouTube. Although Navalny would prefer to do 'normal politics', i.e. be allowed to register as a candidate and given access to media, participating in an open debate with the incumbents, his way of doing politics has become what it is *because of* the obstacles. It is hard to predict who Navalny the 'normal politician' would be, after the radical democratic reform he

envisions as the first step towards ‘the wonderful Russia of the future’ (his slogan). Pessimists would point to Georgia’s Mikheil Saakashvili or Ukraine’s Viktor Yushchenko, whose legacies are mixed, to say the least. But as the authors show, Navalny has also contributed to influencing the regime. In no small measure, the regime’s increasingly repressive way of handling the opposition has been shaped by Navalny’s constant and changing challenges. What would the regime be like without Navalny? That is hard to tell. Who would Navalny be without the regime? That is impossible to tell. The Russian regime and Navalny are literally engaged in a mortal battle, but still, they exist in a kind of strange symbiosis.

The authors appear to argue that Navalny is Putin’s nemesis – though paradoxically, they do not provide a definitive answer to the question whether Putin fears him. I would put it the other way round. Although there is no hard evidence to conclude that Putin himself ordered the assassination, it is hard, given the information at hand, to dispute that somewhere very high in the hierarchy, someone has seen Navalny as such a security threat that this extreme measure was deemed justified. And/or somebody sufficiently influential has viewed the regime’s failure to respond decisively to Navalny’s repeated affronts as a sign of impermissible weakness. They are an authoritarian regime, after all, relying in part (and increasingly) on pure force. Navalny is in prison for the foreseeable future. In this perspective, the obvious absurdity of his sentence is a sign from the regime that they do not need a viable legal argument to let him rot in labour camp.

So is Navalny Russia’s future? The authors are cautious. The finding that Navalny himself to an extent has been used by a new generation of Russians who have learned to organize and work politically could, write the authors, indicate that Russia is slowly growing ripe for change. It is up to them to decide. It seems that in this specific question, the authors are somehow influenced by the view that Russia will eventually become more democratic due to the growth of civil society.

As president, Putin started with an enviable clean slate that progressively became more dirty, until he ended as an outcast of the Western ‘good society’. Navalny has had to search for openings in the authoritarian system, ending up as a hero of the same ‘good society’. This chase has shaped him. His highly entertaining style, publicized protest activities, professional organizations, professionalized media network producing sleek content, and his eclectic adoption of populist demands make him a far cry from, say, the soft-spoken and ideologically firm Soviet dissidents. Because of his forced opportunism, it is impossible to get to grips with the Navalny phenomenon outside the historical and political conditions where it was shaped. The greatest contribution of this book is the implicit insight that the essentialist question of who Navalny ‘really’ is, is meaningless. Therefore, it is hard to imagine how Navalny would be as a ‘normal politician’. But then again, what is normal these days?

Funding

This work was funded by The Research Council of Norway under project no. 313004 – *Luxury, Corruption and Global Ethics: Towards a Critical Cultural Theory of the Moral Economy of Fraud* (LUXCORE).

References

Gorham, Michael S. 2005. “Putin’s Language.” *Ab Imperio* 2005 (4): 381–401.

Hill, Fiona, and Clifford G. Gaddy. 2013. *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. Washington: Brookings.