European Parliament

The poisoning of Alexey Navalny

EU-Russia relations hit a new low in August 2020, after Alexey Navalny, one of Russia's leading opposition activists, was poisoned by a banned nerve agent. Although the perpetrators have not yet been identified, the attack has to be seen in the context of repression and growing discontent against Putin. In response to this clear breach of international law and human rights, the EU is considering additional sanctions against Moscow.

Who is Alexey Navalny?

Alexey Navalny is an activist, blogger and leader of Russia's 'non-system' or 'liberal' opposition (i.e. not belonging to one of the officially tolerated 'system' opposition parties represented in Russia's parliament). He has only ever stood in one significant election, the Moscow mayoral vote of 2013; in this, he did unexpectedly well, capturing 27 % of the vote, almost enough to force United Russia incumbent, Sergey Sobyanin, into a second round. In the same year, Navalny received a suspended sentence for embezzlement, on the basis of which he was barred from standing as a candidate in the 2018 presidential election. Electoral authorities have also refused to register Navalny's Progress Party (recently renamed Russia of the Future).

Until it was disbanded in July 2020, Navalny led the Anti-Corruption Foundation. The Foundation's investigations uncovered corrupt dealings by senior figures, such as former Prosecutor-General, Yury Chaika, and Putin ally, Yevgeny Prigozhin, a millionaire businessman linked to the infamous St. Petersburg troll factory and mercenaries fighting in Ukraine. The foundation's biggest success was in 2017, when its video on then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's private assets was watched nearly 40 million times.

What happened to Navalny?

On 20 August 2020, Navalny collapsed while returning by plane from the Siberian city of Tomsk. After an emergency landing, he was taken to a hospital in Omsk. Doctors there denied having found traces of poison in his blood. Soon afterwards, Navalny was flown to Germany and is now recovering at a hospital in Berlin; whether he will make a full return to health is not yet known. Tests from multiple independent laboratories show that he was poisoned by a Novichok-type nerve agent similar to the substance used against former Russian spy Sergey Skripal in 2018.

Navalny's poisoning fits in with a pattern of harassment and violence against Russian opposition figures. In 2015, Boris Nemtsov was gunned down in Moscow, while Vladimir Kara-Murza, an ally of Nemtsov, survived two suspected poisoning attacks. Navalny himself temporarily lost part of his eyesight after being doused with a caustic green dye in 2017. Only rarely are the perpetrators of such attacks brought to justice.

As in previous incidents, it may never be possible to prove that Putin directly ordered Navalny's poisoning. However, the use of Novichok – which non-state players could hardly have accessed – suggests that the poisoning was authorised somewhere in the Russian state, probably at a high level; at the very least, it raises concerns about Russia's compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention, which bans the stockpiling and use of such substances. Moreover, by failing to strongly condemn or effectively investigate attacks on opposition activists, the Russian state has created an atmosphere of impunity.

Why does the Kremlin see Navalny as a threat?

Navalny's personal attacks on Putin, who he often describes as a 'would-be tsar', have undoubtedly needled the Kremlin, but on the face of it, it has little to fear from him. While over one in every four Muscovites voted for him in 2013, this does not appear to be representative of the country as a whole; in the 2018 presidential elections, surveys by independent pollster Levada Centre suggested that, even if Navalny had been allowed to stand, he would not have captured more than a small share of the vote. However, the authorities' determination to exclude him from political life, and the refusal of Putin and other senior figures even to mention him by name, suggests that they see him as a threat.

Part of the reason may be that support for Putin is looking increasingly shaky. Many Russians were upset by the pension reform of 2018, which raised the retirement age by five years. The economy is forecast to shrink

by 6 % in 2020, hard hit by the pandemic and a poorly managed response. As discontent grows, Levada Centre polls show that in April 2020, Putin's approval rating was 59 % – the lowest ever level since he first became president in 2000. Although constitutional changes adopted in July 2020 theoretically give Putin the option of continuing as president till 2036, the steady erosion of his popularity raises the question of how long he can hold on to power.

From the Caucasus to Siberia, Russians are taking to the streets over issues such as pensions, administrative boundary changes and pollution. For months, tens of thousands of demonstrators in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk have been denouncing the removal of popular governor Sergey Furgal on what they see as politically motivated murder charges. Although their main grievances are specific and local, anti-Putin chants and the messages of solidarity with Belarussian protestors on display in Khabarovsk also point to a desire for deeper political change. For Putin, Belarus is a dangerous example and a warning of how popular protests can threaten the stability of a seemingly entrenched authoritarian regime.

In this context, even if most Russians do not see Navalny as a credible alternative leader of the country, the issues he raises resonate with them. Navalny's 2017 video on Medvedev triggered the country's largest protests since 2011. His description of Putin's United Russia as the 'party of crooks and thieves' tarnished the party's image to the point that in 2018 and 2019, many pro-Putin candidates ran as independents.

Although United Russia continues to do well in most elections, it has suffered several setbacks. One of these came in the regional elections of 2018, when communist and liberal democrat candidates (one of them being Khabarovsk's Sergey Furgal) defeated incumbent United Russia governors in three regions. In September 2019, with most non-system opposition candidates excluded from elections to Moscow's legislative assembly, the 'smart voting' technique promoted by Navalny still delivered a setback to United Russia, which lost around one-third of its seats. Voters were recommended to back 'system' opposition party candidates who, though not necessarily sympathetic to Navalny's agenda, had the best chance against their Putinist rivals. Navalny's poisoning may have been an attempt to avert any similar disruption of the September 2020 regional elections, seen as a crucial test of the ruling party ahead of the 2021 federal parliamentary vote. In the end, the results of those elections were mixed, with United Russia winning in most of the regions that voted, but losing its majorities on Novosibirsk and Tomsk city councils to a mix of 'system' and 'non-system' candidates, including several Navalny allies.

Russian and international response

Russia has denied any state involvement in the attack, expressed doubts as to whether Navalny was actually poisoned, and accused the German authorities of refusing to provide evidence in support of their claims, which Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, sees as evidence of Russophobia.

For US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, 'senior Russian officials' were probably to blame. EU High Representative, Josep Borrell, stopped short of identifying the likely perpetrators, but condemned the attack, pointing out that chemical weapons such as Novichok are prohibited by international law and calling on Russia to carry out a transparent investigation. A similar position was expressed by Ryszard Czarnecki, chair of the European Parliament's Russia Delegation, who argued that EU-Russia relations could not be normalised unless Russian authorities guaranteed universal human rights.

The EU has not yet decided to impose additional sanctions on Russia. Whether or not it does so will depend on the results of investigations into the attack and Russia's cooperation. Since 2018, the EU has a legal framework for chemical weapons-related restrictive measures, applied in 2019 to Russian military intelligence agents implicated in the Novichok attack against former agent Sergey Skripal.

In addition to asset freezes and visa bans for those behind the attack, Germany is re-considering Nord Stream 2. Although construction of the controversial pipeline is almost complete, it has been delayed by US sanctions since late 2019. Until now, Berlin has been highly critical of the US measures, which it sees as interference in its internal affairs. However, under international and domestic pressure to respond to the Navalny incident, the German government says it cannot rule out ending its support for the pipeline.

In February 2020, French President, Emmanuel Macron, called for a rethink of EU policy towards Russia, arguing that the two sides needed to engage in 'strategic dialogue'. Putin also says he wants to improve relations. However, the Navalny incident suggests otherwise, giving the EU no choice other than to continue the tense stand-off that began with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.