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THE SATURDAY INTERVIEW

The Man Vladimir Putin Fears Most

Alexei Navalny, the rising star of Russia's opposition, on his political strategy and why the latest czar is 'trapped' by power.

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By MATTHEW KAMINSKI

Moscow

The outcome is a foregone conclusion. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Russia's paramount ruler since 2000, will reclaim his old job as president in Sunday's elections. The drama comes in the aftermath.

Anticorruption blogger and activist Alexei Navalny will be in the middle of it—as he has been over the past three months of Russia's unexpected political awakening. By the tens of thousands, Russians shed their fear and apathy to protest December's fraud-ridden parliamentary elections and Mr. Putin's hold on power. From a crowded stage of opposition figures, Mr. Navalny has emerged as the charismatic and fresh face of the movement.

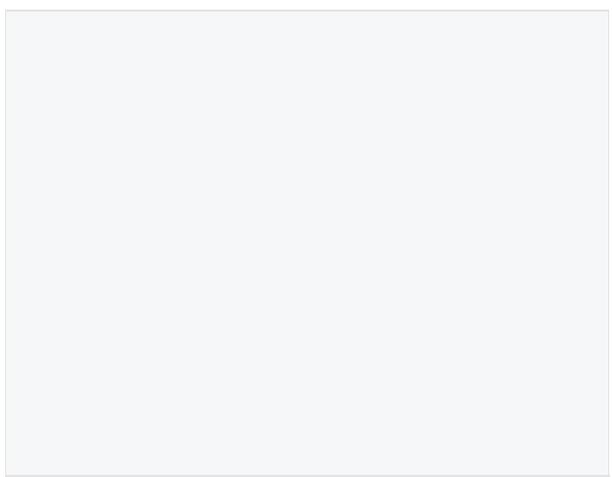
The next phase will test him and the opposition. The series of large demonstrations after December exposed the shallowness of support for Mr. Putin in the large cities and public frustration with the political stagnation and lack of accountability in Russia. Yet the rallies forced no notable government concessions. Though weakened, Mr. Putin gets a new term and possibly energy to reverse his slide or to crack down.

Among the opposition, Mr. Navalny has carved out the harder line. He says it's time to "escalate" with regular protests, a permanent encampment in downtown Moscow, and maybe calls for nationwide strikes. "We need a real tent city in the heart of Moscow," he says. The opposition wants political reforms, including the return of direct elections for governors and easing rules on political parties, and elections for a new Duma next year and for president in 2014.

"All our protests were very kind of friendly," Mr. Navalny says. "I'm not going to appeal to violence or aggression—of course not. But the mood of the protests should be more and more political. It's not just about the fun, hipster stuff. It has to be a kind of real political protest. The Kremlin should understand these tens of thousands of people will never leave the streets. We will never consider Putin as a president with legitimacy."

As the authorities here know, protests and the occupation of public spaces were used in Ukraine's Orange Revolution, and last year's uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia to depose authoritarian rulers. Suggesting the depth of official paranoia, Moscow police earlier this week rounded up a few activists in a car who turned up in the city center to pass out free tents, keeping them in jail overnight.

Escalation carries risks for the opposition. Confrontation with police and the Kremlin's Nashi youth shock troops may scare away middle-class Muscovites who pinned white



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ribbons to their coats and joined in the winter's protests.

Some would prefer to start small to revive Russia's experiment with democracy, running candidates in local elections and building new parties. Some want compromises with the authorities, who might look to co-opt parts of the movement. Not Mr. Navalny, who says any change will be "driven by 1% of the population, the politically active part, which lives in the capital," and sees no other option to force the Kremlin's hand.



Enlarge Image

Zina Saunders

To start it off, the anti-Putin coalition wanted to hold a Monday evening rally on Lubyanka, down the street from Red Square. As we talk on Thursday night, an aide enters to tell Mr. Navalny that the city and his opposition colleagues have agreed instead to use Pushkin Square. He makes a sour face and bites his tongue. Mr. Navalny wanted it in the center of town, but to keep everyone happy he won't criticize the decision.

The Kremlin acts as if it fears Mr. Navalny most of all the dissident figures. Websites and television stations friendly

to the regime have tried to smear him as a CIA operative or Hitler-like nationalist. His emails were hacked into and published. He is the sole opposition leader still barred from state-controlled television.

"I'm on the very blackest part of the black list," says Mr. Navalny. When television host and Putin family friend Ksenia Sobchak invited him on her popular show on Russian MTV, it was yanked off the air—everyone presumes on government orders. "Sometimes it seems to me that there is a small crazy guy in the Kremlin who works for me," Mr. Navalny jokes. "Relatively few people watch such shows. But because they banned it, there are millions of Russians now who wonder, 'Who is he? Why do they fear him so much?'"

Mr. Navalny, who is 35 years old, leads no party. He oversees a staff of 11 and works from an office of four rooms and barren walls off the Moscow ring road. A couple of young men sit behind laptops and work on his latest civic Internet initiative to register election monitors for Sunday's vote. The Kremlin barred credible challengers and put Mr. Putin up against several stalking horses. Yet election day won't come without suspense. Thousands of people in big cities are going to fan out to prevent and document the fraud everyone expects will be needed to assure Mr. Putin his first-round victory.

Russia last saw this level of civic engagement in the late *glasnost* years of the Soviet Union. Many of the people behind the current protests have no memory of it. Until recently, opposition politics was the province of marginal activists and Moscow intellectuals beaten down by 12 years of Mr. Putin's "sovereign democracy."

Yet in a matter of weeks, politics went mainstream, even cool. How much so is shown by the presence of Ms. Sobchak, a 30-year-old who runs her own fashion line, at the rallies: The so-called "Paris Hilton of Moscow" is the daughter of the former St. Petersburg mayor, Anatoly Sobchak, who was Mr. Putin's mentor. "It's a very positive sign when all this establishment—the TV people, the writers—who enjoyed life in the Putin years are now escaping it," says Mr. Navalny. "They're deserters."

The Internet virtually created the Navalny phenomenon. Trained as a lawyer, he got into politics through the liberal Yabloko (or Apple) party. He missed out on the politics of the 1990s, a toxic decade of economic chaos. In contrast with older, less popular opposition figures like Boris Nemtsov or Mikhail Kasyanov who served in government,



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he brings no baggage from that time.

Mr. Navalny dabbled with youth and nationalist groups in the 2000s. Nothing took off. He then found a calling and voice as an anticorruption activist. He bought small stakes in large companies and tried to invoke shareholder rights to open their books. Another effort involves looking into government procurement contracts to find fraud. In Russia, poking into corruption is a serious health risk.

Mr. Navalny publicized his findings on his LiveJournal blog, which has become one of the most popular blogs in Russia. His writing style in posts and tweets is personal, emotional and direct. He can turn a phrase, and stuck the memorable "party of crooks and thieves" label on the ruling United Russia Party. He also brings a common touch, rare among the Moscow liberal crowd, to his public speaking.

Internet entrepreneur Anton Nossik says the Web offered "a platform for samizdat." It freed Mr. Navalny in another sense, providing an easy way to raise money directly and quickly online. Other NGOs have since adopted his funding model.

Three days before the elections, Mr. Navalny fields calls at his office. Wearing blue jeans and a blue shirt, he has an easy charm about him in his confident English. He is saltier in Russian. Mr. Navalny spent a semester at Yale as a "world fellow" in 2010, which Kremlin propagandists say was part of an American "program to initiate an 'orange coup' in Russia."

It would be inaccurate to say that Mr. Navalny leads the movement, which includes many different faces from the worlds of media, art, business and politics. There are also concerns voiced about his "nationalist tendencies." He clashed with opposition leaders to let ultra-nationalist speakers on stage at the rallies. He has called for a visa requirement for people from Central Asia and said that ethnic Russians are mistreated in neighboring ex-Soviet republics.

Yet for now, the nationalism seems to be worn lightly, and if anything is a political asset. "The left liberals thought it was dangerous to talk about such things—that it will bring problems because it will touch the dark side of the Russian soul, and all that sort of stuff, but it's totally bull—," he says. "People in their kitchens discuss such problems. That's why I am supported more widely [than they are] because I discuss these problems."

Others question his tactical judgment. He provoked the police into arresting him after the first large rally in December. In jail for 15 days, he missed an opportunity to submit an application to run for president. He says it was pointless; the Kremlin would have disallowed his candidacy.

The Kremlin faces its own tough choices. Barring an Egypt-style overthrow, any transition from Mr. Putin to someone new may have to include security guarantees for him and his family. Previous leader Boris Yeltsin negotiated such an arrangement with Mr. Putin. But the former KGB colonel could also "escalate," to use Mr. Navalny's word, the confrontation with the opposition.

Against Mr. Navalny's office wall sits a large framed photograph of two men smiling and shaking hands: Libya's late Moammar Gadhafi and Vladimir Putin. It is a gift from a real-estate mogul who relies on the Kremlin for his good fortune but has turned against Mr. Putin. "The guy told me, 'the worst enemy is the former friend,'" says Mr. Navalny.

"Putin did a lot of good stuff from 1999 until 2003," he says, referring to Mr. Putin's early years, when the economy recovered and some reforms were introduced. But it's the high price of oil that has kept the economy going and notably enriched a clique of Putin friends from St. Petersburg. "People don't believe in positive changes anymore. It's 20 years that he wants to keep absolute power. It's obvious now that his system of power is based on corruption, and people around him depend only on money and

corruption."

As his popularity has slid, Mr. Putin's rhetoric has hardened. Earlier this week, he said the opposition would fake evidence of electoral fraud to embarrass him—maybe even kill one of their leaders. Mr. Putin also was badly rattled by the Arab uprising, most of all Gadhafi's fall and murder.

Pointing to the dead Libyan leader in the photograph, Mr. Navalny says, "The history of this guy drives [Putin] crazy. He thinks the only way for him to be alive and healthy and rich is to be president. It's a big problem for us. This guy is trapped."

Mr. Kaminski is a member of The Journal's editorial board.

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