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# The End of Putin

## Alexey Navalny on why the Russian protest movement will win.

BY **JULIA IOFFE**

DECEMBER 28, 2011



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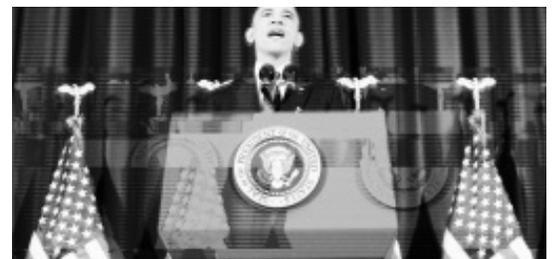
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**M**OSCOW – On the night of Monday, Dec. 5, **blogger, anti-corruption activist, and budding politician Alexey Navalny** was one of 500 people **arrested** at a protest denouncing fraud in the previous day's **parliamentary elections**. Surrounded by some 6,000 people — an unheard-of number for a protest in the center of Moscow, a dozen years into the

apathetic Putin era — Navalny had delivered an angry, guttural, less-than-diplomatic speech. "We will cut their throats!" he proclaimed, then tried to lead a march down the street to the headquarters of the Federal Security Service, the powerful successor to the KGB known by its Russian initials FSB. This had not been permitted in advance, so he was bundled up, stuffed into a police van, and shuttled around nighttime Moscow to keep his supporters from picketing his detention. The next day, he was given a 15-day sentence for disobeying police orders.

By the time Navalny came out in the early morning hours of December 21, he was received with a hero's welcome. "I went to jail in one country and came out in another," he **told** the cheering journalists and supporters who had braved a blizzard to catch a glimpse of him.

It was true: Russia had changed while Navalny was in jail. He had missed the huge rally on December 10 on Bolotnaya Square, when the numbers who came out in peaceful, euphoric protest — an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 — made the original demonstration at Chystie Prudy look like a civic sneeze. Navalny had missed Vladimir Putin's stuttering, insulting **response**, and the energetic, often fractious and messy planning for the next protest, which took place — with Navalny front and center among the 100,000-plus who turned out — on Dec. 24.

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It was particularly ironic that Navalny had missed the first mass demonstration in recent Russian political history.

Navalny has been in opposition politics for nearly a decade, but in the last two years, he has become the man to watch, becoming the first of his opposition colleagues to turn rhetoric and abstract principles into concrete action. First, Navalny (trained as a lawyer) started taking corrupt state corporations to court and blogging about it. Then he created a site called RosPil that crowdsourced the work of exposing questionable government deals. When he asked his supporters to donate money for the cause — and for hiring lawyers to work on the project — the Russian web responded, delivering double the amount he asked for. "People donating money is extremely significant, given Russians' cynicism," Aleh Tsyvinski, a Yale economist who has become a sort of mentor to Navalny, told me when I [profiled Navalny for \*The New Yorker\*](#) in the spring. "Writing to Navalny is, in some ways, a way of exercising power. He is tapping into a huge demand for a grassroots movement."

In effect, Navalny trained a set of thousands of Russian Internet dwellers to do something concrete with their disaffection. And by the time the election season kicked off, in March, Navalny's mantra of "vote, and vote for anyone but United Russia" found a deep resonance among his following, and quickly spread. His alternative title for Putin's ruling United



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Russia party — the Party of Crooks and Thieves — became a sticky meme, with one-third of Russians now **identifying the party in this way**, just three months after the phrase flew out of Navalny's mouth on a radio show.

So when the huge crowd gathered in Bolotnaya on Dec. 10, it was his crowd — a largely white-collar crowd, and the crowd that his campaign had driven first to vote (an unusual activity for this set), then to come out and protest. (When I asked him, a year ago, if he was scared, given the fates of previous dissidents like jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky and dead lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, in taking on the regime, Navalny trotted out his trademark pluck. "If tomorrow ten businessmen spoke up directly and openly, we'd live in a different country," he said. "Starting tomorrow.") The protest was a game-changer, and it was, to a large extent, the fruit of his political labors.

And yet, it was a crowd whose size and support he — and everyone else — had underestimated. Most of the people I spoke to at the protests have come to see Navalny as not only the most viable opposition politician, as well as the one most representative of their views. But there's one big caveat: **his nationalistic views**. Navalny had joined the scarily nationalistic "Russian March" in November, alienating many in his core constituency of the urban bourgeois, who fear



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Russian skinheads — **the most violent in Europe** — almost as much as they worry about Putin's plans to return to the presidency for another 12 years.

Now that he is out of prison and back in the game, what is his plan? How does he view the most recent Kremlin attempts at placating the street? How does he visualize his own political future? We spoke as the euphoria of December's protests fades into exhaustion. "I hope to go somewhere for a week in January, and not have to answer emails," he said. He paused and added, "Not that I've been answering them for the last three weeks anyway."

What follows is a transcript of our conversation:

**FP: What did you make of last Saturday's record-breaking protest?**

We were all worried because the 10th was an unprecedented event. It was an unprecedented, new reality so what we were all worried that it was just a one-off. In the last two days before the protest, though, everyone infected me with their optimism and confidence, and on Saturday it became clear that it's not an accidental protest, that these people are upset and that they will continue to protest and demand what they want, and will get what they want. It became clear that they would come out a second time, a third

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time, and a fourth time.

**You missed the last protest, on the 10th, because you were in jail. What did you hear about it?**

They brought us a radio to our cell, and we heard that there was a group on Facebook [for this protest] and that 20,000 or 30,000 indicated they were coming. I have a popular blog and I know that you can get a ton of "likes," but are they convertible into real attendance? That is the big question. So we were discussing whether there will be more people than at the rally on Dec. 5 when there were 6,000 people. But, honestly, I was very skeptical about the idea of 50,000. I guess I just underestimated it.

**When you heard that 50,000 to 60,000 people came out, what was your reaction?**

There were 18 of us in the jail cell, and out of those 18, 16 were political prisoners. And we were of course really happy to hear this. We felt our own involvement in this, and we knew that, to some extent, we were one of the reasons that people had come out. It was really cool. One guy in our cell, a soccer fan who had also been arrested, he said something I really liked: "It's like a really great birthday party. You weren't invited

to it, but it's still really nice to see." That's how we felt.

**No one expected these numbers, but, in a way, you seem to have underestimated the size of your electorate.**

What is my electorate? People who don't like corruption? Everyone is my electorate because 95 percent of people strongly dislike corruption. But the question was, do they dislike it enough to come out with me and protest? These people aren't serfs. I can't take bring them out onto the square, or not bring them out. I can't say, "Go here, do that." I wasn't the one who brought these people out to protest. The events of the last month are what brought them out. They are the crest of the wave, but the wave didn't rise up because of them.

**Why then?**

Putin created the wave. Injustice, deceit, fraud, falsification created the wave. Of the approximately 75 people who got jail terms after being arrested on the 5th, almost all of them were volunteer election monitors. There were not very many political activists like me. Most of them were there completely by chance. One guy was a programmer, one was a film

director, a soccer fan, a random teenager — people who had never in any way participated in politics or activism. But they come out on the 5th and marched because they were furious, because they had been kicked out of polling stations, because they saw the election protocols that gave United Russia 100 votes, but then saw that the official results were 500.

Putin's main mistake was to pull this nonsense in Moscow. United Russia got 46 percent here, even though it got 32 percent in the Moscow region [which is rural and votes more readily for the ruling party]. In Yekaterinburg, United Russia got 25 percent. Of course, everyone expected that, in Moscow, they wouldn't get more than 28 percent and then — bam! — 46 percent, and areas in the center populated by the intelligentsia were delivering 90 percent for United Russia.

**When I asked people at the protests on the 10th and the 24th if there was a politician who reflected their views, most said "Navalny, but ... " because they were disturbed by your participation in this year's nationalist Russian March, in November. Some saw this as a cynical attempt to widen your base. Have the December protests convinced you that your natural, white-collar base is big enough?**

I didn't go to the Russian March to find another base. I do what I do because I think it's right. I am very grateful to the people who support me, but I'm not going to rule by poll results or focus groups. I have a set of views on what I need to say and do, and I will continue to say and do them regardless of whether my support is rising or falling. I'm not flirting with anyone, not liberals, not nationalists. I think my line on most things is sufficiently clear.

**If you go into "big politics," though, won't you have to pay attention to polls and take your citizens' views into account?**

It's one thing to listen to people's opinions, and another to let your supporters manipulate you. I formulate my political positions by looking at polls, by taking into account the views and opinions of those who surround me every day. At the same time, I am a person just like these people and I want exactly the same things that they do. Mostly, though, you're talking about political activists who are saying, Navalny should do this or that.

**No, the people I spoke to were a random average, and they said, "I like Navalny, but his nationalism scares me." How do you respond**

**to them?**

If there are still people who are made uncomfortable by my participation in the Russian March, or are scared of "Navalny with his nationalistic views," that points only to a problem of clarity. That means I wasn't able to clearly and correctly explain my views. Because every person with whom I am able to discuss this subject in depth, they agree that my views on this are correct, reasonable, and appropriate. So I guess I'll just have to keep explaining.

**Many thought your speech at the protest on Dec. 5 was very aggressive — "we will cut their throats" and so on — and it was very different from your speech on Dec. 24, which was much calmer. What changed?**

Dec.5 was an angry, aggressive protest of a minority. Election observers were the core of this protest, which was and wasn't officially permitted; they were completely surrounded by the police. They were in the minority, and they understood that they had lost. It was a lot of people, but it was still the protest of a minority, of the persecuted, the angry, of those who hate this regime. I was speaking to them. But when, on Dec. 10 and the 24, it became clear that "we" is actually everyone, then the rhetoric changed.

**The questions people seem to come back to over and over again is: to what extent can one change the current system from within, and can one compromise with it? How do you answer these questions?**

You can't change this system from within. Its founding principles are corruption, hypocrisy, and cynicism. If you join this system, your main instruments become corruption, hypocrisy, and cynicism, and it's impossible to build anything with such instruments. I have my own experience with trying to reform the system from within — I spent a year in Kirov [as an advisor to the Kirov governor] — and I've also seen the experience of other wonderful people, like [former finance minister] **Aleksei Kudrin**, who became part of the system instead of changing it.

People who talk about changing the system from within are lying. They're trying to justify their own hypocritical position, to defend the fact that, as part of the system, they're deriving material or political benefits from it.

**So then what's the plan? How do you change the system?**

You can change the system using a tool invented by

human civilization. This tool is called "democracy" and "free elections." We need to have free elections. Then we need to participate in these elections and win, to show that our principles for building a government, unlike those of corruption and cynicism, are better.

**The people who came out to protest in December, whom should they vote for in the presidential election on March 4?**

I don't know who they'll vote for on March 4, and I don't think it's important. First of all, they need to vote against Putin. Second of all, there won't be an election on March 4. It will be a throne inheritance procedure. Who people vote for is not important. We need to use this procedure to get another strike against the regime.

**What results do you think we'll see on March 5? Because Putin will probably win, and can win even without falsifying the vote. But then what?**

We have to do what we did before: demand free elections, continue to develop protest activism, to press on the state until we get parliamentary elections in which anyone who wants to can participate, and to demand new presidential elections.

I've said this before, and I'll say it again, but Putin's power is not based on elections but on his very real popularity. His popularity is based on the good deeds he did a long time ago, and on television. But he hasn't done anything good in a long time. In fact, he's done a lot of very bad things. We can use the television to tell everyone what we know on the Internet, to tell people about his horrible, disgusting, corrupt dealings. And that will be the end of him.

**What do you think about the **Kremlin's proposal to reinstate gubernatorial elections?****

They've obviously realized that they've reached a certain limit, and that there's a very real danger that they will be booted from the Kremlin, so they're trying to lower the pressure inside the political system by breaking down everything they've done in the last ten years. Right now, though, it smacks of deceit because there will still be ways to block candidates and parties from registering, to remove them from the ballot on technicalities. It's a starting bargaining position.

**What do you make of Putin's reaction to the growing protests of the last month?**

He's trying to save face. If he betrays any confusion, his support will drop further. He's in a situation where

he can't do anything to make his support grow. It will continue to decline; the only question is the pace of that drop. If they showed him on television holding his head and crying over the protests, his support would be evaporate overnight. But he's not an idiot. His image is that of a tough guy, and he's playing the tough guy to the last.

**What do you make of [businessman Mikhail] Prokhorov's candidacy for president?**

It's the Kremlin's Trojan project. He's absolutely not independent. He will not win the presidential elections. Nevertheless, his entry into politics is a good thing because any new people, any new political entities make the political system better by offering more choice, more competition. He's fine. I have nothing against him.

**You missed registering to participate in the 2012 presidential election because you were in jail. Did you want to participate?**

Our goal is to have free elections. If we achieve this, if the 2012 presidential election is open to all those who want to participate, not just those who were invited and who negotiated the terms of their participation, if at this point, I have a level of support that gives me grounds to participate, I will, of course, participate.

## And you want this?

Like any politician who is fighting for power, I want to fight for power in a real way and to get the kind of post that would allow me to change something.

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