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Documentary Series Shows 'Hairs and Wrinkles' of Opposition Leaders

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Navalny being detained by police while trying to mount a stage at Bolotnaya Ploshchad during a rally on May 6.

Anti-Kremlin leader Alexei Navalny walks methodically past a crowd of protesters standing behind metal barricades on Bolotnaya Ploshchad, heading for a stage. Two baby-faced police officers step out of his way, blank expressions on their faces.

"We're with you," a man in sunglasses says to Navalny.

"Thanks," Navalny answers without stopping, evidently unaware that he is about to be detained.

Approaching the side of the stage under the May sunshine, Navalny watches as a half-dozen cops in riot gear rush down the steps holding leftist leader Sergei Udaltsov, pushing him away from the crowd.

Seconds later, cops grab Navalny too, pulling his arms as he tries to mount the stage. "What are you detaining me for?" he asks, receiving no answer.

"Don't move or I'll break your arm," says one of the officers as they pull Navalny's arms up behind his back, making him groan in pain. "You do and I'll shut you in prison," Navalny responds.

So begins the first installment of "The Term," an online documentary series with more than 300 episodes that provides a candid look at the lives of the anti-Kremlin protest leaders.

Created by NTV journalist Alexei Pivovarov and filmmakers Pavel Kostomarov and Sergei Rastorguyev, the series was meant to capture what they saw as a pivotal moment in the country's politics.

"In May 2012, the new presidential term of Vladimir Putin began. Half a year earlier, the term of Putin's stability expired," the trio wrote in the project's first blog post.

"We are not chronicling the protests and are not reporting on current events. We are capturing the thoughts and emotions of the leaders. We want to understand where they are leading us, what they are calling on us to do, even when they could face a prison term themselves," they wrote.

The filmmakers just happened to begin the series with footage of the May 6 rally, which has become the subject of a high-profile investigation after violent clashes broke out between protesters and police. They managed to capture Navalny's dramatic detention because they had planned to follow him throughout the day, putting a microphone on his polo shirt.

Leaders' Lives

While Rastorguyev said it was "just luck" that they caught Navalny's arrest, the filmmakers behind "The Term" were generally quite deliberate in their shooting, producing videos with a polish that many of the thousands of amateur YouTube clips showing opposition protests lack.

The series, shot by more than 30 camera operators in multiple countries, even has some elements of a traditional reality show.

There are main characters, such as Navalny and Udaltsov, and supporting roles, such as rank-and-file nationalist protesters. There's a love story, between opposition TV host Ksenia Sobchak and liberal activist Ilya Yashin, who are shown walking in a park holding hands and sitting in cafes — although often while doing rather unromantic things, such as debating the merits of President Vladimir Putin.

There's even a villain, represented by Vasily Yakemenko, the former head of pro-Kremlin youth group Nashi, who turns out to be a rather nice guy in at least one episode, helping a girl who falls into a swamp while on a walk in the countryside, then handing her a flower.

Camera operator Yekaterina Shcherbakova said one of the original goals of the project was to show protest leaders as they were in everyday life, so they would not be "as far as Putin is from the people."

"We think 'The Term' is indeed a mirror ... that was put very close to the characters," project co-founder Pivovarov told Afisha magazine last year. "You can see pores in it, hairs, not very nice wrinkles. And when you know a person better, of course your attitude changes. But it's important to understand that we only observe — we are not leaders and megaphones of public opinion."

The project's creators declined repeated requests for an interview, citing their concentration on a new project called Realnost.doc, a documentary series focused on the lives of ordinary people.

For "The Term," called "Srok" in Russian, many of the camera operators knew their subjects personally, allowing them privileged access to document private conversations and events.

One episode shows outspoken State Duma Deputy Ilya Ponomaryov driving in Moscow with Sobchak, discussing their ambitions in the opposition movement during the height of the protests.

"I don't understand why we need to hurry up," Sobchak says, referring to when the opposition should get involved in mainstream politics. "Why can't we wait a year?"

"I feel like time is slipping away," Ponomaryov answers. "I don't like this running around the squares. I want to build a new country, and I have ideas about how to do it."

"I will be 37 soon and I'm spending the best years of my life on [expletive]," he says.

Many of the episodes display a similar combination of politics and emotion. One of the best-known installments features Pyotr Verzilov, the former leader of performance art group Voina and husband of jailed Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, taking their daughter Gera with him on a trip to the United States, including to the U.S. Congress in Washington.

At one point, Gera tries to pick out her mother in a photograph of Pussy Riot members wearing their trademark balaclavas. She then puts on a sky-blue balaclava and says, "Mama breathed through these holes."

Another episode follows Verzilov on the same trip receiving an Amnesty International prize for Pussy Riot from singer Yoko Ono in New York City. Later, in a car, Gera talks about her grandmother's dacha back in Russia and her old cat Anfisa, but Verzilov seems to pay no attention, apparently basking in his sudden U.S. fame.

"She played her role brilliantly," Verzilov says about Gera's behavior during a CNN interview in which Gera took part.

Turning the Cameras

Despite the filmmakers' personal acquaintance with many of the figures in the series, they have said they do not believe that these opposition leaders would steer the country in the right direction.

Pivovarov, who works as an anchor on the Kremlin-friendly NTV television station, has said "The Term" in no way influences his job. Media reports said he threatened not to go on air

in December 2011 if a massive opposition demonstration on Bolotnaya Ploshchad would not be covered on the evening news report. (The rally was included in the report, and Pivovarov went on the air.)

NTV has aired several exposes alleging that opposition protests have been sponsored by the U.S. government. One of them, called "Anatomy of Protest 2," accused Udaltsov of scheming with a former Georgian politician to organize riots in Russia and became the basis for a criminal case against Udaltsov and two of his associates.

In that case, Udaltsov is suspected of organizing the violence at Bolotnaya Ploshchad during the May 6 rally — the setting for the very first episode of "The Term." More than 20 people have been accused of participating in the clashes with police, and the investigation, which has become known simply as the Bolotnoye case, is ongoing.

When they started the project, its founders said they did not know when there would be a logical end to it and that it did not depend on them — and, apparently, they were right.

In December, investigators came to Kostomarov's apartment for an early morning raid, confiscating video materials related to the Bolotnoye case. After the search, "The Term" went on hiatus.

"The events related to the search of Kostomarov's apartment seriously affected our project by breaking the main principle of documentary-making: The author cannot be a character," the filmmakers said in a blog post.

The creators said in January that the series would be turned into a film by the end of this year.

That same month, the project returned in a slightly different form as part of the news website Lenta.ru, changing its name from "The Term" to "Lenta.doc" and focusing on current events rather than specific figures related to the opposition movement.

Some of the same camera operators and editors who worked on "The Term" were hired by Lenta.ru, but not everyone was happy with the change.

"After the searches on Kostomarov, I returned my camera and left the project," Shcherbakova, the camera operator, said. "The project lost its soul."

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