

Kremlin Gives Navalny A Hard Faustian Bargain

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As opposition leader Alexei Navalny heads for his strong second finish at the mayoral election in Moscow on Sunday — he will likely get more than 25 percent of the vote — he received an offer from the Kremlin he would find hard to refuse.

The offer, outlined by first deputy head of the presidential administration Vyacheslav Volodin in a meeting with Kremlin-friendly political junkies last week, is unscrupulous. He basically told Navalny: "Abandon your ambition to challenge President Vladimir Putin's divine authority, and we will integrate you into our modernized political system as a brand-new loyal opposition. You will get your own political fiefdom, perhaps, replacing Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic party with your own party. Your guilty verdict will be struck down to let you participate in imitation politics."

Navalny's participation in the Moscow race is a test case in Volodin's new strategy to upgrade Putin's system by allowing a degree of political competition in controlled regional settings

where the Kremlin is confident of winning. The strategy allows for a replacement of discredited "loyal opposition parties" with new political groups more attuned to voters' concerns, provided they abide by the Kremlin's rules.

Navalny's "outside the Matrix" campaign in Moscow has rattled the Kremlin. Mobilizing an army of volunteers and securing independent funding through small private donations, he proved that politics could be beyond the Kremlin's reach. His open platform of strong ideas, sincerity and personal responsibility contrasted sharply with the lies and cynicism of the Kremlin's political technologies. Volodin's bet now is to corrupt Navalny with an offer of freedom from jail and a role of a major opposition figure in the establishment.

Navalny understands that his political future depends on his reputation as a genuine alternative to Putin's system. His main political capital is his sincerity and adherence to a set of values. Navalny's political base, which is made up of Russia's first post-Soviet generation, demands a clear end to imitation politics, not the Kremlin's condescending welcome into the matrix. But Navalny's rejection of the deal may land him in jail or on probation, stripped of the right to run for elected office until 2026.

It's a Faustian bargain. Navalny will have to find a way to use the Kremlin to remain free but reject any limits on his political activity and ambition.

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