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Kremlin Critic Navalny Debates Populism, Greta Thunberg and Russia's Future at Nemtsov Forum

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Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny took part in a debate outside Russia for the first time at the annual Boris Nemtsov Forum in Poland on Wednesday.

The forum, named after the Russian opposition politician who was murdered in 2015, aims to facilitate discussions between Russia and the West. Curated by Nemtsov's daughter, journalist Zhanna Nemtsova, this year's forum coincided with what would have been Nemtsov's 60th birthday.

Speaking with American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, Navalny discussed democracy, populism, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg and strengthening ties between Russia and Europe.

Here's a look at what was said:

On populism

Navalny, who has been described as a populist in the past, was keen to shake off the label. He said that he is "branded a populist" whenever he discusses broad issues such as inequality, migration or his fight against corruption.

"The word 'populism' is simply trendy now," he said, saying that this can only be overcome by establishing trust between people and political institutions.

"There is no trust in Putin or the Russian state," Navalny said. Pointing to last month's regional elections, he said the opposition "participated in them without money, without access to the media... and still had a very strong showing."

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After traveling the country, he believes support for the opposition stems from many people feeling like they "have no alternative." To fix this, Navalny said Russia must become a "normal, modern European country" and give up the inaccurate and nostalgic images of the Cold War dichotomy between Russia and the U.S.

"Russian citizens deserve a dignified life here and now. They can afford to live as a wealthy European country, and that's what the people want."

On Greta Thunberg

Both Fukuyama and Navalny were full of praise for the young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg.

Navalny said that Russia's widespread skepticism toward the "amazing" Thunberg comes from a general conspiratorial leaning throughout the country. As a result, he said, people wonder "which big company or media outlet has paid her."

Young people have been mobilizing in Russia because they feel unrepresented by the current political system and that explains their prominence at the recent protests, he said.

On Russia and the West

"Today the Justice Ministry has announced I am a foreign agent... yet for all their talk of standing up to Europe, on a Friday they will fly to their huge mansions in Italy," Navalny said.

The only way for the West to damage the current Russian government is to target and sanction Russian officials with property and connections with the West, he added.

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