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Navalny Has Been Poisoned. Where Are the People on the Streets?

Navalny's poisoning might have a bigger effect on the elite than on the general society.

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Pavel Golovkin / TASS

Debate is raging about why there are no large scale protests over Alexei Navalny's shock poisoning. Here are a few reasons why I believe protest so far has been muted across Russia:

– While there is hope that Navalny will survive, a fatal outcome would obviously prompt a completely different level of reaction by society. The events surrounding the poisoning have been drawn out and lacked clarity for a long time, which has prevented a shock reaction from society.

– Navalny is far from a hero of the people, at least for now. Over the years, the Kremlin has

somewhat succeeded in creating a negative image of him as a pro-Western agent, a rogue and an opportunist. Navalny has also become a contradictory figure in the liberal camp. The fruits of his work, including his countless investigations, have turned out to be much more popular than he himself has.

– Unlike investigative journalist Ivan Golunov who was arrested last summer on trumped-up drug charges, Navalny does not belong to a professional class that can be mobilized to defend him. For journalists, Golunov's set-up became an attack on their profession, so journalists led the way and organized the protests.

– Another key difference with Golunov's case is that Navalny supporters do not have a clear goal like it was the case with Golunov who had to be "freed out" from prison. I would have expected a different reaction if Navalny was facing serious charges.

– No one in Russia believes in the possibility of an open and honest investigation. For Navalny's supporters, the culprit is obvious and the actual poisoner's name, or even that of their boss, does not matter.

Protests could erupt if Navalny's health further deteriorates, but something else is much more important here — a quiet indignation among the internal elite, which can neither be seen nor measured.

Navalny's poisoning might have a bigger effect on the elite than on general society. His poisoning certainly raises questions for many influential players.

Many conservative pro-Putin elite representatives have, to put it mildly, been rattled, and some people who are close to the government are still shocked enough that they would rather believe in the involvement of Western special forces over the regime's ability to poison opponents in this manner.

The use of Novichok as an argument in a political dispute will undoubtedly be read as a signal that the regime has begun to crack, since it cannot cope with routine political challenges using peaceful tools.

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