The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘A Step Into the Unknown’: Russians’ Relationship With Jailed Navalny Is Complicated

As the opposition activist calls for protests, polls show his support is small but growing.

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January 22, 2021

Alexei Navalny. **Pavel Golovkin / AP / TASS**

Putin critic Alexei Navalny is banking on his popularity to bring thousands to the streets on Saturday to protest his incarceration on his dramatic return to Russia after months in Germany recovering from a poisoning attack.

In a country that has excluded him from its political system for almost a decade it’s almost impossible to gauge exactly how much support Navalny has. With his allies calling for mass protests in at least 50 cities, his true clout will now be tested.

Since the 44-year-old anti-corruption activist first burst onto the Russian political scene in the late 2000s, the Kremlin has been keen to belittle his importance and popularity with the public. Conversely, his admirers in the West routinely overstate his significance in Russian politics, exaggerating public support for the opposition leader.

"Who needs him, anyway?" President Vladimir Putin — who never uses Navalny's name — said of the opposition figure during his marathon end-of-year press conference in December, dismissing him as an irrelevant "blogger."

At the other end of the spectrum, Bill Browder, a former Moscow-based venture capitalist who is now a vociferous Kremlin critic, tweeted the day after Navalny was jailed that the activist is "far more popular," than Putin, providing no evidence for his claim.

The reality of Navalny's role in Russian politics is nuanced, say experts and sociologists, with the opposition leader actively supported by only a small — but growing — minority of Russians, while also regularly transcending his limited following to define the terms of Russia's domestic political debate.

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Over the course of Navalny's political career, his results in independent opinion polls have been modest. According to data from the Levada Center — an independent pollster that regularly asks Russians' who their preferred presidential candidate would be and which high profile public figures they trust — Navalny's results typically register in the low single digits.

A November 2020 poll by Levada — the only Russian pollster to publish data on Navalny — saw 2% of respondents give Navalny as their first choice in hypothetical presidential polls, while 4% listed him as one of the politicians they most trusted, a showing more or less in line with his polling over the last decade.

Though his results are modest, they are comparable to those of the longtime leader of Russia's Communist parliamentary opposition, Gennady Zyuganov.

Compared with other prominent establishment figures, however, Navalny scores poorly. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu, far-right leader Vladimir Zhirinovsky and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin all fare better in trust polls than him.

Vladimir Putin himself — despite a recent downturn in his popularity — consistently outpolls Navalny by a wide margin, being trusted by 32% of respondents, and the preferred choice for president of 55%.

Navalny's supporters are dismissive of his lacklustre polling, which they say is unreflective of his true support.

"Our team is very sceptical of the polls," said Vladimir Ashurkov, executive director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation.

"For me, much more indicative is the 27% of the vote for Moscow mayor Navalny won in 2013, the more than a million signatures in support of his candidacy for president in 2018, and

the tens of millions of views that our videos documenting corruption in Russia receive."

It is possible that polling on trust and voter intention — the two most common questions in Russian polling — do understate Navalny's popular backing. According to international studies, Russia is one of the world's least trusting societies, with even widely popular figures like Putin substantially less trusted than they are approved of.

Likewise, with Navalny now legally barred from contesting elections by a string of criminal convictions, he is not a plausible candidate for president in the foreseeable future, raising the possibility that questions of voter intention do not capture his true standing.

Other recent Levada polling, framed differently, supports this theory, placing Navalny's support substantially higher. A poll taken in September, shortly after he was poisoned while campaigning in Siberia, asked respondents whether they approved of Navalny's activities, a question only rarely posed in Levada's polling. While 50% replied negatively, 20% said they did, by far Navalny's strongest ever result in a public poll.

Likewise, Levada's 2020 Person of the Year poll — in which respondents were invited to name the year's most important public figures — showed Navalny's popularity on an upward trajectory.

In private crosstabs shared with The Moscow Times by Levada, Navalny's fifth place showing with 5% overall masked particular strength among white collar professionals and entrepreneurs — among whom he came second to Putin — and among the 18 to 24 age range, in which his 12% showing was within the margin of error of the president's.

According to some, Navalny's increased popularity is a direct consequence of his high-profile return to Russia.

A video investigation, released shortly after Navalny was jailed, documenting a $1.4 billion Black Sea coast palace allegedly built for Putin has received over 50 million views in three days, a record for the opposition leader's investigative work.

"Instead of blackballing Navalny, the Kremlin has turned him into the world's most famous political prisoner," wrote Alexander Baunov, senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center in a recent analysis.

"Now, even some Putin loyalists are, if not on his side, then certainly not on the side of his poisoners and persecutors."

Chicken and egg situation

For sociologists, one of the greatest obstacles to accurately assessing Navalny's popularity is his exclusion from the political system in a country where popular support has traditionally flowed from being in office.

"In Russia, being in power automatically translates into trust and legitimacy among the wider population," said Alexei Levinson, head of the Socio-Cultural Research Department at the Levada Center.

“It is a chicken and egg situation.”

This dynamic also holds true for members of Russia’s political establishment. When ex-president Dmitry Medvedvev resigned as prime minister in January 2020, his trust rating collapsed from 38 to 29% overnight, according to state-run pollster VTsIOM.

For Navalny, who is essentially banned from taking part in formal politics, this represents a unique challenge to building a national profile, preventing him and his supporters from reaping the traditional rewards of public office.

Even so, said Levinson, Navalny has shown a consistent ability to define the terms of Russian public debate and discredit elements of the government, even without the benefits of public office and popular backing.

“Navalny has a talent for striking a chord with the people that others don’t,” said Levinson.

His 2009 nickname for the ruling United Russia party — “The Party of Crooks and Thieves” — caught the imagination of a public that was supportive of Putin but suspicious of the pro-Kremlin bloc’s reputation for corruption. A decade on, the phrase remains iconic as scandal-hit United Russia’s polling sinks to below 30%.

In 2017, Navalny’s blockbuster investigation alleging large-scale corruption by then-prime minister Medvedev attracted 37 million views on YouTube and precipitated a sharp decline in the former president’s public standing. His resignation less than three years later was seen as partly caused by the damage from Navalny’s anti-corruption work.

To Levinson, Navalny’s talent for cutting through hints at a “hidden electorate” of his supporters. On the one occasion the opposition leader was allowed to contest a major election — the 2013 Moscow mayoral vote — he vastly outperformed the polls, taking second place and 27% of the vote, almost forcing a runoff in a race that the independent monitoring organization Golos said was marred by rigging.

“If it’s not seen as a political crime to support him, then Navalny’s support can increase tenfold,” said Levinson.

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Paradoxically, for some the single biggest obstacle to Navalny’s popularity is his explicit positioning as an alternative president — having run, and been barred, as a candidate in the 2018 presidential poll — rather than simply as a critic of the existing government.

In an article for the liberal radio station Moscow Echo, Andrei Movchan, a political consultant and commentator, claimed that in the eyes of a population cynical about politics, Navalny’s presidential aspirations are understood as an attempt to benefit from the same graft that he claims to be fighting.

“The desire for power appears simply the desire to expand one’s opportunities for corruption,” wrote Movchan.

Above all, however, Navalny's brand of politics is off putting to many because it implies radical dissent in a society in which President Putin is still widely popular, with around 60% approval.

"It's one thing to be a critic, but quite another to be a rival to Putin," said Levinson, of the Levada Center.

"Loyalty to Putin is loyalty to Russia's social reality. Disassociating from Putin means disassociating from reality and a frightening step into the unknown."

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