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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Merkel Asks Putin to Free Kremlin Critic Navalny

By Ola Cichowlas for AFP

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Merkel's visit to Moscow comes at a time of strained relations between Russia and the West over a litany of issues. **Bernhard Ludewig (CC BY 2.0)**

German Chancellor Angela Merkel asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to free his jailed opponent Alexei Navalny on the anniversary of a nerve-agent attack on the politician, whose life was saved by Berlin doctors.

"I demanded from the Russian leader that he free Navalny," Merkel — who blames Moscow for the poisoning — said standing next to Putin at a Kremlin press conference.

"And I made clear that we will keep doing that," she said, calling the situation around Navalny "distressing."

Putin — who denies ordering the poison attack and refuses to say Navalny's name in public — referred to his challenger as "the defendant." He denied Navalny was jailed for his political

activity, saying he was behind bars for "criminal offences."

"I would ask that the judicial decisions of the Russian Federation be treated with respect," he said, claiming that Russia had an inclusive political system.

"The fight against corruption should not be used to achieve political goals," the Russian leader, in power since 2000, said of Navalny's work, which seeks to uncover the riches of Russia's political elite.

Merkel's demand comes as French President Emmanuel Macron also asked Putin to release Navalny in a phone call with the Russian leader on Thursday.

The U.K. on Friday announced new sanctions against several figures it says are Russian security agents that were involved in the poisoning.

The pair also discussed Afghanistan and Ukraine in the symbolic visit that is Merkel's last to Russia before leaving office next month.

The chancellor will travel to Russia's rival Ukraine after visiting the Kremlin chief, who infrequently receives Western visitors in Moscow.

Merkel, who grew up in communist East Germany, and Putin, a former KGB agent stationed there, speak each other's languages.

During the chancellor's 16 years in power, the pair always kept a dialogue despite strained relations.

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Merkel visited Navalny when he was treated at the Charite hospital in Berlin following the near-fatal poisoning.

Navalny is now held in a maximum security prison colony in Pokrov, 100 kilometres (60 miles) east of Moscow.

This month he was charged with new crimes that could prolong his jail time by three years. If found guilty, he could only be released after 2024, the year Russia is scheduled to hold a presidential election.

In a message from prison posted on his Instagram by his team Friday, Navalny said the Aug. 20 — when he thought "he died" after losing consciousness on a flight over Siberia — was his "second birthday."

He thanked his supporters for calling for him to be taken out of Russia for treatment.

"Thanks to you I survived and landed in prison," he joked, adding "sorry, I could not help myself."

The 45-year-old's movement has faced unprecedented pressure ahead of September parliamentary polls in Russia, in which Putin's United Russia party is expected to struggle.

Prevent Afghanistan 'collapse'

In his first comments on Afghanistan since it was taken over by the Taliban, Putin said the world community should prevent the "collapse" of the country.

He said the Taliban controlling the country is a new reality from which the world "must proceed."

Both leaders said Afghanistan figured prominently during their talks.

Putin also criticised the "irresponsible policy" of imposing "outside values" on war-torn Afghanistan.

The Russian president highlighted the importance of preventing "terrorists" from entering neighbouring countries from Afghanistan, including "under the guise of refugees."

The German leader also expressed her hope that peace talks on the conflict between Kiev and pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine should continue after she leaves power.

Germany has been a major player in efforts to broker peace in eastern Ukraine.

She told Putin that "even if the progress isn't as fast as we hoped," the peace talks should be kept "alive."

She is expected to meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky Sunday, whose troops continue to fight separatists in a conflict that has killed more than 13,000 since 2014.

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