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Navalny Has Entered the History Books, But His Words Will Live On

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A photo of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny at a makeshift memorial as people demonstrate and pay their respect following his death in prison, in front of former Russian consulate in Frankfurt, western Germany on February 16, 2024. **AFP**

That Navalny was still alive in 2024 was something of a miracle. If he had survived for so long, then, the "Wonderful Russia of the Future" for which he fought all his life might come true, someday. But miracles are hard to come by in Putin's Russia, even though Russians say that "hope is the last thing to die."

Navalny died yesterday, and many in Russia saw hope die with him. We know why Navalny died — or, rather, was killed — and we know who did it.

Many members of the Russian opposition have shown great courage. Some have lost their lives. Not only did Navalny survive a gruesome assassination attempt in August 2020, but he managed — along with his team and allies abroad — to find the culprits and expose them in a

dramatic prank call to one of the assassins. In the video of the call, Navalny was triumphant, saying: “I called my killer. He confessed.” How many other people can say that? When he beat that attempt on his life, he returned to Russia in 2021.

Was this an act of folly, as many argued? Why did he come back, as people asked him a million times? Navalny was adamant that he had to: “I have my country and my convictions. I don't want to give it up or ever betray it. If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.”

Sure, people have left Russia for their own safety. But he wouldn’t. “I participated in elections and vied for leadership positions. The demand for me is different. I traveled the entire country, declaring from the stage everywhere,” he said.

"I promise that I won't let you down, I won't deceive you, and I won't abandon you.”

And he didn’t.

As some have pointed out, his life took on a mythical, almost religious significance. A muckraker, a politician, a protester, Navalny was more than just a dissident. Yet he shared with the Soviet dissidents an unflinching determination and a deep sense of moral rectitude — often exercising vengefulness against his opponents or even former allies.

Navalny was not above the fray just because of his courage and persistence. Especially after he was poisoned and turned into a global icon of democracy, it became easy to forget how much of the infrastructure of opposition he built for others to use. He was the frontman, but behind him were whole teams of dedicated and talented professionals.

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For the Russian public, at the end of the 2000s, Navalny was an anti-corruption blogger. But soon his blog exposing corruption in all spheres of Russian life birthed multiple small organizations — RosPil to investigate e corrupt government procurement, and RosYama to expose how the ubiquitous potholes in Russia’s roads were a symptom of the powerful siphoning away of money that should have been spent improving the lives of ordinary people.

The projects got bigger and bigger, until they were merged into the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), with local chapters in regions across Russia. Navalny may have lived in Moscow, where he was a fixture of this little world of opposition politicians, journalists and intellectuals that Russians called the *tusovka* — the clique. But he saw the bigger picture there was no reason not to find activists in smaller cities, in the whole country.

In all his projects, Navalny used a similar formula. It's easy to say that corruption is bad. Everyone agrees with that, even Putin. It’s more difficult — and more dangerous — to say *who* is corrupt, *how* they get the money, and *where* it goes.

Navalny and a brilliant team of lawyers and investigators, Lyubov Sobol, Georgy Alburov, and Maria Pevchikh, did just that. They wrapped investigations filled with superficially dry financial reports and company records a captivating and funny story — full of anger, sarcasm and memes.

Many of Navalny's supporters tell the same story of how they discovered him: they read his blog and felt that it contained something new and powerful. When Navalny was convinced by his team that YouTube was the place to be, he turned his investigations into professionally produced documentaries. They frequently went viral — over 100 million people watched his expose of Putin's mammoth secret palace.

Related article: Alexei Navalny Is Declared Dead. What Happens Next?

What did he stand for? At heart, since he was a teenager, and for the rest of his life, he was a Russian liberal. He wanted Russia to be a rule-of-law, democratic, free-market country. Alongside his many ideas, came many compromises. In the 1990s, when Navalny was in his 20s, he thought that market reforms justified crushing the livelihoods of the weak, and that democratic reforms required the strong hand of Boris Yeltsin. Later, he would loudly apologize for that belief.

As a liberal party operative for Yabloko in his 30s, he thought that anti-immigrant nationalism would revive a moribund democratic movement — he partly recanted that, too. As a would-be presidential candidate in his forties, he thought liberals needed to move to the left and embrace a form of welfare state.

Many in Ukraine see him as a would-be Putin, and never forgave him for initially thinking that Crimea should remain under Russian control — even though he condemned the war without ambiguity, and later called for *all* Ukrainian territories to be returned to Kyiv. Had he ever held power, would he have delivered on his core belief and promise of a democratic Russia? We will never know.

There's no consolation prize in the fight against dictatorship. In a democracy, Navalny would probably have ended up a minister in a coalition government, or the mayor of a big city. He was a proud politician who was happy to tour his country, taking inspiration from American campaigns. But in a dictatorship, he could only win or be crushed. And he didn't win.

For all his attempts, liberalism remains a minority faith in Russia. Offering liberal solutions to universally reviled corruption was not enough. His successors, the minority of Russians who found inspiration in him, will have to find something else.

But Navalny has entered the history books, becoming the latest of a long line of men and women, from the Decembrists to Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, who fought so that Russia could be free.

In the shop window of a Russian publishing house in Paris, you can see the lead letters that were used to print The Gulag Archipelago 50 years ago. Solzhenitsyn had been just a writer facing a Soviet regime that seemed like it would last forever. If we take Russian propaganda at its word, Navalny was just a blogger. Without Putin, they say, there is no Russia.

But in a sense, Solzhenitsyn's words did win in the end. Eventually the crimes and lies of the regime were just unbearable and the regime fell. Let's hope that Navalny's words will one day win too.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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