

## Alexei Navalny and the battle for Moscow

In Moscow in 2010 I was told I should really meet a certain Alexei Navalny. I knew of Navalny, a lawyer and serial blogger, he had already gained a reputation as a champion against corruption. However, as he was not then associated with the opposition I didn't pursue a meeting. A year later I felt like the Decca Records talent scout who turned down the Beatles in 1962. Following the mass protests in Moscow during the winter of 2011-12, triggered by December's flawed parliamentary elections, Navalny emerged as a leader of the broad opposition movement.

Navalny had played an important role in undermining support for Vladimir Putin's 'party of power'. United Russia, proclaimed Navalny, was the 'party of thieves and swindlers', an epithet which resonated with voters, quickly passing into everyday usage following a clever internet campaign. If Navalny wasn't already a marked man with the Kremlin elite, he became one after his attacks on United Russia and his prominence in the anti-Putin protests.

The Kremlin exacted its revenge in July of this year when Navalny was found guilty of stealing timber from a state-owned firm whilst working as an adviser to the governor of the Kirov region in 2009. Few believed the charges were anything other than entirely trumped up.

The case was complicated by the fact that Navalny had registered his candidacy for the Moscow mayoral elections in September 2013. A guilty verdict would prevent him from standing. In the event Navalny was found guilty and sentenced to five years imprisonment. It appeared as though the Kremlin had got the result it wanted. However, in a surprising move, Navalny was swiftly released on bail ahead of an appeal and allowed to take part in the mayoral campaign. His supporters claimed this was the direct result of mass protests in Moscow. Others saw a more Machiavellian process at play. To provide the elections with a sheen of legitimacy it was necessary for a serious contender to challenge the pro-Putin incumbent, Sergei Sobyanin. Navalny's inevitable defeat would discredit the opposition, following which the verdict would be upheld.

Since then, Navalny, supported by a committed team of volunteers and with the backing of Russia's main 'non-systemic' opposition party RPR-PARNAS, has pursued a vigorous election campaign. Denied media access, Navalny and his supporters have been highly visible, their pop-up advertising cubes springing up throughout the streets of the capital.

Whilst Navalny has been portrayed glowingly in the Western media, he divides opinion among Russia's disparate and fragmented opposition. Some democrats and liberals are uncomfortable with Navalny's nationalist leanings – he has participated in the annual 'Russian March', a parade uniting Russian nationalist groups and has endorsed the 'Stop Feeding the Caucasus' campaign which calls for the ending of state subsidies to the 'corrupt and inefficient' governments in the North Caucasus republics.

As we approach Election Day on 8 September, Navalny's team have talked bullishly about forcing a second round. An outright first round victory for Sobyanin, however, appears the more likely outcome. Nevertheless, Navalny has emerged clearly as the only serious contender, polling around 20% whilst the other candidates remain in single figures. The theme of his campaign has been 'first Moscow, then Russia' and Navalny's sights are already on the presidential elections of 2018. For observers of Russian politics therefore, the outcome of the mayoral elections is less significant than the outcome of Navalny's appeal.

Should the verdict be upheld the Russian opposition will lose one of its main leaders, one that has already had far more success in mobilising anti-Putin support than any in the past.

I'll be back in Moscow immediately after the elections to meet members of Navalny's campaign team. Should the opportunity arise to talk to the man himself I won't make the same mistake twice!

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