
Putin vs. Navalny: The Role of Opposition in Russian Transitional Democratic Building

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Introduction¹

The Ukraine Crisis, the Crimea Annexation, and the Middle East interventions have made Putin a "super star" among global presses. As a former KGB agent who was greatly disappointed by the directive of "Moscow is silent" in 1989, Putin rose from jobless spy to one of the most influential political figures that would determine Russia's fate.² While he brought hope and stability to the chaotic post-USSR Russia, he has been responsible for political uncertainty about his own country's democratic developments. The deaths of Alexander Litvinenko³ and Boris Nemtsov⁴ reminded the world of an old-school political repression against dissidents, casting more doubts on the future of Russia. Although Putin successfully secured his presidency by a landslide in 2018, the growing trend of anti-Putin campaigns and the controversy of Alexei Navalny have raised the discussion of possible democratic evolution.⁵

What would be the true meaning behind these oppositional movements?

This analytical essay focuses on a key question: "Could a sitting authority and its political opposition cooperate in a transitional democracy?" Through a brief summary of both Putin's and Navalny's paths to the public and political realm, although the conflict between Putin and Navalny might be inevitable, the political careers share a great amount of similarities, as well as presenting extraordinary potential to reform Russia's political structure for a more democratic future. By reviewing transitional democracy literature, this article suggests that, successful democracy building relies on successful institutional transitions among political

¹ Because this essay was originally written in 2017, some sources focused extensively on pre-2018 election. Special Thanks to Alex Delunna and editing staffs from Journal of International Service, American University for their efforts in revisions.

² "Moscow is silent" referred to an anecdote that Putin, who was stationing in East Germany as a KGB agent, called Moscow for instructions in 1989 when a group of demonstrators showed up at the KGB office, but he received little information from his supervisor. Chris Bowlby, "Vladimir Putin's Formative German Years," *BBC*, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32066222>.

³ Alexander Litvinenko: Profile of Murdered Russian Spy," *BBC*, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-19647226>.

⁴ Russia Opposition Politician Boris Nemtsov Shot Dead, *BBC*, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31669061>.

⁵ Amie Ferris-Rotman, "The Teenagers Standing Up to Putin," *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/12/opinion/the-teenagers-standing-up-to-putin.html>

actors, rather than changing leadership.

The overall structure of this article will be in three parts: 1) A brief, political career review of Putin and Navalny; 2) A basic framework of inevitable conflict among political actors in an authoritarian structure, followed by an empirical analysis of the Putin-Navalny dynamic; 3) A cooperative-based understanding for opposition-authority interactions in a transitional democratic nation, and 4) a conclusion.

The Rise of Putin and Navalny

Putin's life story and his path to power are no secret. As a little boy, born in the post-war Leningrad, Putin was described as "odd and disturbingly introvert."⁶ After studying law in St. Petersburg State University (formerly Leningrad State University), Putin became a KGB agent in the 1980s and was stationed in East Germany.⁷ Various sources demonstrated that Putin felt deeply betrayed by the failure of the political system, returning to his hometown after the collapse of the USSR.⁸ Putin's former professor, Anatoly Sobchak, then-mayor of St. Petersburg, became his political mentor.⁹ Putin soon became the vice mayor, responsible for St. Petersburg's economic affairs.¹⁰ Even though Sobchak and Putin later suffered from corruption charges,¹¹ Putin won Boris Yeltsin's¹² trust and successfully entered the center of Russia's political realm with a wide range of appointments, including the head of the Federal

⁶ Ben Judah, *Fragile Empire: How Russia in and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014):10

⁷ David Hoffman, "Putin's Career Rooted in Russia's KGB," *Washington Post*, 2000, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/russiagov/putin.htm>

⁸ "The Rise of Vladimir Putin," *Youtube*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIM9PvZLMwE>.

⁹ Olga Prodan, "Prominent Russians: Anatoly Sobchak," *RT*. <http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/politics-and-society/anatoly-sobchak/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid*.

¹¹ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 21.

¹² Former Russian President serving from 1991 to 1999, who facilitated the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Security Service.¹³ Later, as Yeltsin's successor, Putin's oversight of the Chechnyan conflicts, the domestic economic stabilization policies, and the increase of oil prices,¹⁴ Putin became one of the most popular leaders in Russia. Putin's controversial foreign policies towards Ukraine and Crimea attracted a high level of antagonism from the western nations. However, these concerns have not stopped him from maintaining an unparalleled domestic approval rate in Russia of over 80%.¹⁵

Alexei Navalny, as one of the most prominent political opposition leaders in Russia, had a different career path. Born in 1976 in Butyn, a city in the Moscow region, his childhood memory of communist Russia was not pleasant, due to shortages of food and a lack of necessities.¹⁶ With big dreams of getting rich under Yeltsin's economic reforms, Navalny became a lawyer after completing his studies at Lumumba University of People's Friendship, but he became quickly frustrated by the post-Soviet political system of collusions between politicians and billionaires.¹⁷ In his frustration, he then joined the Yabloko party,¹⁸ one of the largest liberal democratic opposition parties in Russia, known as "one of the last pieces of *perestroika* left."¹⁹ However, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Navalny's experiences in Yabloko were never pleasant. His party remained only as a party "[casting] vote" with little political significance in Duma elections, and he furthermore increasingly disliked Yabloko's personalization of political powers.²⁰ Yabloko's leaders also failed to cooperate or integrate with various political opinions, and Navalny's political aspirations were restricted within the

¹³ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 26.

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin's Rise to Power, *Youtube*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nY3Uz4ELwM0>.

¹⁵ Putin's Approval Rating, *Levada-Center*, 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.

¹⁶ Judah, *Fragile Empire*, 197.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 200.

¹⁹ *Perestroika* means "reform" in Russian. It was one of the slogans for USSR's political reforms in the 1980s during the Gorbachev administration. "The last pieces of perestroika" referred to Yabloko political orientation as liberal and democratic since its establishment in 1993.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 200-201.

party. Around 2004, the rise of the “anti-systematic” opposition, originated by social radicals and street protests, helped Navalny to identify the need to create a “systematic opposition” in Russia.²¹ He soon started his own populist, anti-corruption campaign on the internet.²² By asserting that “the United Russia is the party of crooks and thieves,”²³ Navalny became increasingly popular among young Russians. Despite the fact that made-up charges against Navalny barred him from legally participating in the presidential run for 2018, his persistence for his own path won him 27.2% of the vote in the 2013 mayoral election in Moscow,²⁴ granting him great potential to challenge Putin's throne in the future.²⁵

Based on their career paths, Putin and Navalny have shown a few similarities. First, they both found their own ways in the new Russian system with their charm and refreshing personalities. Putin entered the Russian political realm when Yeltsin was old, incapable and controversial, bringing “new blood” to the chaotic post-USSR reconstruction as a strong leader, while Navalny found his popularity among the rising middle class and the younger generation, whom had doubts about Putin's ruling. When Navalny said, “Ironically, I can call Vladimir Putin as my god father in politics,”²⁶ that statement was fairly accurate. Second, both of them have remained highly popular in Russia. Putin initially assumed office in 1999 with low poll numbers,²⁷ but his popularity benefitted from Russia’s economic performance and stability in his early presidential terms between 2000 and 2008.²⁸ For Navalny, although he suffered from

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 217.

²³ The United Russia has been one of the most influential political party in Russia since 2003. Tom Parfitt, “Russian Opposition Activist Alexei Navalny Fined for Suggesting United Russia Member Was Thief,” *The Telegraph*, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/9312508/Russian-opposition-activist-Alexei-Navalny-fined-for-suggesting-United-Russia-member-was-thief.html>

²⁴ To clarify, Navalny was barred after his participation in the 2013 mayoral election.

²⁵ Neil MacFarquhar and Ivan Nechpurenko, “Aleksei Navalny, Viable Putin Rival, Is Barred from a Presidential Run,” *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/world/europe/russia-aleksei-navalny-putin.html>.

²⁶ BBC Hard Talk: Alexey Navalny, *BBC*, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3ct0c77>.

²⁷ Putin's Approval Rating, *Levada-Center*.

²⁸ Daniel Treisman, “Putin's Popularity since 2010: Why Did Support for the Kremlin Plunge, Then Stabilize?” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 30, no. 5 (2014): 371.

hostilities by the authorities, his YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook accounts represented a major battlefield for his 2018 presidential campaign, and they drew a significant amount of supporters and attention from both home and abroad.²⁹ His failed, unendorsed attempt of running 2013 mayoral election with 27.3% of the vote demonstrated his great potential of being a popular politician.

However, the differences between the two are also identifiable. Putin has been "a good player of the system," with the support of multiple oligarchs. His ruling and foundation come from the control of the media, high levels of political organization and structural recognition. But Navalny, despite his lack of interactions with political establishments, has created his legitimacy and foundation outside of the traditional political structure in Russia. His internet campaigns and strong diversity of Navalny's popularity among younger generations mark his reputation as a "man of the people."³⁰

Inevitable Conflicts between the Opposition and the Authority

Even in modern times, post-Soviet Russia has remained heavily authoritarian, and not yet fully developed as a democratic state.³¹ Within all authoritarian nations, a key issue shall be, and always will be, the legitimacy of ruling and the preservation of political power at the top level. As a Norwegian sociologist Stein Ringen indicated, "when chips are down, the inescapable bottom line is the preservation of the regime and its power."³² Putin's lasting political

²⁹ Aliaksandr Herasimenka, "What's Behind Alexei Navalny's Digital Challenge to Vladimir Putin's Regime? Five Things to Know," *The Washington Post*, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/02/23/whats-behind-alexei-navalnys-digital-challenge-to-vladimir-putins-regime-5-things-to-know/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b7c2b155500f.

³⁰ "Russian Opposition Leader Navalny Released Amid Thousands Of Detentions Nationwide," *Radio Free Europe*, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-navalny-protest-released-putin-rally-inauguration/29210933.html>.

³¹ Luke March, "Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition," *Slavic Review* 68, no.3 (2009): 504; Leonid Gordon, "Russia at the Crossroads," *Government and Opposition* 30, no.1 (1995): 19; Stephen White, Russia, Election, Democracy," *Government and Opposition*, 35, no.3 (2000): 303.

³² Stein Ringen, *The Perfect Dictatorship: China in the 21st Century*, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2016): 4.

influences and Russian quasi-democratic political structures have already shaped Putin-Navalny interactions as naturally conflictual, not cooperative. The Russian political establishment might tolerate some minor levels of criticism, but it would not tolerate any challenge that threatens its political legitimacy.

Specifically, as a microcosm of the conflict, Navalny was regarded as a legitimate opposition instead of a potential threat to Putin's Rule like other political dissidents, after he won 27.2% of the vote without any support from the Russian political establishment during the 2013 Moscow mayoral election. The key reasoning follows: 1) His votes were earned completely by public support and could not be controlled or influenced by Putin's political mechanisms; and 2) Navalny's ability of attracting public attention from the lower levels of society likely reminded Putin of "the greatest geo-political disaster of the last century"³³ with Gorbachev's loss of grip of his ideal of reforming the USSR, as well as the horrific consequences of liquidating a dictatorial leadership (such as Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak during the 2011 Arab Spring). Navalny's popular support was different from the communist party's lite splits in the 1999 Duma elections, where political oppositions leaders were limited by "centralized and bureaucratic tendencies of a single ruling party."³⁴ Also, Navalny's unendorsed, self-initiated campaign with a 27.2% support rate showed the Russian political establishment the risk of a radical popular movement. Although the failure of Navalny's election failed to present an immediate threat to neither the Russian government or Putin's leadership, its potential for further development could be perceived as the thin end of the wedge. Without any containment or restriction, it could grow out of the system and directly

³³ Nick Allen, "Soviet Break-up Was Geopolitical Disaster, Says Putin," *The Telegraph*, 2005, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/1488723/Soviet-break-up-was-geopolitical-disaster-says-Putin.html>.

³⁴ Luke March, "Managing Opposition in a Hybrid Regime: Just Russia and Parastatal Opposition," *Slavic Review* 68, no.3 (2009): 507, 513.

challenge Putin's leadership.

Therefore, under such logic, Navalny's opposition in 2018 did suffer from a series of "preemptive strikes." Under a "not free" public opinions environment, as the Freedom House concluded in 2017,³⁵ it could be interpreted that criminal charges against Navalny were a counter attack from the political establishment. Smear campaigns served as a distraction from Navalny's political activities, being acts of shame designed to impair his fundamental political support from the lower level of Russian politics.

However, as much as Russia remained authoritarian, elections, campaigns, and other basic democratic mechanisms still exist in Russian society today and have become a part of daily political games. Navalny's independent public support seemed to teach an unexpected lesson for both Putin and Navalny. After 2013 Moscow mayor election, on one hand, Putin seemed to realize that, defeating a dangerous political opponent was important, but the potential expense of losing popular support would undermine his legitimacy of ruling, and endanger his own position. On the other hand, Navalny recognized that challenging a popular leader individually with street and internet protests might create accusations of him being a radical conspirator, diminishing his own political influence. That was why right after the five years conviction of Navalny's embezzlement cases, not only did hundreds of people show up to protest his wrongful sentencing, but also the officials adjusted their position and spared his imprisonment.³⁶ At the same time, after his house arrest during most of 2014,³⁷ Navalny chose to avoid direct criticism against Putin, who remained highly popular in Russia, and redirected

³⁵ "The Freedom of the Press 2017: Russia Profile," *The Freedom House*, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/russia>.

³⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, "Aleksei Navalny, Putin Critic, Is Spared Prison in a Fraud Case, but His Brother Is Jailed," *New York Times*, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/31/world/europe/aleksei-navalny-convicted.html>.

³⁷ MacFarquhar and Nechpurenko, "Aleksei Navalny, Viable Putin Rival, Is Barred from a Presidential Run."

his oppositional activities against Medvedev, Putin's prime minister.³⁸ For Putin, although he still had major influences over Russia media and political establishments, he chose to distance himself from “the party of crooks and thieves,” the United Russia party, and ran as an independent in the 2018 election.³⁹ When Putin emphasized the hopes and trusts of his voters after the 2018 election,⁴⁰ he was avoiding possible corruption accusations and was reinforcing his existing public support as a democratically elected leader. This absurd but profound compromise consolidated their political positions without any significant conflict, witnessing a “peaceful” coexistence between the opposition and authority in an authoritarian state.

For the Genuine Advance of Russia

The Putin-Navalny interactions were a small part of the post-Soviet democratization, as Russian democratic building could not be accomplished by simply resolving their conflicts. In fact, existing literature has identified various deficits among current democratic promotions: 1) Disconnection between popular votes and political results;⁴¹ 2) Resistance against external factors;⁴² and 3) The rise of illiberal democracy.⁴³ Establishing an effective political system would take not only “a generation or two to create something that [might be] both democratic and stable,”⁴⁴ but also extensive efforts to perfect governmental institutions, rule of laws, and norms of democracy. Under the key question of this essay, a possible scenario might come into the frame: Could Putin and Navalny, the authority and the opposition, work together?

³⁸ Neil MacFarquhar, “Opposition Leader Tests Public Support for Bid to Topple Putin,” *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/09/world/europe/aleksei-navalny-russia-election-putin.html>.

³⁹ Holly Ellyatt, “Putin Abandons United Russia Party, Will Run as An Independent in 2018 Election,” *CNBC*, 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/12/14/putin-to-run-as-an-independent-in-2018-election.html>.

⁴⁰ RT, “Putin addresses Russians on the night of the 2018 elections,” *YouTube*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQhY_LIPEzk.

⁴¹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy*, (New York: Routledge, 1994): 254.

⁴² The Limit of Liberal-Democracy Promotion, 394.

⁴³ The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, 27.

⁴⁴ Graham Allison et al., “Staggering Toward Democracy: Russia's Future is Far from Certain,” *Harvard International Review* 15 no.2 (1992/93):14.

First, although authoritarianism as an applicable political structure has been largely criticized, historical precedence has shown the possibility of democratic transitions facilitated by interactions between the authoritarian establishment and the opposition, such as the democratization of both modern South Korea and Taiwan. During Taiwan's Chiang Ching-kuo's presidency,⁴⁵ when the government maintained its controls on the military and ruling party's machine, local opposition parties and open elections could be held fairly.⁴⁶ Violent suppressions against protests by the policy and the military were strictly banned, and the press slowly started to become independent.⁴⁷ In the case of South Korea, during its military authoritarianism of the Fifth Republic,⁴⁸ civil societies⁴⁹ and political oppositions were able to engage in joint efforts of public protests and elections, forcing the authorities to democratize.⁵⁰ Although Russia did not directly copy their transitional patterns, their successes certainly offered insights, as political oppositions and authorities could strengthen a nation's democratic institutions within a proper course of interactions.

Second, considering the recent development of Russian-related, international controversies and domestic instabilities, there might be little room for further political struggle between the authorities and the opposition. Normally, political reforms would usually take place when a country achieved a relative political stability and a favorable international environment. Reviewing post-Soviet history, Yeltsin's political and economic reform in 1990s with the

⁴⁵ Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek. He took his father's position in 1976 as chairman of the National Party in Taiwan. He led the democratic reforms in 1980s.

⁴⁶ Yang Lu, "Processes and Features of Taiwan's Political Transition: From Perspectives from Democratization and Localization (台湾政治转型的过程和特点: 以“民主化”和“本土化”为视角)," *Taiwan Politics*, no.6 (2009): 16.

⁴⁷ Shaolai Zhou, "How Did Taiwan Democratized: Insights from Parties' Interactions (台湾民主化是如何发生的? ——基于政党策略互动的视角及其启示)," *Chinese Social Sciences Net*, 2014, http://www.cssn.cn/zxz/xsdj_zxz/xsdj_zsl/201402/t20140211_961357.shtml.

⁴⁸ The Fifth Republic refers to Chun Doo-hwan's presidency since 1979 to 1988, in which he sized power through a military coup after the assassination of Park Chung-hee.

⁴⁹ Su-Hoon Lee, "Transitional Politics of Korea, 1987-1992: Activation of Civil Society," *Pacific Affairs*, 66, no. 3 (1993): 353-355.

⁵⁰ Sang Joon Kim, "Characteristic Features of Korean Democratization," *Asian Perspective*, 18, no. 2 (1994): 188.

support of the U.S. and European states had already been difficult and chaotic. Since the constitutional crisis in 1993, Russia did not make significant democratic reforms even with a favorable international environment and left-over momentum from *perestroika*. Thus, in the future, the Russian environment for reform might be increasingly controversial, with Russia's interventions in the East European and the Middle East. Furthermore, as more and more refugees and ethnic minorities entered Russia, Russian nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments became another issue for domestic politics.⁵¹ If Putin-Navalny interactions were to be more conflictual and even destructive, the future of Russian democratic developments could not be optimistic.

Third, politically, cooperation between Putin and Navalny would have significant benefits for both of them. Navalny's campaigns against corruption, as long as they are not radicalized, could become a major effort to create future incentives for a check-and-balance system regarding Russian oligarchs and Putin himself. His internet influences would also attract the younger generations toward politics, inspiring them to participate in public policy discussions, or even practices. His image as a brave warrior among western media could be incorporated into the general Russian impression for receiving more favorable attitude from the U.S. and other European states. For Putin, Navalny's independent public support have shown that, as the Russian public has craved for more democracy, Putin's relations with the oligarchs might slowly lose their potential benefits and eventually endanger his political capital. As Putin ran as an independent candidate for the 2018 election, his political strategies have shown the traces of adjustment for a public-supported approach. Although Putin has preserved his authoritarian leadership, he would be under more public pressure to provide not only basic goods and services, but also political reforms toward democracy. Hypothetically, if such a fragile, delicate,

⁵¹ Mary Elizabeth Malinkin, "Russia: The World's Second-Largest Immigration Haven," *The National Interest*, 2014, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-the-worlds-second-largest-immigration-haven-11053>.

but meaningful balance between oppositions and authorities were to be maintained, further Russian political developments might be more promising.

Lastly, after all, as previously indicated, the conflict between Putin and Navalny would be highly likely to continue in the existing authoritarian system. The intentions and political agendas of these two individuals could be largely different and even confrontational. The total outbreak of "war" between Putin and Navalny would also be a dangerous aspect for Russian society, in which it would be much bloodier, and much more painful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has discussed extensively on the topic of Russia's prominent opposition leader, Alexei Navalny, and his interaction with Vladimir Putin's current leadership. By providing a comparison and contrast analysis on their political profiles, Putin and Navalny showed their potentials and capabilities to draw support from the Russian public within a new, quasi-democratic system. But Navalny's relationship with the political establishment and oligarchs is vastly different from Putin's. Further analytical opinions suggest that within the Russian political system, Putin-Navalny's interactions remain highly fragile with a great likelihood of confrontation. Under a brief review of transitional democracy theories and cases of successful democratizations, this article suggests that, alternative possibilities, with cooperation between the oppositions and authority, could facilitate peaceful development of democratic institution. Further analyses have demonstrated several benefits of their positive cooperation. However, because such a vision can seem to be overly ideal, the risk and difficulty of this cooperation is also acknowledged due to the future political uncertainty in Russia.

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