

A revolution in Russia is possible

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Mikhail Lobanov on the Navalny and Kagarlitsky cases

In mid-February, over the course of three days, we received two pieces of very bad news that will have a major impact on Russia's political landscape. First, the appeal court changed the sentence against the left-wing intellectual Boris Kagarlitsky - a fine of 600,000 rubles (approx. 6,000 euros) was suddenly converted into a five-year prison sentence. The scientist was arrested right in the courtroom. Last Friday, the world was shocked by the news of Alexei Navalny's unexpected death in a penal colony beyond the Arctic Circle. It may well be that in future reviews these two events will be seen as the beginning of a new dimension of the Kremlin's reprisals against Russian society.

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The reactions to the two events or the lack of them are closely linked to the prospect of ending or continuing the war in Ukraine. As is usual in such political cases, the Kremlin is trying to dictate or even impose narratives on the public. We have to see through these narratives in order to fight them.

The first fact that we should understand and accept: The war in Ukraine can realistically only be ended after a profound political change in Russia. Real peace cannot be obtained from the Kremlin even at the price of unfair concessions to Putin at the expense of the interests of Ukraine and other countries. We will only achieve a short break before a new campaign continues.

A second fact, without which the first statement only leads to undue despair: a revolution or a profound political change in Russia is possible in the medium term. There are three essential requirements for this:

- The dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's domestic policy and with their own vulnerable situation at all levels of Russian society, with the exception of a small percentage of the rich and the insecure;
- The presence of a sufficiently large number of people with experience in independent or even oppositional work. These are the future activists of a broad popular movement that will transform the country and eliminate the current leadership that has seized the wealth and power. Many people with active political experience in particular belong to the younger generation, in which left-wing democratic views are extremely widespread.
- A series of mistakes and crimes by the Russian government, which began with the aggression on February 24, 2022, make political crises in Russia virtually inevitable. The Prigozhin mutiny was the first sign of this.

The first of these conditions - mass dissatisfaction with life in Russia and Putin's domestic policy - is something neither the government nor anyone else can change. Russia has one of the most radical

liberal-conservative regimes in the world. The ideology of the market, glaring economic inequality, the vulnerable and dependent situation of a large majority and the insane luxury of a minority are the foundation on which the regime stands and which it will not abandon, even when it finds itself on the edge of the abyss. They will not “share” with the people.

But the Kremlin itself can do something about the second and third requirements. The active part of society, which has experience in collective interaction, can be intimidated and demoralized. This is what fabricated investigations like in the case of Kagarlitsky and the politically motivated murder of Navalny serve this purpose. Sometimes European officials and politicians act as Putin’s unwilling allies and further demoralize the active part of Russian society. Namely when, for some reason, the lives of political activists who have fled repression and mobilization are made more difficult and complicated. This also closes escape routes for those who will be at risk in the future.

To escape political crises, the Kremlin is looking for willing or unwilling allies in Europe and America. They are supposed to use disinformation or open corruption to convince the citizens of their countries and their own governments that unfair concessions to Putin are unavoidable. In doing so, they allow him to get out of the hopeless situation, to take a breath and to continue the military aggression with new forces.

How does the complex Russian propaganda deal with questions that are uncomfortable for the Kremlin? Be it the airliner MH17 shot down over Ukraine in the summer of 2014, be it the murder of Navalny or the criminal prosecution of the publicist Kagarlitsky or the mathematician Asat Miftachov. It begins with several counter-versions being offered through various information channels - from the official mass media to opinion leaders supposedly independent of the Kremlin - in order to distract from what is actually happening. A single counter-version can be publicly debunked, but no one will concern themselves with debunking a whole swarm of such false, tossed-up versions. Ultimately, the impression remains that there are many versions and different opinions and that the “real truth” will never come to light anyway.

Seizing the Kremlin narrative abroad contributes to the demoralization of Russian civil society.

Among the standard versions offered by the Kremlin are always those that blame those who could have immediate political benefit: “Cui bono?” is the question. The Ukrainian government benefited from the shooting down of the Boeing 777 by pro-Putin forces - so the Kremlin is throwing out the version that Kyiv must have done it. The murder of Navalny leads to a global wave of criticism of Putin. This was convenient for the governments in the USA and Western Europe, as well as for NATO, so they did it through their secret agents in Russia. In attention-grabbing political cases - like those of Kagarlitsky or Miftachov - the narrative is offered that the defendant was guilty of something else and that the court must convict him because of it.

That’s why it’s always important to track the Kremlin’s narratives that accompany political repression and crimes. The adoption of these narratives and their unconscious reproduction by political and social forces in the various countries outside Russia contributes to the demoralization of Russian civil society and thus helps Putin to avoid political crises. This then means counteracting the prospect of a revolution or profound political change in Russia, which is the only way to end the armed conflict in Ukraine peacefully, permanently and justly.

For this reason, I would like to remind you of some facts and truths:

The left-wing intellectual Boris Kagarlitsky should now serve five years in prison for nothing. He was

extremely careful and didn't endanger anyone else. He only appeared publicly to raise his voice against the war. The mere fact that in December 2023 a Russian court sentenced him to a fine and not several years in prison in this fictitious case of "justification of terrorism" speaks for his innocence. Now the verdict has been reversed and Kagarlitsky has been returned to prison for the simple reason that he refused to leave Russia. But he has every right to do that.

An attempt was made to poison Alexei Navalny on Putin's orders in August 2020. In recent years, the Kremlin and security forces have gradually done everything possible to isolate Navalny from his family, his lawyers and the world. Now the Kremlin is covering up all traces and the body is not being handed over to the family. If the Russian rulers had not wanted Navalny's death and were not responsible for it, they would have acted differently. Then Navalny would have lived under different conditions for all these years and would have been treated by trusted and independent doctors. An international team of doctors worked on the investigation into the cause of death from the start. We know that this was a political murder of an important political opponent.

I call on everyone to evaluate their attitude and actions regarding events in Russia with what impact they will have on Russian civil society and thus the Kremlin's chances of escaping future crises. I call for the broadest possible solidarity with all political prisoners and war opponents. The projects of Russian activists and they themselves should be supported. This is not that difficult and only costs a fraction of what has to be paid "for security". There are no ethical dilemmas here. But this is an important contribution to a political upheaval in Russia and thus to peace in Ukraine and Europe.

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