



THE SUNDAY TIMES

NEWS

The Man Putin Couldn't Kill: new documentary tells story of Alexei Navalny's poisoning

Matthew Campbell

12 Sep 2021 00:01:00

Yulia Navalnaya will never forget the phone call she received in Moscow one morning last summer. It was 6.40am and she was about to go to the airport to meet Alexei Navalny, her husband. Russia's foremost opposition activist had been campaigning for supporters in the country's vast Siberian hinterland.

Kira Yarmysh, his assistant, was on the line saying that he had fallen ill on the flight home. The plane had made an emergency landing in Omsk and he was in hospital. "She said, 'Yulia, don't worry, Alexei has been poisoned.' She was in shock, she told me everything in a rush. I said 'all right' and hung up."

Yulia rarely gives interviews but a Channel 4 documentary airing on Wednesday — just as Russia prepares to vote in legislative elections on Friday

[from which Navalny supporters are banned](#)

— includes footage of her reliving the attempt on his life with a nerve agent last year.

After hearing the news, she jumped in a taxi and raced to the airport, where she faced a two-hour wait for the next flight to Siberia. "I went for a coffee, sat down, and tears streamed down my face."

That August 20 was the start of an extraordinary ordeal requiring every ounce of Yulia's renowned combative energy. At first, doctors at the hospital in Omsk refused to admit the fierce, blonde woman in dark glasses and a black leather jacket unless she could produce a marriage certificate. But they soon relented.

Then she had to confront the spectacle of her husband in a coma, covered in wires and tubes, apparently dying.

"The most terrifying thing was to see Alexei," she says in the documentary

The Man Putin Couldn't Kill

. "He had convulsions ... it was like the film

Alien

. He'd arch his back. It was terrifying."

Yulia, a political figure in her own right, had supported him through police raids on their flat, lawsuits and previous physical attacks. Now she had to seek permission to take Navalny out of the country from the man suspected of ordering the "hit": Vladimir Putin.

The fear was that Russian doctors, announcing he was suffering not from poisoning but "low blood sugar", were under instructions to let him die.

Anastasia Vasilyeva, Navalny's doctor, was convinced of a conspiracy after overhearing a conversation in a hospital office.

“A woman from the transport police came into the office,” she recalls. “She showed the chief medical officer something on her phone. She said, ‘Look at the substance we’ve found.’ Her eyes were bulging with fear. ‘This is really dangerous for everyone here.’” The chief medical officer waved her away.

When a German air ambulance crew was eventually allowed to fly Navalny to Berlin, Yulia went with him — and it was love for her, he has said, that summoned him back from the jaws of death after 18 days in a coma.

In January they returned to Moscow, where Navalny was promptly arrested for violating parole terms and sentenced to 2½ years in prison on old and trumped-up fraud charges. Since then, his network has been largely demolished after being branded an “extremist group”. Followers have been imprisoned or chased into exile.

Yulia is still there, though, to watch over him as he languishes in prison. The two met in 1998, holidaying in Turkey, and have been together ever since. Their daughter, Dasha, was born in 2001 — she is now studying at Stanford University in California— and a son, Zakhar, in 2008: he is at a boarding school in Germany.

“Dasha was five in nursery school when she was asked where her dad works, and she said ‘my dad works at rallies’,” Yulia recalls in the film. “And when she was seven she said, ‘My dad fights crooks.’”

Navalny had infuriated Putin with his slickly produced videos about the luxury lifestyles of the corrupt, Russian elite. The film relates how, while he was out filming in the city of Tomsk, state security agents broke into his hotel room and smeared novichok nerve agent on his underpants.

Yarmysh, now exiled in Finland, was sitting next to him on the flight to Moscow. “I turned and saw he was as white as a sheet,” she says. “The trolley came by and I asked if he could have some water, because he was obviously unwell.”

She goes on: “He looked at the trolley for a long time and said, ‘No, I need to get up.’ About 15 minutes passed and he didn’t come back. He was lying on the floor in the kitchen area. I ran there. Then he stopped responding.” He was stretchered, dying, onto an ambulance after the pilot diverted to Omsk.

Various heads of state, from President Emmanuel Macron of France to Charles Michel, president of the European Council, called Putin, trying to persuade him to allow Navalny to leave the country. The film speculates, however, that Sauli Niinisto, Finland’s president, may have made the greatest impression on the Russian leader.

According to Vladimir Milov, a Russian opposition activist, Putin enjoys a “trustful” relationship with the Finn, who may have found the “right words” to convince him that letting Navalny leave was the best way “to avoid a major scandal”.

Navalny may owe just as much, however, to the pilots who diverted to Omsk and the ambulance crew that injected him with atropine — the best treatment for poisoning with a nerve agent — before the state had time to intervene.

The film includes a remarkable recording of one of the alleged would-be assassins, Konstantin Kudryavtsev, complaining that “events went against us” and that, had it not been for the emergency landing in Omsk, “everything would have ended differently”.

One of eight members of

[a chemical “murder squad”](#)

identified by cybersleuths from Bellingcat — the “people’s intelligence agency” based in Leicester — he is heard describing how the team had applied novichok to Navalny’s pants. Posing as an assistant to one of Putin’s top aides, Navalny had tricked him into talking about what had gone wrong on the phone in what must rank as the greatest embarrassment ever suffered by the FSB, successor to the Soviet KGB.

In a subsequent television appearance, Putin acknowledged that state security agents had been following Navalny for years — but denied they had attempted to kill him. “If we had wanted to poison him, we would have certainly finished the job,” he added with a sinister chuckle.

Navalny appears to have had the last laugh, however. Shortly after being arrested in January, his team posted online his most explosive video of all: a direct attack on Putin exposing his

[gargantuan pleasure palace on the Black Sea coast](#)

, complete with hookah lounge, aquatic disco and indoor hockey rink.

“In this country there is a single irreplaceable monarch — Putin,” says Navalny in the film. It has been seen by most of Russia’s adult population.

Navalny: The Man Putin Couldn’t Kill, Channel 4, 10pm, Wednesday [@MCinParis](#)

[Related Images](#)



Alexei Navalny and his wife Yulia Navalnaya pose for a selfie last year after the activist’s recovery from his poisoning

INSTAGRAM/Reuters



Navalny spent 18 days in a coma after the novichok attack, only to be arrested on his return to Moscow

Publisher: News UK & Ireland Ltd

Published Date: 12 Sep 2021 00:01:00

Article Id: 76076924 **Version:** 1

Word Count: 1162

Character Count: 5319



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