

The blue-eyed rival Putin can't 'disappear'

He's been poisoned and imprisoned, but Alexei Navalny remains a thorn in the president's side, says *Marcel Theroux*

On August 8 last year, during an early flight to Moscow, Russia's most prominent and charismatic opposition activist, Alexei Navalny, collapsed screaming, before falling into a coma. Weeks later, he would describe his brush with death in a way that typifies his appeal to Russia's millennial generation: comparing it with an attack by *Harry Potter's* dementors. "Rowling's description is that a dementor's kiss doesn't hurt, it just sucks life out of you," he said. "It didn't hurt at all. But the overwhelming feeling was, I am about to die."

To anyone who had been paying attention to Russian politics, the mysterious deaths of so many of Putin's critics and opponents, and the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in 2018, it seemed obvious that Navalny had been poisoned. Yet the full truth would test the credulity of even the most cynical Kremlin-watchers when it finally emerged.

In a phone call shared on Navalny's YouTube channel in December (watched by more than 13 million people in less than 24 hours) he posed as a top aide from the FSB, Russia's security service, to dupe his would-be assassin into revealing how he had planted Novichok, the banned nerve agent, in the seam of his boxer shorts. If the pilot hadn't diverted to the Siberian city of Omsk, where an ambulance rushed him to hospital, before he was airlifted to Germany for specialist medical treatment, he would probably have died.

Navalny, 45, spent last autumn recuperating in the Black Forest. Against advice, he flew back to Moscow in January, where he was arrested and charged with violating the terms of parole of a 2014 fraud case before being imprisoned in Pokrov Penal Colony Number 2 – harsh even by Russian standards.

Yet the man who has been a thorn in Putin's side for more than a decade has managed to remain an irritant behind bars. Yes, he and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) have been thwarted in their short-term hopes of persuading the electorate to use a now-banned tactical voting website to embarrass Putin's United Russia Party in this Sunday's elections. But Navalny's voluntary martyrdom has confirmed his status as the moral conscience of Russia. As he updates his 3.9 million Instagram followers from prison via his team of lawyers, his supporters are confident that their fellow Russians will eventually see what they have known for a while: Navalny is presidential material.

I met Navalny in late 2012 at a meeting of Russian opposition activists in what was then their unofficial headquarters – a reclaimed chocolate factory on the bank of the Moscow River. Tall, blue-eyed and ebullient, he had just been elected *primus inter pares* of the 45-member committee – the high point of an extraordinary 12 months. Putin had engineered a return to the presidency, but Navalny, whose anti-corruption investigations already had a huge online following, had emerged as the most engaging of a bright new generation of millennial activists who

talked of the rule of law, fair elections, and finishing Russia's incomplete transition to democracy. In front of huge crowds who'd braved the freezing cold, Navalny berated Putin and decried United Russia as a "party of crooks and thieves".

It was heady stuff. But it ended as quickly as it had arisen. Navalny

managed to run for the post of mayor of Moscow in 2013, and frightened the Kremlin by almost forcing a run-off. But he was never allowed to take part in an election again – and intensifying repression has gradually nullified opposition voices. Looking through the list of names elected to the opposition council alongside him in 2012, I'm struck by how many have subsequently been imprisoned, gone into exile, or worse. In 2015, the *éminence grise* of the young activists, Boris Nemtsov, was shot dead in central Moscow. And then, in that twist that would have Ian Fleming scratching his head, Navalny was poisoned himself.

In a new film for Channel 4, *The Man Putin Couldn't Kill*, we explore the inside story of how Bellingcat, the Netherlands-based investigative

agency, pieced together evidence that showed an FSB hit squad had been following Navalny since he declared his abortive candidacy for the 2018 presidential elections. Sometime last year, they received orders to act – it seems likely that the Kremlin was spooked by events in Belarus, where protests were rocking the government of Alexander Lukashenko, a mini-Putin who has ruled since 1994.

Bellingcat also showed that

attempts had been made to poison at least two other members of that 2012 opposition council: the poet Dimitry Bykov and Nemtsov's deputy, Vladimir Kara-Murza. Kara-Murza was in fact poisoned, unsuccessfully, twice. As for Bykov, it's hard to convey quite how baffling this is – a rotund, curly-haired literary eminence, it's as if MI5 tried to assassinate Stephen Fry.

The paradoxical effect of Navalny's poisoning and his subsequent imprisonment was to remove him as a live political threat and yet cement his status as the second most important politician in Russia. Putin scrupulously avoids ever saying Navalny's name – preferring circumlocutions like “that gentleman”, or “the patient in the Berlin clinic”.

The two men locked in this historic struggle over the future of Russia may have very little in common, but their political careers have run in parallel. At the turn of the century, Navalny joined the weak and divided Russian opposition, while Putin was hand-picked to succeed Boris Yeltsin as Russian president at the same time. He had been a low-level spy in Dresden, a fixer for the mayor of St Petersburg, and briefly head of the KGB. There was a feeling that he was an accidental president, the Chauncey Gardener of the Kremlin. Some even argued that being ex-KGB might be a good thing, given its reputation for efficiency and pragmatism – like hiring an ex-Goldman Sachs partner to fix the country.

But Yevgenia Albats, a political activist and KGB historian who mentored Navalny during the Noughties, saw it as the start of the re-Sovietisation of Russia. “I was terrified,” she told me recently. “It's not just one man who was coming to power. It was the most repressive institution of the Soviet Union.” Albats's fears were disregarded at the time. But Bellingcat investigator, Christo Grozev, told me that he had learnt that the Bulgarian umbrella used to murder the dissident Gyorgi Markov in London in 1978 was developed at the same lab that supplied the chemicals to poison Navalny. Back to the USSR indeed.

What might surprise casual Western observers is that Navalny is far from universally admired. Many older Russians find his style too abrasive and his core followers too messianic. Furthermore, many are fearful of anything that might lead to another revolution. But Albats, the Cassandra of Russian politics, fated to be correct but never believed, is confident of his ultimate destiny. “I've been saying this for quite a while,” she says. “Aleksei Navalny will become president of the Russian Federation. He will become the leader who is going to turn Russia back on its democratic path.”

The Man Putin Couldn't Kill is on Channel 4 tonight at 10pm



Russia's conscience: Navalny's voluntary martyrdom has cemented his status as the second most important politician in Russia