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Russia's opposition has lost a crucial leader but gained a martyr

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If it happened, if they decided to kill me, it means that we are unbelievably strong at that moment,” Alexei Navalny once said when he was asked about being assassinated. The answer was vintage Navalny: ever hopeful in the face of existential terror. But now that it has happened, now that Mr Navalny has been pronounced dead in an arctic prison, it is Vladimir Putin, his longtime nemesis, who appears all too strong.

Throughout more than two decades in power, Mr Putin has waged a war against his opponents at home. Mr Navalny’s death on February 16th leaves the embattled Russian opposition without its most effective and charismatic leader in a generation.

For Russians opposed to Mr Putin’s regime, Mr Navalny represented hope. His death, although hardly unexpected, will make him a martyr. “Now Alexei Navalny will be with us for ever as an ideal role model,” wrote the author Mikhail Zygar. “There are so few unblemished heroes in Russian history—now we have one.” Crowds gathered to pay respect in cities as far flung as Los Angeles, London and Berlin. Makeshift memorials cropped up across Russia. In Moscow and St Petersburg residents placed flowers at monuments dedicated to victims of Stalin-era repressions. On social media, many Russians reposted a picture showing Mr Navalny holding up a sign reading, “I’m not afraid, don’t you be afraid either.”

Yet the fear that Mr Putin uses to rule is real, and growing. As Alexander Baunov of an American think-tank, argues, the Kremlin’s treatment of Mr Navalny shows how Russia has transformed “from a dictatorship of lies, to a dictatorship of fear, and after the beginning of the war, into an open dictatorship of terror.”

Mr Navalny’s first conviction on trumped-up charges of embezzlement in 2013 brought thousands to the streets in Moscow; the Russian authorities suspended his sentence and allowed him to take part in mayoral elections that year. After Mr Navalny survived a poisoning attempt and returned to Russia in 2021, his nationwide organisation was declared “extremist” and its network of offices uprooted.

Putin’s regime has only become more brutal with time; the trend is unlikely to reverse.

“In Russia people love to say that it’s darkest before dawn. I think that’s true—only we probably haven’t come to know true darkness yet,” Greg Yudin, a political philosopher, wrote in Meduza, an independent Russian news site, after Mr Navalny’s death. “It looks like dusk is just beginning to fall. The sun is gone.”

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