

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Welcome, I'm Carol Saivetz. I am the co-chair of our Focus on Russia seminar series. And I'd like to welcome you to today's Starr Forum and Focus on Russia Series. I'm really pleased that we have for today two speakers who are going to talk about their book, *Navalny: Putin's Nemesis, Russia's Future?* With a question mark at the end. I think that it is a really important topic. We all know that Navalny was poisoned. Navalny has been imprisoned. But I think understanding his impact on Putin's future maybe, on Russian politics, is really vitally important.

And before I introduce the speakers, let me-- let me just tell you a little bit about what we're doing. You will have an opportunity to ask questions. Please use the Q&A feature on the Zoom. And please check occasionally the chat, because we'll be posting links to people's bios, to upcoming events, and information about how to purchase the book.

I'd also like to thank Michelle English and Laura Kerwin, who have been helping us with the technology and the advertising and are really responsible for all of this coming together.

So our two speakers today are Morvan Lallouet, who is a PhD candidate in comparative politics at the University of Kent in England. He is currently writing a thesis on "Navalny Liberalism and the Russian Opposition."

Ben Noble is an associate professor in Russian politics at University College London, an associate fellow of Chatham House, and a senior research fellow at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow. He conducts research on legislative politics, authoritarianism, Russian domestic politics. He has published works in journals such as *Comparative Political Studies*, *Russian Politics*, and *The Journal of European Public Policy*.

Please join me in welcoming Morvan, who's going to speak first.

**MORVAN
LALLOUET:**

Thank you very much for inviting us to speak about our new book at MIT. And thank you very much, Carol, for accepting to chair this event.

So, who is Alexei Navalny? He's Russian, you already probably knew that. He was born in 1976-- '76-- sorry. He was trained in law and finance. Then he had a short and not very successful business career. He then entered, in 2000, into politics. He became a member of a Liberal Party. And he, as you already probably know, made a name for himself-- for himself in fighting against corruption on his blog into this, starting from the mid-2000.

And, of course, he is now the most famous Russian opposition leader, though he is sitting behind bars, probably for years to come. But who is exactly Alexei Navalny? That question was on many, many people's minds, and not only on the minds of people who follow Russian politics, who already knew him quite well, especially when Alexei Navalny was poisoned in August 2020.

And interest towards Navalny shut up again when Navalny, working with the investigative collective Bellingcat, claimed a few months later that he had unmasked, and even called some of the people who had tried to assassinate him. Interest shot up again when in January of this year Alexei Navalny returned to Russia and was immediately sent to prison.

And at that time, when Navalny returned to Russia, many people around us, friends, colleagues, and again, people who are not necessarily that much interested in Russian politics, were asking us that question, who is that man and why does he matter for Russian and even global politics?

And at that time, Ben Noble reached to me on Twitter and to Jan Matti Dollbaum, who is the third co-author of the book, and who unfortunately cannot be present at this event here, and he asked us if we could recommend a good English language book on Navalny. And our answer was simple. We cannot do that because this book doesn't exist. It doesn't even exist in the Russian language today.

And after a brief discussion to see if we were on the same page about Navalny, let's say, we decided that we should write the book. And so we found an agent, we found a publisher, and we managed to write that book quite quickly, in a few months. We wanted it to be out before the Russian legislative elections, which took place a few weeks before.

So this is-- this book is our attempt to answer that question, who is Alexei Navalny? So, what's more precisely this book? I'll start with a big disclaimer. We are not investigative journalists. We do not have special access to the Kremlin or even to Navalny himself. He was already behind bars when we started writing the book. And we're not traditional biographers. We did not write a traditional biography.

Of course, in the beginning of the book we do talk about Navalny's childhood, where he comes from, his youth, but we did not meet with his friends from high school. And this is not a traditional biography ordered in a chronological way.

So what's the general approach that drove us when writing that book? I think one of the most important things we tried to do is we tried to avoid, as much as possible, the heavy and strong politicization and polarization that was so obvious when Navalny was poisoned and then returned to Russia. And in our view, this polarization manifests itself in two dimensions.

The first is, of course, a very black and white narrative surrounding Alexei Navalny. On the one hand, he is, mostly in the Western media, and of course very supporting-- supporters-- excuse me-- a sort of white knight in shining armor, a very brave man, willing to take on Vladimir Putin, willing to take down the Russian authoritarian regime.

On the other hand, and this is the narrative that you've probably most heard in pro Kremlin circles or media, Navalny is depicted as an ugly racist nationalist. So who exactly is Alexei Navalny? We believe that he may be both. And we tried to tell his story in all its shades of gray and in all its nuances.

The other type of politicization that-- and polarization that we witnessed at the time, and still today, and which is in some way a bit more subtle, is either on the one hand to overblow Navalny's significance. When you read some media accounts you get the impression that Navalny enjoys huge support in Russia, that if he were to be allowed to run against Vladimir Putin tomorrow in a free and fair election he would easily defeat him.

On the other hand, you have-- again, this is mostly a pro Kremlin narrative, but you can also hear it from other types of people-- Navalny is depicted as only a simple blogger, someone who was-- who enjoys maybe some support in the West, but who doesn't enjoy much support in Russia, and who is only used by the West because they like his ideas or want to bring down Vladimir Putin's regime.

So we attempted to avoid these different pitfalls. We attempted to tell Navalny's stories in the most objective way. We, as I said, are not traditional biographers. We are not investigative journalists. We are Western academics, who have-- who tried to tell the story in the most objective way that we can.

And the way we did that is that we divided Navalny's activity, Navalny's career in three strands, which are Navalny the anti-corruption activist, Navalny the politician, and Navalny the protester. And then we move on to examine and assess Navalny's place in Russian politics, and how the Kremlin and Navalny have shaped one another. But Ben Noble will then develop these points.

And in doing so, we also attempt to answer that question that's also on everybody's minds, which is, is the Kremlin really afraid of Navalny? And to conclude before I hand over to Ben, I'll just tell a few words about the sources we used. We have used Western, but mostly-- also mostly Russian press sources. There is still excellent journalism in Russia, even though journalism is, of course, under a huge threat in Russia today.

But also, more importantly, we have used-- and I think this is one of the most important contributions of the book, if I may say-- we have used the research that Jan Matti Dollbaum, our co-author has conducted over the course of this PhD research, and which is made of survey data and also many interviews from activists in Alexei Navalny's movement.

So we hope that the book provides for readers a view about Navalny from the ground in Russia, from Russia's regions, and it doesn't tell only what we might think of Navalny, but what people who have chosen to support him might make of him. And on that note, I will hand over to Ben Noble.

BEN NOBLE: Thanks, Morvan. And thanks, Carol, for the invitation to speak at this event. And also, thanks to Michelle and Laura for all of the technical support.

As Morvan mentioned, one of the motivating reasons for writing the book was to make sense of Navalny's complexity, especially in a media environment in the West in which the narrative was very black and white, about presenting Navalny, as Morvan put it, this white knight figure against the villainous dictator Putin.

But let me read a couple of paragraphs from the book to give you a sense of how we try and grapple with that complexity. So "Navalny is different things to different people. To some he's a democratic hero, a figure willing to stand up to Putin's authoritarianism. Some even call him the leader of the opposition. To others, he's a traitor, a CIA paid agent of the West who's betraying the motherland. To others still, he's a nationalist or a xenophobe.

Even a quick glance at Navalny's words and deeds makes clear why people might be confused. He's a liberal who has made nationalist, even racist statements. He's an anti-corruption activist, who himself, has been convicted of embezzlement. He's a Russian patriot who calls for sanctions against Russian authorities. He's an avowed Democrat who leads his movement with a strong hand. Navalny wants Russia to be happy, but attacks opponents with scathing comments and rarely backs down."

So in the book, as Morvan mentioned, we try and make sense of that complexity by following three strands of Navalny's life, as an anti-corruption activist, politician, and protest leader. And we also look at how the Kremlin has adapted to the challenge that Navalny has presented over time. So I'm going to speak a little bit more about those three strands, as well as how the Kremlin has adapted.

Many of you, I imagine, will have heard or maybe even watched the "Putin's Palace" investigation put together by Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation and put on YouTube at the beginning of this year. It currently has more than 118 million views. In a couple of weeks after its release, Levada, a polling agency, and independent polling agency in Russia, presented evidence that up to a quarter of the adult population in Russia had watched it.

And so that's-- for many people, especially internationally, they will associate Navalny's anti-corruption activities with that video. But his anti-corruption activities began many, many years ago. So when he, in the early to mid-2000s, was an emerging member of the post Soviet middle class in Russia, he decided to invest his money in stocks and shares. But then quickly he worked out that he couldn't get the information that he would like, such as who else own stocks and shares in these companies and also what's happening to the profits being made by these companies.

So he had the courage to stand up in shareholder meetings and ask difficult questions in a way that made him stand out from the crowd. It also became quickly clear that he was eloquent, charismatic, and that he was able to command the attention and respect the people. So as well as causing a bit of trouble in these meetings, he made it clear to an external audience what he was doing.

He started blogging using the LiveJournal Blog, which was very popular in Russia at the time. And that's an early indication of how Navalny has used social media to engage people on topics that some people would dismiss as being boring. When you're looking at corruption, it can be quite a dry, dull, gray topic. But Navalny has a knack for making it interesting, for framing it in a way such that the information can go viral.

So because of his blogging, Navalny quickly became one of Russia's most famous bloggers. And he rose to prominence. And he was increasingly seen as an influential figure. So he started to build a team in order to help him carry out these investigations. Because he was quickly, with this increased prominence, being inundated with information, people saying, well, you need to look into this particular case. They alleged some corruption and he would look into it. He couldn't do it all by himself. So he assembled some competent people around him, including investigators and lawyers.

And what's interesting is that at this moment he almost stumbles into anti-corruption as an activity. But he also quickly realizes that it can be a useful political platform. Because it's difficult to think of somebody who supports corruption. It's one of those issues that can put-- draws together people a very different ideological backgrounds. And so we can see Navalny shifting from this anti-corruption activism into an increasingly political role.

So in chapter 2 of the book, we explore Navalny as anti-corruption activist. We discuss the broader role of corruption in Russia and how it's changed over the post Soviet period. We also look at his motivations, the allegations made against him that he's purely a pawn for higher up elites particular gains. We look at the construction of the organizations that he made over time, which were, when we were writing the book, being deconstructed rapidly in real time, which made for an interesting writing process.

We also look at some of the important investigations before the "Putin's Palace" investigation, including a very high profile study into Dmitry Medvedev. And we also look, at the end of that chapter, at how law enforcement was increasingly closing the net around him, his team, and his movement. So that's in chapter 2.

In chapter 3 we move on to Navalny, the politician. And this, in many respects, is one of the reasons why we needed to write the book, to make sense of Navalny as a political figure. And also, how his political statements and his political positions have changed over time. Now, he has shifted in the policies that he's backed, in the sentiments that he's expressed.

So we chart his early days in the Liberal [NON-ENGLISH] Party, where it quickly became clear that he had the ability to rise through the ranks as a very competent intelligent person. But he also had a very strong personality and he clashed with the party's leadership. We also chart in the chapter his engagement with nationalist sentiment, with nationalist figures. And we look at some of the darker pages of his political career, but also of his life.

It's one of the reasons why we wanted to write the book, to place those statements in context. Not to forgive him, not to apologize for him, but to make sense of them in the time in which he said them and also in the broader context of Russian society at the time.

So in that chapter, we also look at his attempts to run in electoral politics. He stood in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election. And surprisingly, the Kremlin allowed that. It seems shocking now, given where he is, behind bars. But that was still possible in 2013. We contrast that with his attempt to run in the 2018 presidential election, where he tried to stand, but was barred. He wasn't allowed on the ballot. And so it gives-- the chapter gives a sense of both his shifting ideas, but also his shifting organizational affiliations as a politician.

And when we finished writing the chapter, we stood back and thought, well, this is quite confusing. There are lots of twists and turns. How do we make sense of this for ourselves, never mind for a readership? And so we really end the chapter by focusing on this idea of, is Navalny inconsistent? And I'm going to read a few more paragraphs that summarize where we end up in this chapter.

"The story of Navalny's journey as a politician can be bewildering. We were, in fact, bewildered when we finished writing the chapter. At some point he's called for the liberal opposition to unite. Then he opted to go alone. Regarding elections, he sometimes called for boycotts, but then for the fielding of opposition candidates and then for protest voting. Sometimes slogan is essential, but other times they're rejected as simplistic. Then they're back in favor once again. How should we make sense that these zigzags, of this inconsistency?

One may well call Navalny inconsistent and an opportunist for these turns, like his less pragmatic colleagues in the liberal opposition in Russia have constantly done. But in reality, they appear to reflect Navalny's readiness to subordinate both tactics and substantive demands to the one thing that he has been remarkably consistent about, and that is the need to fight an authoritarian system that uses corruption and repression to secure its power."

So that's how we end the chapter looking at Navalny the politician. In chapter 4, we then move on to Navalny as protest leader. And as Morvan mentioned, this is when we can draw on the brilliant research done by our co-author, Jan, where he interviewed, along with colleagues, activists and supporters of Navalny in the regions between 2017 and this year. And lots of people outside of Russia maybe saw coverage of Navalny in *The New York Times* as a protest leader, at the head of hundred thousands of people calling for Russia without Putin.

But the movement that we saw that he was able to build, that crescendoed and that has been deconstructed this year, was built up slowly over time. When he was first seen at the head of these crowds by many people, especially around the 2011 and 2012 protests, following the disputed national parliamentary elections in Russia, he sort of fumbles a bit.

He has an ad hoc approach. He finds himself a leader of protest, but he doesn't necessarily have a well-developed strategy. But he learned quickly. And he also got the right people in his team, including Leonid Volkov, who ends up being his chief strategist. And they decided, and they realized that they could use protests for their political, as well as their anti-corruption-- their political ends and their anti-corruption activities. And so you can see these three strands of the same life all coming together.

Fast forward to Navalny's attempt to run in the 2018 presidential election and he sets up a network of regional offices across the country that can be used to coordinate local protests, to coordinate protests across the country, as well as coordinating other political and anti-corruption activities.

In the fifth chapter we then turn away from protests then and look at how the Kremlin has adapted to Navalny. Because often in coverage of the Kremlin, it can be portrayed as this monolithic block that never changes, all powerful and can't move and adapt. But what we show in the book is that the Kremlin has adapted the challenges presented by Navalny, his team, and his movement. We can look at, for example, technological changes. So the Anti-Corruption Foundation would find a way to exploit the information environment in Russia to point out corruption within members of the elite. The Kremlin would realize that and they would block off these particular avenues.

And so, if we can look at the Kremlin's adaptation, what you see is that the Kremlin deals with Navalny, his team, and his movement in different ways over time. And that Navalny has shifted between these three threads that we trace throughout the book. But that over time, and especially over the last year, the number of spaces open still for Navalny, his team, and his movement to operate in have reduced. And the Kremlin has again been closing in on him, his team, and his movement.

And as Morvan mentioned, we discuss in the final chapter of the book whether Vladimir Putin, president of Russia, is afraid of Navalny. It's a question that we often get, that we still often get. And our response is that, while we can't get inside Putin's head-- we're going to have to wait until he writes his autobiography or we can get inside the archives, or insiders turn into outsiders, and then they reveal the private sentiments of Putin regarding Navalny, but what we do do, and what we can do is look at how the Kremlin and how Putin have responded to Navalny.

So I'll finish my presentation before handing back over to Morvan to speak about the recent elections and Smart Voting, which is team Navalny's tactical voting project, by discussing our conclusions regarding is Putin afraid of Navalny. We might not know what Putin thinks of Navalny, but we can draw conclusions from the president's dogged refusal to use Navalny's name in public. His admission that Navalny was indeed being followed by security service personnel before falling ill in August 2020. And his insistence that Navalny is an agent of Western powers.

We might not know how troubled the authorities are by the Anti-Corruption Foundation's investigations, but we can draw conclusions from the official orders to take down YouTube videos, the frequent law enforcement raids on the foundation, and finally the destruction of the FBK itself.

We might not know how seriously the Kremlin takes Smart Voting, but we can draw conclusions from the reports it's setup a spoiler initiative called Smart Vote to confuse voters, the mass detention of municipal politicians in March 2021, and the full frontal attack on Navalny's campaign offices across the country. All of this suggests that even if we don't know Putin's personal view, it's unquestionable that the Kremlin takes Navalny extremely seriously, that they see in him and his team's activities a clear threat to the current political order.

We finished writing the text in around April-May. And we clearly show the direction of travel, but we, of course, haven't updated it to what's happened since. And I imagine what has happened since, if we were to revise the text, it would really reinforce those points that we make of the Kremlin deciding that they're going to change the way that they deal with Navalny, his team, his movement, but opposition more broadly, shifting away from maybe softer management to more overt brutal repression. So with that, I'll end my comments and hand over to Morvan to speak about the elections.

**MORVAN
LALLOUET:**

Thank you very much. So as Ben mentioned a bit earlier, Navalny cannot participate in elections. He ran once for becoming mayor of Moscow and he was in a way so successful that he wasn't allowed to run again ever. His movement cannot run in elections. Before it was outright banned in Russia, it could not register as a political party, which is almost a precondition to participate in elections in Russia.

So how do you even do politics when you cannot run in elections? The answer is you have to be creative. You have to be smart. And Navalny, when you look at his already long, 20 years, political career, has devised many strategies in order to keep influencing politics without being able to do what most politicians do in the world.

His latest initiative was called Smart Voting. And it's an attempt to coordinate opposition votes in Russia. The principle is quite simple. It's the idea that opposition minded voters, people who oppose Putin, must unite behind the strongest candidates regardless of ideology. So what Navalny's team has been doing is collating information that is-- I must make that clear, it's not public, it's a discretionary decision that Navalny's team makes, and chooses district among district who is the best placed candidate from the opposition that is legal, that can participate in elections in Russia, who's the best place candidates to defeat Putin's party, United Russia.

And, of course, the strategy has been quite controversial, especially among liberal democratic minded opposition parties or voters, because they argue that why should we, democratic minded voters, vote for these pseudo opposition parties that are most of the time of an ideology that is quite far from democracy or liberalism? So this-- and the proof of that is that most of the candidates that were endorsed by the Smart Voting initiative in the latest legislative elections in Russia came from the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, whose leader has been in place for almost 30 years now and who advocates sometimes outright Stalinism.

But what Navalny's team has been arguing is that these ideological disagreements are irrelevant as of today. Russia finds itself in a situation where you have a first stage of politics, which is first to keep politics alive in Russia, and to defeat the regime of Vladimir Putin. And then once, hopefully, in the future a democratic regime is in place in Russia, people will have the opportunity to vote according to their political preferences, according to their ideology.

So the majority of these candidates that were endorsed came from the Communist Party. The majority of those who were elected with the support of Smart Voting were also from the Communist Party. This is a fairly small number. And which leads us to the question of how-- what kind of impact can this have? Of course, it is difficult to assess that impact because it actually amounts to betting on the better horse. So it's hard to say whether people have been voting for the Communist Party because they like that party or because they follow Navalny himself and his movement.

What we can though, is that there has been some academic studies of Smart Voting in the past in local contexts. And it shows that, at least the big cities-- this study was conducted, if I remember well, in St. Petersburg-- this initiative can have some impact. Can this allow Navalny's team to retain some influence over Russian politics? I think is hard to say. Of course, by definition it's a strategy that he can only use in elections. And now the next nationally scheduled elections are only the next presidential elections in 2024.

And what we're witnessing right now is a tremendous closing of opportunities for opposition in Russia. Anti-corruption investigations are still possible, but we can be doubtful that they might have a very strong impact in the future. And it's quite possible that these investigations have diminishing returns, especially after the last-- their last victim with Vladimir Putin. It can only go down to lesser figures.

As we have already repeated, not only cannot be a normal politician, his party or quasi party is banned in Russia, he cannot also be a protester. We have seen in the past year the most wide-ranging repression of demonstrations in Russia. So the only thing that Navalny can for now rely upon, or when I say Navalny, I mean, of course, his team. Navalny can communicate through his lawyers, but of course, he cannot appear on YouTube, which was-- had turned to be his main platform.

The only tool that he can use is the internet. And of course, as you may have heard the tech giants that provided Navalny with that tremendous platform, be that app stores, for example, either for Google or for Apple, you could get this Smart Voting application on your smartphone, they-- so these applications were banned. So the-- Navalny's team finds itself quite over-reliant on the internet. And the future of the internet in Russia, of the free internet that had in a way guaranteed Navalny's impact, Navalny's success in the past years, it looks quite bleak now.

So the only glimmer of hope, as-- I mean, yeah, the picture-- the overall picture, I'm sorry, is quite bleak. The only, I think, glimmer of hope in this quite bleak picture is the hope that people who were inspired people, who were members of Navalny's movement can, in one way or another, continue their political careers, their political activism in other platforms in Russia. And I will stop here and welcome the questions. Thank you very much.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Thank you very much. And just as a reminder, if you have a question please put it into the Q&A function on the bottom of the Zoom screen. But I'm going to usurp the prerogative of the chair and try to frame some of the conversation. You talked about the three threads in Navalny's career, the anti-corruption, Navalny as politician, and Navalny as protest leader.

It strikes me that what Putin seems to be afraid of-- and again, I'm couching this because you didn't come down on either side of that issue really-- is the anti-corruption piece and the protest piece. That as a political personage, they can make sure that he doesn't run again for mayor of Moscow. They can make sure that he doesn't run for president.

But if we assume that this is a system that's based on corruption, and that with the pandemic and with the decline in Russia's economic fortunes, that this idea that somehow Navalny can galvanize political opinion against the corruption, and he or his followers can lead the protest movement, it seems to me that that's what Putin is most afraid of, is this sort of perhaps galvanizing the population, but it's a threat to the political order, at the top of which-- on the top of which stands Vladimir Putin. So let me just-- that's sort of my take on what you guys have been saying.

BEN NOBLE: It's interesting. I think for all for the-- for the three strands that we look at there is a deeply personal element to Putin in all of them. So I suppose I'm reluctant to say that Putin dismisses-- not that I'm saying you said this quite like this, but I'm reluctant to say that I think that Putin dismisses Navalny's chance as a politician. Because when Navalny announced that he was going to run in the presidential election, the 2018 presidential election, that was, what, end of 2016. And he did lots of his campaigning in 2017.

And according to investigations by Bellingcat and partners, the FSB assassination squad that they claim put Novichok on Navalny's underpants-- in Navalny's underpants in Tomsk in August 2020, they started tracking him around the time that he announced that he wanted to run in the presidential race. And so one reading of that, and I think quite a plausible reading, is that this was Navalny standing up and challenging Putin directly for the top job in the country. And Navalny, when he announced his candidacy, put out a video on YouTube, because he couldn't go on main state TV, to say I'm running for the top job. And so I think that was the directly personal confrontation.

When it comes to anti-corruption, "Putin's Palace" is the ultimate direct attack, linking Putin directly to these broader allegations that Navalny has been making over time to, yes, senior officials, but not directly to Putin himself. So another sort of-- the second very personal element.

And then with protest, I already mentioned that Navalny was often seen at these protests chanting, shouting with all his might, "Russia without Putin." And so, these are very direct personal challenges. And it's difficult to escape the conclusion-- if we don't say it this directly in the book, and maybe Morvan on can push back if you doesn't agree with this as well, but I think it's a very personal confrontation.

I imagine, if we were to get inside Putin's head, he would be annoyed by Navalny. That's one way of putting it. Threatened in terms of worrying that he would win a presidential election, if free and fair elections were to take place, maybe less so, because Putin is aware of the polling data, as well as the polling data that probably gives a sincere reflection of what Russians think, albeit in a media environment in which Navalny is framed as an agent of the West.

So I think there are very personal elements to this story. And so, if somebody were to force me I would say that Putin is afraid of Navalny. And that's why we've seen the lengths taken against both him, his team, and his movement this year.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:** OK, Morvan, did you want to weigh in?

MORVAN Just a quick-- a quick thing, is that so we-- when we say-- we talked a lot about how Navalny wanted to be a normal politician, to run in an election, to lead a party, et cetera. But I think one of the important factors when we consider all this is that Navalny wanted to be a national politician and not a Moscow politician or a St. Petersburg politician.

That is, he was-- and I think this is what makes him stand apart from other liberal democratic politicians in Russia and that he really started when he launched the presidential campaign at the end of 2016, is that he wanted to build a national network. And that he-- more broadly, he was never content with saying I'm going to represent a minority of intelligentsia voters in Moscow and in St. Petersburg. He has always said I want to represent the majority of the Russian people in small cities, in the provinces or the regions.

So this is, I think, the dimension where his more traditional politician aspect is not necessarily to be discounted. But I'll stop at that.

CAROL OK, so I'm going to start looking at the questions here. So I will lump some of the questions together if they follow along the same line. So one of our viewers writes, looking at the long history of Russian leaders why would we assume that a Russia under Navalny would be better, say, than Putin's Russia? And then a parallel question in my mind is, would it even be credible to expect that an open, free and fair election, if there were such a thing in Russia, that Navalny would win it?

BEN NOBLE: In the book we certainly don't assume that Russia would be better under Navalny. What we focus on is what Navalny has said about what Russia would look like if he were given the opportunity to rule. And it's a really good question because I think it raises a broader point, which is when thinking about the level of support Navalny has in the country, why, if he is embracing such a topic that can unite people of very different ideological backgrounds as fighting corruption, why are his approval ratings not higher?

One of the responses is the media environment. He's framed as this unpatriotic, treasonous person who's doing the bidding of the state department, Western powers. But another is that people have heard this story before in relatively recent memory in Russia, of somebody saying I'm going to introduce reforms and the world's going to be much better, the country is going to have this brilliant golden future.

And that was Boris Yeltsin at the beginning of the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he promised reforms. But for most Russians who lived through the 1990s, that was a desperate decade for the vast majority of economic misery, of chaos. And so, I think even for those people who are sympathetic to what Navalny thinks and his policy positions, they might be reluctant to support him because they fear the instability that might ensue. And they might even have their own doubts as to what type of politician he would be if he won. But I'll let Morvan respond to the question about whether he'd win if there were credible free and fair elections.

MORVAN I think that at the national level, probably not. But Russia is a very diverse country with big cities, with different political cultures, with an educated middle class. And I think that, in my mind, it's completely possible that not necessarily not only himself, but people close to him, people representing his view, if allowed to run freely could win in big cities. They could win some votes in the parliament, even at the regional level, or, that doesn't seem like science fiction to me, at the national level.

And what we see-- and if Navalny or people around him were able to snap a few victories in big cities, seats in regional parliament, seats in the national parliament, then you have a political picture that changes completely. And I think that's-- what we have seen is that the people in power actually in Russia are not willing to let even that happen.

And what I would add also is I think that we shouldn't maybe set the bar too high for the Russian opposition. We are now in a situation where there is no liberal democratic force in the Russian parliament or even-- you can find some in regional parliaments. But if that influence were to grow, if only a bit, I think that could achieve some political changes.

And what we saw, for example, and that was one of the effects of Smart Voting, is that when Navalny supported mostly Communist candidates in the parliament for the city of Moscow, the municipal council of Moscow, you could see that these people became vocal opponents of what was going on in Moscow. And that this may be, in the medium range, can possibly change things.

CAROL SAIVETZ: If I can just jump in. I got a text from a friend of mine in Moscow saying that she was shocked at herself. That was the first time she had ever voted for a Communist candidate. But of course, that's whom the Smart Voting had targeted as her as her candidate. So that's exactly what went on.

So we have two-- go ahead.

BEN NOBLE: Sorry Carol, I just wanted to say that we should also make clear that there were lots of members of the opposition-- opposition minded voters in Russia who just didn't get on board with the project. They couldn't bring themselves to follow the instructions to vote for candidates who weren't aligned with them in terms of policy, preferences, and ideology. So we should be very careful in making it clear that team Navalny wasn't able to convince everybody. But it seems, though, they were able to convince some. And I also have personal stories of people saying am I really going to be voting for a Communist? Is this really what I should be doing?

And so Smart Voting is a non-obvious strategy. It required a bit of explanation, but that's certainly something that Navalny was really good at, and educating people in politics, in clear language, and making it clear, look, this is where we are. The system is called electoral authoritarianism. There aren't any ideal solutions. We have to deal with this at the moment and tactical voting is the best option.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Right. So we have two other questions that are related to each other-- is why did Navalny go back to Russia? Surely he knew what awaited him. And then the second part of that question from somebody else was, and why weren't there huge protests? Given that there had been larger protests earlier on, why weren't there huge protests once indeed he was arrested and sent to prison?

MORVAN LALLOUET: So, that's a very good question. And well, I'll start again with a disclaimer. We don't have access to what happened, either in Navalny's head or in his inner circle, and what was the decision making process that led to that decision. I think that what can be said is that Navalny has always said that he was a Russian politician and that he was not going anywhere. And that he found himself in Germany because this is where he had to be treated when he was poisoned, but that this was not his choice.

So-- and he has also made an argument that I think it's quite powerful-- is that in his view, in most people's minds in Russia if you leave the country it means you gave up and that's your choosing the comforts of the West over the hardships of what people are actually going through in their country.

And I think that-- and I think that this was-- the answer was already in the question, is that what better way is there to show that Putin is actually afraid of me, that Russia is actually a full-blown dictatorship than coming back to Russia and forcing that regime to take that decision. Because if you put that man in jail, if you ban his whole movement, in a way it's admission of guilt, admission the fear, and admission that the country is a full-blown dictatorship, and not a hybrid regime or some sort of democracy with Russian specifics.

And last point I would make is that many people ask, oh, did he miscalculate? I think that from what we understand, most people, including ourselves, expected him to end up in jail. The people in power had made that quite clear. What none of us, I think, expected was the extent of the repression against this movement. And it's possible that Navalny believed that, well, maybe I'll go to jail for a few years, but my movement will be able to tread on. And we saw what happened-- it wasn't.

And the same thing with protests-- why weren't they bigger? And I think that the answer is that the repression against demonstrations in Russia has never been that massive since the fall of the Soviet Union. You had more than 10,000 people who were arrested after a few days of demonstrations. And when you saw pictures of Moscow and the heavy police presence that looked like as if the city was under siege, I think that it's quite natural that people would fear turning out to the street. And this is not talking about the criminal cases that were brought after arrest against dozens of activists who participate in these protests.

CAROL Right.

SAIVETZ:

BEN NOBLE: And I'll add to that. I agree entirely about the point regarding people not being necessarily enthusiastic about the prospects of being beaten up by the police, or riot police, or members of the National Guard. Another thing that we should mention, and I don't think we have given this detail, is Navalny's approval ratings.

I've mentioned-- I've sort of hinted at them, but we can put some numbers on that. When he was poisoned the Levada polling agency put the percentage of Russians who approved of his activities at 20%. And with these figures, we should always bear in mind the media environment in which Navalny is presented, but it was 20%. When he returned to Russia, it was 19%, so roughly the same.

And so in the book we're not making it-- we're not making the argument that we think that Navalny has the majority support of Russians, definitely not. But then we can update the picture regarding the approval ratings for Navalny. When the Levada Center last asked Russians whether they approve of his activities in June, with the results reported in July, it was down to 14%.

And then the question becomes, well, what explains that drop off? Is it because now that he's behind bars people have lost hope. They don't see the future in Navalny and they have decided that they're going to move their support elsewhere? Or might it be that people are afraid-- there's another manifestation of people being afraid. That they don't want to be associated, even with an anonymous response to the Levada polling agency, with an individual and his organizations that have been labeled extremist because they're worried about the law enforcement ramifications for them.

So it's a very good question about comparing numbers and protests and what that tells us more broadly about support levels. But we shouldn't forget the extraordinary coercion and repression. And we should also make clear that we're not trying to make the case for Navalny in the book, if that's one way of putting it. We're not making it seem as though he should be the one in power and not Putin.

We tried to remain objective. We're Western academics who aren't involved in Russian politics. So we have the luxury to be able to speak about these things, to make statements that point to areas of sort of shades of gray, without those statements, our statements, being politicized necessarily, which might happen for individuals who are involved in the process, who are involved on the ground in Russia.

CAROL

One of our questioners asked whether or not, as he put it, whether Putin had been sort of permanently shut up.

SAIVETZ:

How would each of you gauge the future of Navalny and his movement I think is the import of the question. Whichever one of you wants to go first.

BEN NOBLE:

Well, I mean, so if we assume-- if we agree with the evidence put together by Bellingcat and partners that it was the Kremlin behind the assassination attempt on Navalny, they tried to shut him up permanently, it just didn't work. And we discuss in the book maybe why that was the case.

One of it could be as mundane as the paramedics who dealt with him when he got off the plane after the emergency landing in Omsk gave him atropine, because they thought maybe he'd overdosed or they thought something else was going on. And with that injection of atropine that could have saved his life. Another reason could be because he was evacuated to the Berlin Charity Hospital and treated there.

But given that the assassination attempt didn't work, what do the authorities do with Navalny? And at the moment it seems as though they're in a bit of an equilibrium that suits them. He's behind bars, he's not dead. And that means that the international community-- yes, they've made objections, but at the moment things are quite stable. But he's really away from YouTube.

As Morvan has suggested, YouTube has been his life. It's given the oxygen. It's been the way in which it's been able to get his message out. Now, he can get messages out to the outside world through his lawyers, but far less. So he's been able to put some information on social media after the elections, including calling out big tech for what he sees as then buckling to pressure from the Kremlin. He's been able-- he was able to put out an op ed discussing his views on corruption that was published in *The Guardian* in the UK and other newspapers. He was able to give that interview to *The New York Times* to speak about his conditions in prison.

But his ability to speak to his movement has been reduced. And so I think for the Kremlin, they've shut him up as much as they need to. And with these additional criminal charges it's likely that he's going to be behind bars for many years to come. And more broadly speaking, his organizations have been destroyed, quite spectacularly, with breathtaking speed.

I mentioned that this is happening when we were writing the book. As well as being worried that the book was going to be out of date as soon as it was released, we were also deeply concerned that an organizational ecosystem that we have been-- we were constructing the narrative of its creation year upon year, all the effort that went into it, and yet it was being taken down so quickly. That was quite staggering. So I think to answer the question, the authorities have shut him up as much as they need to now.

CAROL
SAIVETZ: OK. Somebody else asked about whether Navalny is perceived as being elitist. And I think this would go to whether it's an urban or rural phenomenon, how widespread it is throughout the country. Do you have any sense of who his supporters were-- are? Are they just the intelligentsia, as you said before? And I think that that's a big question. And it may also help us gauge how widespread a phenomenon he really is or his movement really is.

MORVAN
LALLOUET: So Navalny comes from a not so elitist, elite background. He was born in the suburbs, the deep suburbs of Moscow. But he's clearly from the middle class. His parents were-- his father was a career officer in the Red Army. His mother was an accountant. And then they took over a fairly successful business in the 1990s.

And he has lived in Moscow-- excuse me-- since the beginning of the 1990s. So of course, he's perceived, I think, as somebody from the upper middle class, whatever that means. There's a lot of caveats around that word in Russia. But from somebody-- and I think he's quite conscious of that-- who has a lifestyle, a living standard that was clearly above most Russians.

And he's a man who is globally connected. He was a member of the Yale World Fellow program. He speaks English. So clearly, he's not a worker-- a factory worker from a small town in Siberia, that's for sure. And it's-- he also comes from the fairly liberal background, which has in Russia that association of any elitism centered around Moscow, centered around St. Petersburg. And this is something that he has tried to overcome by having a more, let's say, laid back style, using a more relaxed language. He's clearly not intelligentsia figure in that respect, even though he is, of course, well-read, well-educated.

And I think that if we look at his support, it's clear that his core constituency will be people who live in big cities and who are educated, by virtue of what his program is, which leans fairly right wing, even though in recent years, I think, again conscious of this limitation, he has tried to put forward a more left wing, more social platform in order to appeal to less elite Russians let's say. But I think that, of course, this is what he is and the people he directly speaks to first and foremost.

CAROL
Ben, do you want to add anything?

SAIVETZ:

BEN NOBLE: I was just going to add that one of the reasons why we wrote the book is to try and present a picture that was intelligible to a Western audience who doesn't follow Russia all the time, but to use that opportunity to show Navalny from the bottom up. And so when we, in chapter 4, look at Navalny as protest leader and we draw on Jan's survey data, you get firsthand accounts of how his supporters and activists view him, and including supporters and activists outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg.

And you really get a sense of how Navalny was successful in moving outside of the usual strongholds of the opposition in Russia. And maybe that's one of the reasons why the Kremlin saw him so much as a challenge. Because he was breaking down those barriers, the concentration of the opposition within the two capitols.

And so it might be, if we return to the idea of whether the Kremlin is afraid, whether Putin's afraid, they might not have been afraid of this current strength, but they saw the direction of travel. They saw what he could become. And so decided to nip it in the bud when they could.

CAROL SAIVETZ: That's great. We have about one minute left, so I'm hesitant to ask another question. So let me do this. Does either of you want to make any closing remarks, sort of being forward looking in terms of where you see Navalny-- probably still in prison, but a year from now where you see the phenomenon. Is it just going to fade away at this point? Is Putin-- what do you think it says about the regime and maybe the 2024 presidential elections? That's a small question, but--

BEN NOBLE: Well, so Morvan has already said that it's difficult not to be bleak, and yeah, I'd echo that sentiment. But I think repression is going to increase. But we need to hear from what team Navalny say. So people like Leonid Volkov, who are outside the country, they're yet to present their vision going forward, but we can expect that that is going to happen. Because without that direction, it's not clear what the movement will do without that sense of leadership from the top. But let me give Morvan the last word.

MORVAN LALLOUET: I think that, of course, I'll concur and say that the future looks pretty bleak. But at the same time, I think that even though we can expect more repression and a more authoritarian regime, I think there remains-- and this is something that Navalny said in this last interview to *The New York Times*, that there remains a deep problem in the Russian political system, is that you have a middle income country with a fairly strong educated middle class and that these people do not have political representation in Russia today.

And this is something that in the long run can make maybe a bit optimistic for the future of Russia and pessimistic for that political system that allows-- that created this situation in the first place.

CAROL SAIVETZ: That's great. So let me take this opportunity to thank you both. Again, if you look at the links that are in the chat, the book is available for purchase. I also wanted to remind you that our next Focus on Russia seminar will be on November 9th at, I think, 11:30 to 12:30. And it's more foreign policy oriented. And it's entitled "The Future of US-Russian Relations: More of the Same or Something Different?"

And our speakers will be Barry Posen, who is professor at MIT, and Dmitri Trenin, who is a major commentator on Russian foreign policy-- thank you for putting up the slide-- and the Director of the Moscow Carnegie Center.

So with that, let me thank you all for attending and let me again thank our speakers. And please tell Jan that we missed him and we're sorry he couldn't join us today, but you guys did a great job. And I think it's a topic that we'll need to continue to watch as we go-- as Russia goes forward and as we go forward. So thank you very much.

BEN NOBLE: Thank you, Carol.

MORVAN LALLOUET: Thanks a lot. This was a very nice conversation.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Thanks, guys.