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THE CURRENT: Will pro-Navalny protests threaten Putin's power?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Alexei Navalny returned to Russia in January knowing that he would be arrested. He returned after months recuperating in Germany from being poisoned by a Soviet nerve agent and was sentenced this week to 3 1/2 years in prison. His detention has sparked mass protests all across Russia.

With us to talk to us about the significance of his arrest and these protests is Angela Stent, nonresident senior fellow here at Brookings, and professor and director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies at Georgetown University. Angela, thanks for talking to us today.

STENT: Delighted to be on your program again.

PITA: One thing that's been particularly striking to external observers has been the breadth of the protests in support of Navalny. He's been an anti-corruption campaigner for years, but certainly not the first political opponent or dissident to be arrested, or to have an attempt made on their life during Putin's many years in power. Maybe you could start us off with some context for who he is and how he's perceived within Russia.

STENT: So, he started off as a sort of more liberal politician. He was a member of the Yabloko party when he started off, which was a party that no longer sits in the Duma, and then, I would say, his views developed. At one point he was quite nationalistic and he still, for instance, wouldn't return Crimea to Ukraine were he to be president. But then he has slowly become the leading anti-corruption politician in Russia. His foundation has made some very impressive videos detailing the corruption of top leaders, including one released just after he was arrested on his return to Russia about a palace, a billion-dollar palace being constructed on the Black Sea allegedly that will belong to President Putin, even though it's financed by other people.

So, the anti-corruption is a very important part of what he's doing. And then there's a second element that's very important, and that is the tactic that he is advising and has been advising Russians over the past couple of years to adopt in all manner of elections: local elections, regional elections, and then national elections, called "smart voting." And that is to tell people to vote for any party that is not the ruling United Russia party, and the United Russia party is the one that, of course, supports President Putin. And that I think has been with deemed particularly dangerous by the Kremlin, this idea, because there are major parliamentary elections coming up in September to the Duma, national elections, and they were very concerned this year that his tactics would succeed and that the supermajority that the ruling party has would no longer be there. So, I think he now represents to the Kremlin the threat of both exposing corruption and diminishing, if you like, the legitimacy of the ruling party.

And he has become increasingly popular in Russia, but I would say that the current protests, they were ignited by his poisoning and then arrest when he returned to Russia, but I think for many people on the streets it's a combination of frustrations not only about the repressive government, about the economic downturn, the impact, of course, of COVID this year, and so it's a general expression of greater frustration, but ignited by Navalny's arrest and sort of personified by him as the leading opposition figure.

PITA: The response to these protests have been, unsurprisingly, mass arrests both of protesters and of journalists, police violence, brutality, intimidation. Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation has cited as many as 12,000 arrests over the past two weeks, which the Washington Post editorial board cited as the largest scale of political detentions since the worst era of the Soviet Union. Why is Navalny's arrest and his movement striking such a chord now, and what's the likelihood of this growing into something more sustainable, like, for example, what we've seen in Belarus, where these are ongoing regular demonstrations about these larger issues, even though they were ignited by a specific incident?

STENT: If you look at interviews that were done with many of the protesters, a lot of the people on the streets are young people. And if you're in your 20s, you've never known a leader of a country other than President Putin. And these are young people who are just coming to maturity saying, we want some control and say in what happens in our lives politically. And Navalny, of course, characterizes Putin as grandfather sitting in his bunker because of COVID. So, I think there's a lot of feeling among young people of frustration, and that they're looking at an increasingly elderly leadership there which is becoming increasingly repressive. So, some of this does have to do also with the way that the Kremlin has reacted to growing discontent and laws that were passed in December that really do clamp down even more on protesters. Plus, of course, we've seen the increased use of violence by the special police forces who are supposed to be dealing with the demonstrators.

Then if you add to that, Russia's economy has been in a downturn for a number of years. Really, the economy stopped growing after 2008 and of course COVID has hit people particularly badly in terms of unemployment and in terms of their own standard of living. So, there's economic frustration and then there is this increased understanding of how corrupt the leadership is. These are the people who watch the Navalny videos and protesting against that kind of corruption. So, I think it's a combination of a lot of pent-up resentment against what appears to be an increasingly aging and repressive government.

Whether this becomes like Belarus or not will really depend on whether Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation can sustain the momentum now that he's going to be out of sight. It's actually going to be two and a half years because he will get some time off for house arrest – he was under house arrest in the beginning for this particular crime that he was accused of committing. So, can they survive, will the Kremlin try and break up this organization? In other words, will these protests go on without a leader? And I think nobody knows the answer to that, but I think we'll have a better sense as the weeks go by whether the foundation can still mobilize people to go out into the streets.

PITA: The Biden administration has just achieved one particular goal regarding Russia, the extension of the New START nuclear treaty. How have they reacted to Navalny's detention so far and what would you recommend their response be to this?

STENT: So, the Biden administration has condemned this. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has put out several communications demanding his release, saying there's deep, deep concern about this. So, the issue is at the moment we've signed this, extended the New START arms control agreement with the Russians, and the Biden administration has ordered a review of relations with Russia, which is sort of typical for any administration coming in, but particularly into what happened with the computer hacking over the last year, the Solar Winds hacking, looking into what Russia did in terms of election interference in 2020. So, it wants to review everything that has happened, I think, in the last four years, and then it has to craft a response.

Unfortunately, there isn't very much we can do. Navalny's foundation and Navalny himself have put out a list of 35 individuals who are close to Putin, wealthy individuals who they want to be sanctioned. They want the U.S. and the Europeans to take up these the sanctions and freeze people's bank accounts. And it's unclear whether that's going to happen. It's also unclear whether, if you sanction some individuals close to Putin, that will have any impact on releasing Navalny. It's very hard to see what would induce the Kremlin to release him from prison because they have now taken a stand and they want him to be an example to deter other Russians from protesting and going out into the street. And I think any response that the U.S. does would have to be coordinated with the Europeans, and again it's unclear how much the Europeans are willing to do. The high representative for foreign policy from the European Union is in Moscow today, and he will be having talks with the Russians, so I think one has to be very realistic about the limits of what can be done. Because the Kremlin has quite clearly said that Navalny is an agent of the West, that he's backed by the CIA, and that all these protests and everything are backed by the United States, you have to calibrate then responding very harshly with then feeding into the Kremlin's narrative that, in fact, he is controlled by the West. So, this is really a dilemma, I think, for the United States to figure out what the correct response is.

PITA: As you said, we are ultimately going to have to wait and see how this develops and how public support either grows or ebbs in this situation. And Putin has been around for going on two decades now. What, in the long term, do you think this portends for his continued hold on power, for his longevity as Russia's leader?

STENT: I think what it shows is that there is certainly opposition and that opposition is growing. On the other hand, because he and the Kremlin are willing to use as much force as they need to – and they're now using force much more than they did let's say 10 years ago – they can prolong their stay in power, because as long as the security forces remain loyal, the protesters will have a limited impact. Putin could stay in power until 2036. He had the constitution amended in 2020 to allow him to do that. It's the dilemma for many authoritarian regimes, is how do you engineer a succession where you ensure that your interests will still be protected if you're no longer in power. And as far as we can see, they haven't figured that out yet, but I think to predict the imminent demise of the Putin regime is quite unrealistic. I'm sure that protests will continue, but I think the hold on power that the Kremlin has is still quite strong and it would really take a much larger movement to somehow weaken that.

PITA: Angela, thanks very much for being here today and talking to us about this. We always enjoy having you back on and I thought I should mention to you and our listeners that this is a particular milestone: you're on the hundredth episode of The Current. So, thank you for being with us.

STENT: Delighted to be, thanks.