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Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold: Alexei Navalny's civic revolution and the unrest in Belarus

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The post-election protests in Belarus and the poisoning of Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny are cemented together by something greater than cause and effect. Certainly, what is unfolding in Belarus is a reminder that the collapse of the USSR is an ongoing affair. Yet while it has the hallmarks of other post-Soviet revolutions, what is striking is that it is occurring in a country which has for decades clung to the traditions, symbols, statecraft and narratives of the USSR. It is thus not merely a nationalist rejection of a Russified system, but a civic revolt against Soviet political and cultural behaviours. Navalny has been leading a similar insurrection in Russia for years, even though Russia is far from the nostalgic Soviet reboot that is Belarus. While the Kremlin and its patrons have been his main target, his real battle has been against 'learned helplessness', or deeply ingrained passivity towards processes of political and social change. Riding on a wave of protests in Russia's far east, Navalny had likely recognised that what was unfolding in Belarus was not simply the last stand of the Soviet era, but a new front in a much bigger war.

Belarus is strategically important to Russia insofar as it remains outside of Western geopolitical or economic frameworks and is a potential bridgehead for Central and Eastern European provocations. But this revolt matters to Vladimir Putin not because Belarus is a buffer state, but because Belarusians have shown that even in an unfree, sclerotic country, people can still claim the power to say they've had enough. Navalny himself has long argued that the reason for Putin's aggression in eastern Ukraine after Euromaidan was neither concern for Russian compatriots nor the creation of a bulwark against the 'evil West'. The *real* motive, Navalny maintains, was the contagion

of anti-authoritarian revolution. Belarusian President, Viktor Lukashenko, accidentally conveyed the gravity of the unfolding situation when stating that ‘the defence of Belarus today is no less than the defence of our entire space’. Lukashenko was appealing to Putin for aid on the basis of their so-called Union State, but he inadvertently gave voice to a growing existential threat: one that threatens the very foundations of the entire Moscow-dominated post-Soviet space, of which Putin is the beating heart.

While Russia is officially a federation of semi-autonomous territories, Putin oversees a system that dictates power from Moscow and demands obedience from dominions in return. Recently, however, those regions have been increasingly disobedient. The Khabarovsk unrest in the far east is just the latest in a growing number of regional anti-Kremlin rumblings, and Navalny was surely in Siberia to consolidate those provincial spot fires into a conflagration ahead of upcoming regional elections. With the explosion of civic unrest in neighbouring Belarus, this fire on the outskirts suddenly had the potential to become an inferno. It’s no wonder Navalny didn’t make it back to Moscow.

In Belarus, Navalny would have long ago disappeared, but in Russia he has amassed too large and too popular a following to risk rousing. So the Kremlin has tried silencing him in more banal, punctilious ways – a thousand annoying cuts rather than a single provocative blow. Until now. If anything, keeping Navalny around demonstrated Putin’s confidence in his own invincibility. The clunky timing of his poisoning suggests that Putin’s throne is wobblier than his new constitutional mandate would have us believe.

Russian history has produced a legacy of centralised power bequeathed from Emperors to Tsars to Commissars to modern politicians. A revolution might bring down an *ancien regime*, but in the same way that centuries of history were not swept away by the revolutions of 1917 or 1989, a deep-seated legacy of authoritarian culture lives on not just in politics, but in the minds of masses. Democratic institutions account for little in a society in which self-organization and self-rule are undeveloped. Both Lukashenko and Putin came to power promising relief from the chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, offering paternalism and stability in return for apolitical acquiescence. For people unaccustomed and unpractised in democratic participation, this seemed a fair deal – paternalists, after all, can only reign over an infantilised realm.

Unlearning centuries of learned behaviours seems insurmountable, and the protest in Belarus, despite its vigour, is fragile. Much like the other ‘colour revolutions’ of the former Soviet sphere, this movement has arisen in resistance to the stagnation and subjugation of Lukashenko’s model of power, but it lacks the strategic vision or policy platform needed for a viable alternative. Opposition leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has maintained her goal is not to take power but to inspire change; a process she admits cannot be done overnight. In her words, Belarusians are fighting not just for the possibility of free elections but for the right to simply make decisions by themselves: to be ‘reminded of their own dignity’. This is surely the first step in the transformation from subject to citizen.

Navalny is dangerous not because he threatens Putin, but rather the political cultures and behaviours upon which Putinism, Belarus, and the entire Moscow-dominated

post-Soviet space is built and sustained. Over the years he has evolved from a rogue anti-corruption blogger to the formidable voice of a homegrown, multifaceted civic consciousness that, although nascent, inspires mass democratic participation even in situations when undemocratic outcomes are all but assured. Unlike Putin, who does not participate in public debates, Navalny thrives on open discourse and dialogue: his bringing together of liberals and nationalists by means of the rights and concerns that unify them, rather than ideologies which divide them, is an achievement even Western politicians seem to find beyond the pale. There is still a long, long way to go. It is unclear in what capacity Navalny will emerge from his coma. But things have already begun to fall apart - the centre cannot hold.

Bio: Danica Jenkins is a PhD candidate and Teaching Fellow in European Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. Her research areas are the intellectual and cultural history of Russia and South Eastern Europe, and her PhD addresses the role of cinema in 'coming to terms with the past' in the Balkans. Recent research projects also include the epistemology of cinema in the European tradition, and civil society and identity in contemporary Europe.

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