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RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICS HAVE BECOME PART OF THE WEST'S RUSSIA POLICY

THE STAKES ARE RISING WHEN NAVALNY RETURNS TO RUSSIA

Aleksey Navalny's return to Russia poses an obvious risk to his life. At the same time, the West must be prepared to respond to the consequences of his return.

Among the most significant events in Russia in 2020 were the Covid-19 pandemic, reactions to the protests in Belarus, and the poisoning of top opposition politician Aleksey Navalny. The first two were clearly events of international significance, but so was the medical treatment given to Navalny, first in Omsk and then in Berlin, after he suffered from symptoms of poisoning during a flight from Tomsk in Siberia to Moscow in August.

In December, a joint study by the investigative journalist groups *Bellingcat* and *The Insider*, along with *CNN*, *Der Spiegel* and Navalny's *FBK Foundation*, showed that it was difficult to find more conclusive evidence of the Kremlin's involvement in the assassination

attempt by a chemical weapons-related poisoning group under the FSB that had been following Navalny for years. This kind of operation would hardly have been possible without the blessing of high-level intelligence. The question of whether the FSB leadership was proactive in resolving the "Navalny problem" or whether the order came from the Kremlin is irrelevant. The revealed pattern confirms the long-standing trend of the strengthened role of the security services, especially the FSB, in Russian politics. It is consistent with Putin's approach to political processes being increasingly seen as issues of national security.

Navalny's self-confidence and style in the revelation videos related

to the investigation, receiving approximately 45 million views in less than a month, underscore the extent to which the FSB failed. The target did not die or become paralyzed, but recovered relatively quickly and bounced back, playing for higher and more radical stakes than before. Navalny's role and reputation as the Kremlin's most prominent critic has been based on the political pressure on the Kremlin generated by exposing elite corruption. While the willingness of citizens to see Navalny as an alternative to Putin varies considerably – with the majority indifferent to politics as a whole – Navalny's numerous revelations have created an alternative to Russia's official reality, the political potential of which the regime obviously fears.

At first glance, Navalny's rise as a player in international politics at the nadir of Russia–West relations has provided additional capital for his ability to de-legitimize the Kremlin. It is not just a matter of exposing a state-level assassination attempt, but also of exposing the Russian security services, fearfully respected in the West, as instruments of rampant corruption. The leaking of secret information into the darknet and its trafficking there, even by the security services themselves, is a sign of a deep decline in institutional trust. Amid these realities, the KGB's heirs may not be able "to complete their duties if they wish", as Putin pointed out in his annual press conference in December. This was already seen in the assassination attempts and murders before Navalny, especially in the case of Sergey Skripal.

Navalny's prompt and ostensibly complete recovery has made possible his return to Russia, and he has tentatively announced that he will fly to Moscow on 17 January. There are good reasons for this, above all in terms of political credibility. Mounting opposition to authoritarian regimes from abroad can provide important moral and symbolic support for domestic resistance, but it is not possible to lead and coordinate supporters

from abroad indefinitely. The political front line requires a physical presence.

The risks posed by Navalny's return are understood in the Kremlin, and various criminal cases have been ongoing against him for some time. The message is clear: freedom of political activity on Russian soil is not granted. The more crucial question is, how does the Kremlin intend to carry out its threat after Navalny's return? It will be an international event and if he is bundled directly from the airport to the courtroom, the attention will be even greater. The Kremlin does not want this, but even less does it want a politician on its soil who is not only a domestic problem but also a foreign policy problem.

Navalny can, to some extent, count on the restraint created by his international capital. Even if the EU and Biden's US keep Navalny's position on their agenda with Russia, it is still unclear what the Kremlin could gain by bargaining over Navalny's fate in view of the position that it currently finds itself in. Avoiding possible additional sanctions against the elite hardly goes hand in hand with the risk that Navalny is perceived to pose, especially in a year in which the Duma elections will be held.

The international humiliation caused by the poisoning and the growing domestic political pressures on the regime will put the Kremlin between a rock and a hard place when Navalny returns. Giving latitude to a skillful opposition politician who has gained international incentives is hardly a question when such latitude has not been given thus far. Navalny's years of systematic exclusion from official politics and the exposed assassination attempt show that the Kremlin does not trust softer means. These have comprised slandering Navalny as well as the exploitation of his conflicting reputation among Russians. In any case, imprisonment would draw negative domestic attention that would now be combined with unprecedented international attention.

Navalny's fate cannot be ignored by the West. It is not enough to vaguely imply that the Kremlin might face some consequences, without having a clear action plan and a real intent to implement concrete sanctions in practice if Navalny is arrested on obvious political grounds, or even physically eliminated. Regardless of whether or not unambiguous political messaging would have an impact on the Kremlin, the West should be ready to act if the shocks caused by Navalny's return so require./