

# PUTIN/LUKASHENKO: TWO SIDES OF SAME MISGOVERNANCE COIN

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Democracy is under attack in some countries, but recent events in Russia and Belarus provide lessons for accountable governance globally.

While Aleksei Navalny, 44, Russia's best-known democracy and anti-corruption advocate, recently struggled for life in a coma from poison in a Siberian hospital, President Vladimir Putin followed his ongoing practice - refusing to voice the opposition leader's name. He threatens Putin's regime because he stands for a peaceful, democratic Russia and is principled, selfless, courageous and charismatic.

European political leaders reacted promptly to Navalny's critical situation, especially when local officials tried to obstruct his evacuation to Germany.

A blogger, Navalny has deployed myriad internet projects to discredit Putin's use of television stations he seized for propaganda purposes from 2000 on. In 2007, Navalny sought to build a pro-democracy coalition of liberals and nationalists.

Historian Robert Horvath notes that Navalny exposed the methods used by corrupt officials "to embezzle billions of dollars from state-controlled corporations". He challenged Russia's authoritarian system and its heavily manipulated elections to legitimize Putin's rule. His proposal to vote for anyone but Putin's Edinaya Rossiya (ER) party in the 2011 elections exposed massive electoral fraud and precipitated huge protests.

Navalny and his Foundation for the Struggle against Corruption (FBK) has kept a YouTube spotlight on offshore assets and the kleptocrats' lifestyles. One in 2017 on the palaces, estates and yachts of then-premier Dmitry Medvedev was viewed 35 million times and caused nationwide protests.

In 2013, released from jail to compete in Moscow's mayoral election, Navalny, despite smearing by the Kremlin-aligned media, won 27% of the vote. His presidential ambitions were thwarted by his 2013 criminal conviction on fabricated charges, but he's used his national network of

activists to promote a strategy of “intelligent voting” - voting for candidates with the best chance of defeating the ruling party. One notable success in the 2019 regional elections was in Khabarovsk - now a hotbed of anti-Kremlin protest.

The world, says Horvath, should recognize Navalny as the embodiment of the possibility of a peaceful, democratic Russia that is a partner, not an adversary, of the West.

Navalny opposed the war with Ukraine, arguing that Putin’s overriding motive wasn’t concern for compatriots, but fear of the contagion of anti-authoritarian revolution. By exposing the hypocrisy of the Kremlin’s anti-Western propagandists, Navalny reflects Nobel Peace Prize laureate Andrei Sakharov’s insight regarding the connection between respect for human rights and international peace. If a democratic Russia ever emerges from Putinism, Navalny will undoubtedly be honoured as its prophet.

Putin’s counterpart in Belarus since 1994 is President Alexander Lukashenko, re-elected on August 9 in an election which many have denounced as fraudulent.

To achieve his landslide win, Lukashenko manipulated the parliament elected in 2019 with not one opposition member. One observer of the 2019 election declared, “I will never forget the fear I saw in the eyes of our interlocutors.”

The results drove more than 200,000 Belarusians into the streets of Minsk in protest. However, for protesting and requesting new elections, they’re now being detained and tortured. Lukashenko’s forces locked protesters and journalists in the Red Church. Food supplies from Poland to aid Belarusians were blocked. Two of the executive directors of opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya’s newly formed Coordination Council have been jailed. Opponents have been fired from their jobs and replaced.

Tikhanovskaya, now exiled in Lithuania declared, “We’re not the opposition anymore. We’re the majority now.” Vowing to “stand till the end” in protests over the disputed election and subsequent violence, she told the

BBC that if the protest movement stepped back now, Belarusians would be "slaves".<sup>1</sup>

Democracies around the world must encourage Lukashenko to show respect for human dignity and peaceful demonstrations; free all political prisoners; cease torture for detainees and cease criminal proceedings against members of the Co-ordination Council; provide a new free and fair election with local and international observers; and create a new Central Election Committee (CDC).

Some feel that Putin favours a new election in Belarus because he's tired of Lukashenko. Nobel literary Laureate Svetlana Alexievich says, "Perhaps the world will help us, so that Lukashenko starts talking to us. For now, he's only talking to Putin, so perhaps Putin will help us."

Democratic government for Russians and Belarusians meanwhile remains over the horizon.

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#### Sources:

1 Svetlana Tikhanovskaya's interview BBC

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000m9vd>