

[Transcript] The Realignment / 422 | Alexey Navalny, the Dissident of Putin's Russia - Does the Dream of a Democratic Russia Live On?

Marshall here, welcome back to The Realignment.

Before we dive into today's episode, I just want to note that Saga and I released our latest bi-weekly recap and Ask Me Anything episode last Sunday.

To listen to the full episode and submit your own questions or comments, go to realignment.supercast.com

or click the link in your show notes.

On to today's episode, my guest today is the Washington Post's David Hursahorn, author of The Dissident, Lexi Navalny, Profile of a Political Prisoner.

One of the biggest and unanswered questions about Russia's relations with the West is whether their poor state will last beyond Putin's rule whenever said rule eventually comes to an end.

Would a democratic Russia, ideally less corrupt as a consequence, present a different face on the international stage?

Or do our geostrategic disagreements about the world order, Russia's place in Europe, and the legacy of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union go deeper than just Putin's rule?

I appreciate the chance to examine these questions to the lens of Lexi Navalny, Putin's leading dissident critic, a lawyer, protest leader, presidential candidate, and her work crusader, now prisoner of conscience.

I hope you all enjoy this conversation and definitely let me know what you think.

Huge thank you to the Foundation for American Innovation for supporting the work of this podcast.

David Hursahorn, welcome to the realignment.

Thank you.

It's great to be here.

Let's just start with the most basic question.

Who is Alexi Navalny and why does he matter?

I think a lot of folks probably hear dissidents, Putin's Russian, just assume we're a bunch of brave people who've been sort of warehoused away for the rest of their lives.

What's his significance here, really?

So Alexi Navalny is the leading political opposition figure to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

That's been true for more than a decade now.

He matters for many reasons.

Putin is, for a long time, he was perhaps the world's best hope of a post-Putin democratic Russia.

He now, of course, represents a specific type of democracy crusader, political prisoner, dissident, a title that he really disdained and never wanted.

And we can talk more about why that was the case, but who is now jailed in Russia on various trumped-up charges for at least 30 years, we think.

That would bring him into his mid-70s when he gets out.

So it really has become this staring contest, but really a contest for life.

Can he survive in Russian prisons long enough for Vladimir Putin to be out of power and perhaps for him to have a chance of freedom?

Why does he reject the label term dissident?

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So there's a really complicated history that goes back to the Soviet Union, where dissidents were viewed as these brave, honorable voices, but who actually, in the perception of Navalny and some of his closest supporters, they were losers.

Not losers in a colloquial sense, but in a very literal sense, they never won anything.

They didn't win the freedom in the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union.

They didn't win any kind of power.

And Navalny has always seen himself as a politician, as somebody who has aspirations to elective office, aspirations to living in a free democratic country where somebody like him can be chosen for elective office.

And so they always disdained that label, which they thought would brand him in a way.

This is kind of fruitless, very honorable, but ultimately feudal crusader for a type of Russia that was never going to come into being.

And in fact, they viewed themselves as campaigners, as out there doing electoral politics, even when the system wasn't allowing it, even for example, in 2017, going into a presidential election in 2018 when he was barred from the ballot, but he was out there running, setting up campaign offices all over the country, seeing himself as a viable contender against Putin, if only they would allow free elections in Russia.

This summer, though, we saw something quite remarkable.

And after the latest sentence that was handed down another 19 years for extremism, which is on its face absurd, right, if Navalny is only guilty of extremism, if demanding democracy and free elections is somehow extreme.

He's never been somebody who supported violent uprisings or anything of the sort.

But after that sentence, Navalny posted on his blog a really remarkable essay, you would call it, or statement comparing himself to Natan Sharansky, the Soviet dissident saying he'd been reading Sharansky's book in isolation, in his isolation cell, reading about how Sharansky himself in Soviet times had been imprisoned in a similar isolation cell.

And they are this real, really poignant moment where he's come to accept, it seems, his status as a dissident, as a political prisoner, as somebody whose very existence now, his lack of freedom, is a symbol for the kind of oppression and repression that is taking place in modern Russia.

And it's interesting that you bring up Sharansky just in the sense that unlike Navalny, Sharansky has an exit option.

He goes to Israel.

So while he's a dissident, ultimately you could argue, because of his multi-layered identity, he can just go somewhere else and actually be quite influential, I think kind of frankly in a negative way in American democracy promotion discourse in the 2000s, that's the whole other podcast we could get into.

But I guess the question is, because Navalny doesn't have an alternate identity, an exit option, what does that mean for him?

Well, you're touching on exactly the other piece of the dissident puzzle that I didn't speak about yet, but it is that idea that the dissidents, many of the Soviet dissidents were able to flee.

They left for the United States, for the West, for Israel.

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They were celebrated as heroes, but they escaped.

And Navalny not only didn't want to be known as a dissident, but he especially did not want to be seen or ever labeled a dissident in exile.

So even after what we now understand to have been Kremlin-ordered assassins tried to poison him to death with a banned chemical weapon.

He goes then to Germany.

He's airlifted in a medevac to Berlin, where he's treated, is in a coma for weeks, really has to relearn basic functions, had a walk, had a talk.

Even after that, five months of recovery, not even, and he insists on going back.

And there's this recognition among his wife, Yulia, and others that there was no way he was ever going to stay outside of Russia.

He really believed at that point that if he were to become a dissident in exile, as celebrated as he might be in Brussels or Washington, that that would spell the end of his political career.

So he goes back to Moscow, and of course his flight is diverted to prevent it from landing at the airport Vnukovo, where his supporters, thousands of them were waiting, they're being forced out into the cold by the police, end up at a different airport, Sharmyatevo, to the north of the Russian capital.

And at passport control, the police are waiting and they arrest him.

This was a grave miscalculation on Navalny's part.

He really thought that the old rule still applied.

He'd been playing this kind of cat and mouse game with Putin and the Kremlin for years.

And he thought in a way that he'd become so big that they couldn't arrest him, lock him up, and essentially throw away the key.

Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, visited him in his hospital room.

He spoke about how that was a normal thing because he is one of the leading political opposition figures in Russia.

And in fact, what he didn't grasp and what he didn't realize was that, as far as we know now, Putin was already planning to go to war in Ukraine.

He was already planning to crush any dissent ahead of that.

And when you consider the willingness of Vladimir Putin to invade a neighboring country of 40 million people, the fate of one person pales in comparison, right?

So Putin was essentially done fooling around with Navalny.

He didn't die, refused to die when they tried to kill him.

Now that was it.

He had the choice to stay out.

He wouldn't stay away.

He came back and they throw him in jail and start piling on the charges one case after another, upping the sentences.

So you're absolutely right.

In comparison to a Sharansky or to any of these folks who were able to get out before the Soviet Union fully collapsed, some of them did, in fact, go back.

Or even if you take Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former head of Yukos Oil, the sort of signature

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oligarch who Putin made an object lesson of by arresting him, throwing him in jail.

He was imprisoned for 10 years.

And the deal, once he was allowed out, again, totally on Putin's whim, a kind of capricious decision announced at the end of one of his long marathon news conferences, Chorokovsky has gone to live in exile.

There was no, it was a clear arrangement where he was not going to stay in Russia.

But in hindsight, for Navalny, he probably would have preserved his ability to fight Putin and to fight against Putin's regime had he been brave enough, and it would have taken a lot of bravery to stay outside of Russia.

He'll probably say that that was a false choice, that there was no way.

And in fact, for many Russians, if there's any chance that he would ever win a high office in Russia, and that seems slimmer and slimmer, for many reasons, we can talk about including his positions on Ukraine.

But if there was any chance, he thought that that was not going to happen by staying out.

And only by going back was he showing that he is so committed to Russia that you can't paint him as a foreign agent, as some kind of trader.

This is a Russian guy through and through, and he said this over and over.

He's a Russian nationalist.

He's actually suffered, had been criticized for that being too nationalist.

The Ukrainians view him as very similar to Putin, unfortunately, in their view, in terms of his Russian nationalist and even imperialist views.

But for Navalny, it was this sort of his country, he did the six month fellowship in the United States at Yale University, and afterwards said he realized he couldn't live in the U.S.

He missed black bread.

This is a guy who is just Russian, and he revels in that identity.

He's a very much international guy, global guy, who loves animated movies and sitcoms, and is a guy who's extremely well versed in pop culture or had been up until being thrown into a prison colony.

So on one hand, he's somebody who can interchangeably interact with any society almost on earth, and on the other hand, always viewed himself as a Russian who was committed to living in Russia and fighting for change in Russia to create the democratic country that he hoped to pass on to his kids.

You know, and it's fascinating because we're talking about post-late-states Cold War dissidents, but even if you read a lot of histories of the first half of the 20th century, you could think of all of the white Russians who were just kind of bumming around Western capitals to be the thing about Alexander Kerensky, who led the short-lived Russian Republic.

He spends the rest of his life in the United States.

There's a long history of brave dissident Russian figures ultimately finding themselves exiled and ineffective.

So I could understand on a personal level why, given that track record, if he's serious, it's unclear if doing a bunch of Council on Foreign Relations events from New York City or going to the, you know, Munich Security Conference and just having him be the guy in that sense would be particularly effective.

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So I understand the underlying dynamic that led to the miscalculation.

So here's a question I want to ask you.

A question I'm really fascinated by is, to what degree are our current problems of Russia?

To what degree do they stem from Vladimir Putin specifically?

And to what degree are they actually about broader non-individualistic dynamics?

So for example, you hinted at this with his position on Ukraine and Russian imperialism.

Let's say we just snap our fingers and he's now president of Russia.

What issues between Russia and the West would remain if there was a democratic system?

And what would disappear because Putin isn't in the picture in the same way?

Well, this is the, you know, really the fundamental question.

And depending on who you ask, folks either have more or less optimism, more or less belief in Russia as a society to live as a free and democratic country.

Navalny himself has written and talked with admiration about how Ukrainians rose up in support of democracy in pursuit of a free democratic future for themselves during the Orange Revolution and again during the Maidan Revolution and noting how that has not happened in Russia.

The Soviet Union, we know, collapsed, you know, in on itself, basically.

There's this misplaced belief in the West that, you know, the US won the Cold War as opposed to the Soviet Union losing it.

But those of us who have watched Russia closely in the post-Soviet period understand just to what extent the West kind of lucked out in a way that the Soviet Union fell on its own rot and corruption and mismanagement, etc.

And so first we should say there is no snapping of the fingers, right?

Navalny will not magically be president of Russia and it's become more and more difficult as time goes on because his positions, while he would view them and I think most of us would as morally correct say now being a strong voice against the war in Ukraine, put greater and greater distance between him and the people who would have to elect him.

There are now thousands of Russians who are losing husbands, brothers, sons, boyfriends to this war. It's going to be very difficult to convince them of Navalny's view that this war is unjust, that it's a war of aggression, that Russia needs to pay reparations to Ukraine, which he has said should come from oil and gas revenues.

So for Navalny to overcome that, Russia would probably have to go through the kind of reckoning that Germany went through after World War II and at the moment there is no sign of that.

Well, let's pause there because that's actually important.

Gary J. Bass has a really interesting book out on the Tokyo trial, which is the counterpart to the Nuremberg trial. So this is Imperial Japan on trial and basically a broad theme of the book is like looking at how both trials transform Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan into like the allied amazing nations they are today. It's hard to imagine how Russia could ever truly even go through a reckoning, especially given the fact that the reckonings that we could cite to historically required total war defeat, occupation, even the Japanese ones a little more complicated. That's why you still have like a complicated relationship between the modern Japanese state and Japanese nationalism. But talk about how you could see a path to a reckoning given the dynamic of the war today. That's very difficult. In fact- Yeah, I'm not expecting it to be an easy

answer. It's hard to see a path toward that reckoning without a complete and total defeat of Russia in this war akin to the complete and total defeat of Nazi Germany. And of course the fundamental difference being that Russia is a nuclear power, the largest nuclear arsenal on earth and Putin and his allies have made clear that if they believe there is an existential threat to the existence of their state that they could resort to a weapon of mass destruction. That sounds completely insane, even crazier when you think that they would have to set off a nuclear device in a neighboring country where we've already seen a nuclear disaster in Chernobyl that affected the entire area, how dangerous that would be for Russian citizens. So it's very difficult to see any path toward that reckoning absent a complete and total defeat, which at the moment of course, given the stalemate we're seeing in this war, how it's a grinding war of attrition doesn't look like that's possible. Someone asked me recently, how do I see this war ending? I looked at the message. What makes you think I see this war ending? These are neighboring countries that now

despise each other on many levels. Again, imagine two neighbors throwing rocks at each other's houses, breaking the windows over and over and over again. Unless one decides to move, there's no sign of that or one dies. No indication that anything is going to change.

Speaking of reckoning, I think the part that's always been most frustrating and I think perilous about Vladimir Putin is the realization that he really did not give up on the imperial aspects of the Soviet project. So put aside communism for a second. Conceiving a Soviet as the Soviet Union is like an imperialist project that's in the Baltics, it's in Kazakhstan, it's the various stands, it's expanding into Afghanistan, etc. I think a lot of folks would have understood in the 1990s to the early 2000s that being something that was left in the past, Putin has clearly not reconciled himself to that reality. He's just put a Russian rather than a Soviet face on it. How does Navalny, what is his reaction to the downfall of the Soviet Union? What is his reckoning? Putin's the greatest geostrategic tragedy of the 20th century. What's Navalny's line on this?

Calling it a catastrophe. And again, we've seen this, I call it sometimes nostalgia for lost empires, manifest itself in so many different ways in our age. Brexit is another example of the Brits trying to go back and reclaim this kind of imperial status that is just not coming back. That's not the kind of world that we live in. So in the case of Navalny and Putin-

I want to be very precise about what you're articulating here because obviously there are bad parts of Brexit, but I think the real frustration part that illustrates this is, think of the Tory Conservative Party line on this, which was global Britain.

We can have a Britain that's at the center of everything, a Britain that's big and expensive and not just sort of a has-been from the 20th century. Because I think when you use the word ever, people are going to probably think of very specific, of course, of colonialism, but what's so dangerous about nostalgia is you could actually talk yourself into a more benign version that is just as unreachable in a specific way. Well, you can lie to yourself about it.

I mean, that's fundamentally what this was. The Tory line often was just an absolute lie. And I can tell you this and don't want to go into too much of a diversion about Brexit, but I arrived in Brussels as somebody who didn't know a ton about Europe and European politics. And what I immediately saw was that the Brits were absolutely leaders in the EU. They were

the model for so many things, the judicial system, the court system, finances. They were the kind of balance between Paris and Berlin and had this incredible role that they could have maintained. You would have had a much more global Britain without Brexit than you have with Brexit, because they were the leaders of this block of more than 300 million people in the European Union. And it requires a certain creativity to realize in this globalized age, you need to move forward in a crowd with friends. And this seems to be what Putin has missed entirely. Look at his neighborhood. Look at how many former friends and allies have fallen away. Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, things have gotten tense. Armenia, they're now at great tension with, in part because of Russia's abject failure to uphold the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. Now, Navalny, and we're going to get into one of the more interesting things about Navalny that many people don't know, despite the fact that he is this media creature, right? There's so saturated. There's been a documentary about him that won an Oscar, etc., etc. Many people don't know that Navalny is half Ukrainian. His father was born in Ukraine. He spent his childhood summers up until he was eight years old in a village with his grandparents that was right near Chernobyl. The village is called Zalia and right near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. That's where his father was born. Of course, the power plant didn't exist then, but when Navalny was born, it did. And one spring, they get a call from the relative saying, don't send Leosha this summer. There's been a problem. And there was a nuclear accident, obviously.

And all of his relatives had to evacuate and relocate. He's gone back and seen his grandparents abandon house there where he used to spend these idyllic summers as a child. So when you talk about

or think about some of the comments that Putin has made about Russian Ukraine being brother nations,

that Ukrainians, many of them now fully reject, for Navalny, the idea of Russians and Ukrainians being the same person is personal. He looks in the mirror and that's what he sees. He is Russian and he's Ukrainian. His mother is Russian, his father is Ukrainian. And he had said over and over again that he did not see any difference between these Slavic peoples, between Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. And also acknowledged that this was not going to sit well with many Ukrainians and it's, of course, become more and more upsetting and offensive given the war of aggression that is going on right now. But Navalny had said before the big invasion in 2022 that he expected Ukraine, Belarus and Russia eventually to live together as one country again. Obviously, that seems like a total fantasy at this point. It's not going to happen. His view on this was relatively benign. He said in a positive way, right? These are relatives of his, friends of his, but for Ukrainians, they view this as this Russian imperialist mindset that everybody is going to live in this Ruski Mir, as Putin has called it, this Russian world.

Quick question, because this is where this gets really fascinating. We just spent some time like allotting the European Union. There's entirely a world where after the Soviet Union collapses, you do have the states. Actually, the states that you were describing, they actually had their conversations. There's the CIS independent states that could evolve in a different direction. My concern with Navalny wouldn't be, okay, I understand your idea of like broader national reunions. The question is, how does he get there? That's where I want to zoom in on. Of course, from Navalny's perspective, you would think it would get there through a

democratic process. He's a guy who believes in retail politics, but there really is no path anymore, especially now to this. Some of the criticism that he has faced is that he didn't take issue with Putin's concept of a Ruski Mir, of a Russian world. What he took issue with was Putin messing it up, Putin undermining it because of his aggression and brutality and unwillingness to embrace democracy, et cetera. In fact, for Ukrainians who have also had aspirations for self-determination, who since the collapse of the Soviet Union have wanted to build a country that would be free and democratic and European, let's be clear. This war in Ukraine didn't start in 2022. It started in 2013, 2014 during the Maidan Revolution. I was there in Kiev for most of that, and this is because Ukraine was about to sign agreements, a political association agreement, and a deep and free comprehensive trade agreement with the EU. These things are all connected, and allies of Putin in Ukraine were lobbying against these agreements with some very sinister messaging. Putin's main guy in Ukraine named Viktor Medvedevich was running an NGO campaigning against these EU agreements with billboards up all over the country, showing a family, a stick figure, a family. But instead of a mom and a dad, there were two dads, and it was warning that the EU was going to bring euro-sadame, a euro-sadam. This idea, this homophobia, all of this, now we see this toxic stew that you also hear even more so from Putin, and it's now taken on elements of anti-Semitism against Zelensky, who was Jewish. All of this kind of negative messaging had started, why? As an anti-Western, anti-democratic message, because in fact, Ukrainians and Russians historically have been so close, and if Ukrainians can live in a free and democratic society, if they can thrive, and Navalny has made this point over and over again, the worst thing for Putin would be an example of a country next door, a big country, the breadbasket of the Soviet Union, getting past its corrupt leadership, as they've existed with Yanukovich, Viktor Yanukovich had this palatial property with a golden toilet, etc., get past that and move toward the kind of boring bureaucratic democracy that is the European Union, but that has allowed Europeans to enjoy great chocolate and great coffee

and mostly keep their continent free of wars for 70 years. Now, there is war back on the European continent, that's Putin's fault, and he's fighting for this model that, for many of us, we look at it and say, it doesn't exist anymore. That's not how people live, as kind of subjugated, repressed folks, but look, he's in China today as we speak, linking arms with Xi Jinping, and there's a similar view there that these big countries should be allowed to do whatever they want within their borders, including repress large segments of their own population, vulnerable peoples. Now, Navalny has been controversial because he has said a bunch of racist things in the past,

a bunch of very sinister things. He was trying at one point to really build a nationalist movement that would be linked up, crazy as it might seem, with a progressive liberal movement as a means of finding a viable alternative to Putin. I mean, this is a guy who really is a political animal, and the folks who have known him longest will say this, Navalny has always been about politics, and there where he was flirting with the far right and flirting with nationalists, and he eventually gave that up because it only brought him grief, but what he was looking for is where is the common ground that those folks who don't like Putin and then his more liberal minded, Western minded, economically liberal, politically progressive allies, could they find some common basis to then oppose the regime in Russia that was becoming

more

and more autocratic, more and more dictatorial? That never came together, it failed. He believed that there were models of that happening elsewhere, but in fact, it wasn't happening in Russia. And there are folks who would tell you, getting back to your question, that the fundamental problem is something about the national character of Russia and Russians, that they prefer this strong, autocratic, strongman, you know, leadership, and that there isn't a willingness to move toward democracy. I actually don't ascribe to that at all. I lived for four years in Moscow, I believe that Russia could absolutely flourish as a democratic society. I think Putin doesn't give his own people enough credit. There are risks, it is a big complicated country.

You know, when you consider the number of languages that were spoken in the Soviet Union, for instance, and I'm from New York, right? New York versus Texas, you've got different accents, but we're all speaking the same language. When you think about the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, you know, Chechnya, there is a real risk even within what's left of the Russian Federation. I mean, this is a giant country stretching across so many time zones. And you realize that it is in many ways too big, almost unmanageable. It's very difficult. And to build that into a democratic society, you can understand why it has been so challenging. And at the same time, you have to have faith in the Russian people. And this is what Navalny has always expressed, which is an absolute confidence and optimism that Russians could overcome these legacies of autocracy, especially of corruption. Of course, he made his name in his career as an anti-corruption crusader fighting against public graft. There's a saying that, you know, Russia without corruption isn't Russia. Navalny never accepted this. He believed that absolutely you could have a Russia without corruption. And it could be a beautiful, happy Russia is one of the slogans that he picked up at some point that Russia should also be happy. Now, not all Russians would agree with that. You know, Russians often look at Americans when we're too smiley and think there's something wrong with us. You know, what are we smiling about? You know, if you ask a Russian,

how are you? It's not a synonym for high. They will tell you how they are and what they're feeling. So in that sense, a very genuine society and, you know, one that is just so rich, obviously, in its artistic literary traditions, etc. There is no reason why Russia couldn't have already joined the family of democratic nations, if not for many of the things that Navalny has been crusading against his whole career, this abysmal corruption, self-enrichment. The West has some complicity in this. If you go back and read the history of what was going on just after the Soviet collapse, the institutions were not built quickly enough or with sufficient safeguards to prevent this kind of rise in autocracy that we've seen. So what do we, you know, I'm not one who tries to explain, ever explain Russia in one, in one sound bite, and certainly not in this book. This is a book about Alexei Navalny, you know, one guy, a political animal, now political prisoner.

But indeed, you can see all these elements where there were so many opportunities for Russia to take a different path. And Putin, his story is well-told, former KGB officer, believing, you know, sincerely, I think, into many conspiracy theories, convincing himself that the only way to make Russia great again is to pursue this path that he's chosen, which has been ruinous. I mean, just how many people dying unnecessarily in this war, cities being destroyed to what end. But again, he's done this before. Chechnya mentioned earlier. Grozny was flattened, the capital of Chechnya, which is part of Russia, absolutely flattened in two wars. It's been rebuilt and now

lives as a subject in, you know, what folks would say is, you know, under Tsar Vladimir. He thinks that's possible. As somebody who knows Ukrainians, I think that's far fetched to think that will ever, ever come to be in Ukraine. So in this last section, a couple of big questions. So my analytical assumption, especially this far into the war, isn't that Putin's going to get overthrown or some officer is going to assassinate him and we get a new Russia. The question I'm most interested in then is how sustainable, especially because Putin's getting up there age-wise, how sustainable is Putin's status quo Russia after he eventually goes natural or otherwise? So there are folks who would like everybody to believe that without Putin, it would all just collapse. I think the much more likely scenario is not that Putin is out by whatever means natural or unnatural. And then he's replaced by Navalny emerging triumphantly and heroically from prison, but actually is replaced by somebody who is much more like Putin than Navalny. Somebody, perhaps, who also comes from the security services, could be almost certainly will be somebody from the pro-Putin elite. There is not a lot of appetite for Navalny among many of those who have aided and abetted Putin over all these years, right? A lot of them getting rich off of the corruption that has been allowed to flourish that Navalny has drawn attention to with his videos, with his investigations. So it's very hard to see how Russia would stray too far from Putinism, but one of the great things about being in the news business is life is unpredictable. And when that moment comes, when there is a transition in power in Russia, anything is possible. So we have to be ready for and I think the West needs to prepare for that moment when it could be very, very unstable and unpredictable for a while again in a country that has the world's largest nuclear arsenal. And this has been part of the problem, right? That why hasn't the West gone in stronger into Ukraine or anywhere else is this fear that the devil they know in Vladimir Putin is better than allowing that nuclear arsenal to be in the control of say somebody like Ramzan Kadyrov or the late Yevgeny Prigosin, the head of Wagner. Another point that folks don't realize, speaking of Prigosin, how much work he'd done on Putin's behalf. More recently, folks are familiar with Wagner and the paramilitary group, the mercenary group that was operating in Ukraine helping to propagate this war. But in fact, when Navalny's anti-corruption foundation, the fund to fight corruption collapsed in Russia, it was Prigosin through lawsuits that bankrupted the foundation, essentially acting against Navalny on behalf of Putin. And this is also the Prigosin who meddled in the US election using his troll farms. But these small details of how some of Putin's allies have worked against Navalny and the West and Ukraine for years. Yes, the second to last real question would be, I kind of identify more with the political animal aspect of Navalny. So my diagnosis would be that there are kind of three bad models for the Russian idea. Obviously, you have the Tsarist idea, which Putin has embraced. You have the Soviet ideal. You have the failed democracy of the 1990s. What would a positive forward-looking vision for Russia be? Because it seems like that is what any sort of post-Putin democracy, autocracy, etc., is going to need to be searching for if it's going to be able to build a sustainable project. Because the three models I just articulated before have just led to disaster in their own ways. So better to let Navalny answer this than for me to answer it. Navalny is calling for a parliamentary republic. So a weakening of Russia's strong executive presidency and a redrawing of the constitution as necessary to create the kind of parliamentary republic that is common in the rest of Europe. That's a lot easier said than done. He actually wrote a long op-ed

that was published in The Washington Post just on this topic. What a post-war democratic Russia would look like. And this is what he laid out. The idea of a parliamentary republic with especially a free judicial system, independent judicial system, unlike the court system that has been abused so badly against him, we saw just yesterday he was appearing by video link at a court hearing, not allowed out of the prison colony to attend the court hearing. And he had no representation because his lawyers have now been arrested or have fled. The entire judicial system is being dismantled just to try to prevent Navalny from communicating with the outside world. But in that op-ed that Navalny wrote about turning Russia into a parliamentary republic, he had some very rosy descriptions, overly optimistic in my view of the former Soviet state, describing their paths as much more simple than they were. And in fact, we've seen Ukraine struggle itself for years, since 1991, even as the people are rising up for democracy, and then presidents leaders pulling back in, or Georgia, that we thought after the Rose Revolution was really headed on a fast track toward the West. And now, in this most recent go around, the EU designated Ukraine and Moldova as officially as candidate countries, and Georgia is waiting. At one point, we expected Georgia would be the first in that batch to be moving forward. So very much easier said than done, but there is that possibility. Again, I've seen it that there is a capacity, I think, for Russia to become a democratic country where elections are actually free and fair, where the Russian people can express their will and fit in very well into the Western family of nations. I think a lot of Russia sometimes wants to be France when you see the love of fashion and food and everything else. And maybe if they can't be France, they'd settle for being Italy. Some of this goes back to the days of de Tocqueville and the Marquis de Christine, when these writers from France were traveling one across America, one across Russia, and giving very different assessments of what they found. In some ways, Russia is still recovering from that blow of being described as this wild place. In fact, it could be, and you can see it when you live there, a terrific, terrific democratic country. Unfortunately, at the moment, that repression just continues. It's all about regime preservation. So to wrap, I think the real question here, if you're thinking of democracy, is what is your interpretation or understanding of what the Russian people themselves actually want? Especially, I'm 31. This is a younger audience. I was born right after the Cold War, obviously. Especially those younger Russians who weren't KGB officers during the fall of the Soviet Union and East Germany in that transition. I'd love to hear you wrap with that. Sure. Let's again talk about our protagonist here, about Navalny and what he said when he's been out campaigning. He's been absolutely clear that Russians want what free people everywhere want, to be able to raise their children, to have a good job and a good income, good schools, good services, to have housing that isn't crumbling and falling apart, to have beautiful parks, to have a nice, as he said, happy life. He's pointed to places, for example, some of the cities in Siberia, where you have terrific higher education, universities. These should be thriving regional capitals. Instead, you find these housing blocks where the buildings are crumbling, where folks are really unhappy, out in Vladivostok, in the far east of Russia, where you can fly within two hours of anywhere and you see these glittering Asian capitals. There's no reason that Vladivostok can't look and feel just like San Francisco, with the hills jutting into the Pacific Ocean. From Navalny's perspective, it really is a very simple thing. They would like to live in a great, well-functioning country with good citizen services and, in fact, to be admired

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in the world. I think that's part of the challenge, is this chip on the shoulder, this idea that Putin pushes every single day that Russians are victims of something, when, in fact, Russia is only a victim of itself and of Putin. Navalny is quite an optimistic character, even from prison, believing that, again, Russia can be a better country, can be a happy place. He had this bad luck of that op-ed about a parliamentary republic that was published on September 30th last year, the same day that Putin declared he was annexing four regions of Ukraine on top of Crimea, which was invaded in the next in 2014. And, of course, nobody paid attention to that article because everybody was focused on this flagrant violation of international law. You can't, and this is something Navalny has written, you can't just start wars to redraw borders. We know that borders are sometimes arbitrary, but in this day and age, there has to be some respect for that international order, for international agreements like the Budapest Memorandum that Russia signed on to, accepting Ukraine's established borders of 1991. So, in short, I think what Russians want is to live in a happy, good country. That's a great way to end. David, thank you so much for joining me on the realignment. This episode is coming out, time to publication, so listeners can find the dissident wherever they find their books, articles, etc. Thank you.

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