

# Alexei Navalny, Russian Opposition Leader and Fierce Putin Critic, Dead at 47

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Corruption Fighter

For years, Navalny battled corruption in a nation rife with it



Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny attends a rally in support of political prisoners in Prospekt Sakharova Street in Moscow, Russia on Sept. 29, 2019. *Sefa Karacan/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

Alexei Navalny, the Russia opposition leader and fierce critic of Vladimir Putin, died in prison, Russian authorities announced on Friday. He was 47.

Russia's prison service said Navalny felt unwell after taking a walk and lost consciousness. He was serving a 19-year sentence on controversial, extremism-related charges. "The facility's medical staff immediately arrived and an ambulance brigade was called," the prison service said in a statement. "All necessary

resuscitation measures were taken, which did not lead to positive results. The ambulance doctors confirmed the death of the convict.”

Navalny’s spokesperson said his camp have not received any confirmation of his death, that his lawyer is currently on his way to Kharp, and that they’ll share more information as soon as they have it. Putin’s spokesperson said the Russian president had received the news of Navalny’s death. Yulia Navalnaya, Alexei’s wife, spoke at a conference in Munich shortly after the news broke. “Upon hearing the horrible news, I didn’t know if I should have immediately flown to my family or speak out,” she said. “But then I thought – what would Alexei do and I’m sure he would be here.”

Navalny was detained by Russian authorities in 2021 on what are widely regarded as fabricated charges of corruption intended to silence his criticism of Putin. Prior to his arrest, Navalny survived at least two documented assassination attempts. His imprisonment resulted in widespread protests against the Putin government throughout Russia. In 2022, he was sentenced to nine years in prison with an additional 19 years added to his sentence in August.

Throughout his detention, allies of the jailed opposition leader repeatedly raised concerns regarding the physical abuse suffered by Navalny at the hands of Russian correctional authorities. In March of 2021, Navalny issues a formal complaint accusing prison authorities of subjecting him to torture and sleep deprivation, his lawyers reported he had untreated injuries that required immediate medical attention. In April of that same year, six doctors — including Navalny’s personal physician — and two CNN correspondents were arrested outside of the prison colony IK-2 after attempting to gain access to the facility.

That same month Agnes Callamard, Secretary General of Amnesty International, accused the Putin government of subjecting Navalny “to a slow death” and demanded that he “be granted immediate access to a medical doctor he trusts and he must be freed.”

“On one hand, Navalny’s drawn-out murder at the hands of the Kremlin is going to re-invigorate anti-Putinist sentiment at the very moment Russian leadership was likely enjoying some tailwinds,” Gavin Wilde, who served as director for Russia on the National Security Council, tells *Rolling Stone*. “On the other, it is a stark reminder of the deep, repressive hole Putin has dug for Russia as a polity and as a society — and how few remaining glimmers of hope there are that it can emerge from it anytime in the foreseeable future.”

“Even so, Navalny’s example is that we shouldn’t give up hope,” he says.

Navalny’s death comes after his allies announced in December that he had gone missing from prison, and that they assumed he had been transferred.

“The fact that this is happening right now (although Navalny should have been transferred to another colony two months ago) — now that ‘elections’ have been announced and Navalny’s team has launched the ‘Russia without Putin’ campaign — is 0% accidental and 100% directly political manual control from the Kremlin,” Navalny Chief of Staff Leonid Volkov wrote on X. “It is no secret to Putin who his main opponent is in these ‘elections.’ And he wants to make sure that Navalny’s voice is not heard.”

Navalny was found weeks later at a remote penal colony in the Arctic. “I am your new Santa Claus,” he wrote himself on X. “The 20 days of my transportation were pretty exhausting, but I’m still in a good mood, as befits a Santa Claus ... Anyway, don’t worry about me. I’m fine. I’m totally relieved that I’ve finally made it.”

Navalny initially spooked Putin’s government with a surprising showing in the 2013 Moscow mayoral election, leading to greater prosecution. But even in the face of that crackdown, Navalny “continued to develop new ways to try to undermine the near total control Putin had on Russian life,” Michael Van Landingham, a former CIA Russia analyst, tells *Rolling Stone*.

“Navalny developed a means to fight Putin’s regime within the system that resonated with Russians’ exasperation with corrupt governance, first exposing shady business dealings and then flagrant embezzlement,” Van Landingham says.

Navalny’s attempts to draw attention to Putin’s corruption were often creative — his team once used drones to record what they said was a palatial estate secretly owned by Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev.

While the circumstances surrounding Navalny’s death remain murky, assassinations and attempted assassinations are some of the darkest markers of Putin’s regime. Navalny survived at least two attempts to end his life through the use of the nerve agent Novichok, once in 2017 and again in 2020. Many prominent Putin critics — or political figures who have simply outlived their usefulness to the Russian despot — have met their untimely demise through poisonings or highly suspect accidents.

In 2018 Sergei Skripal, a Russian intelligence service agent who spied for the U.K. government, was the victim of an attempted poisoning that almost killed him and his daughter. In 2006 Alexander Litvinenko, a Russian defector and Putin critic, died after having his tea spiked with the radioactive element Polonium while in London on an asylum claim.

Navalny’s defiance even in the face of ever harsher persecution continued even after Putin’s first attempt on his life and the activist made a fateful return to Russia all too aware that he would be jailed and potentially killed. “As with many things, Putin did not waste his second chance” at removing the long standing thorn in his side, Van Landingham says.

Leonid Volkov, a longtime spokesperson for Navalny, wrote on X, formerly Twitter, that “we have no reason to believe state propaganda. If this is true, then [it’s] not ‘Navalny died’, but ‘Putin killed Navalny’ and only that.”

“I don’t trust them one penny,” he added.

Navalny himself acknowledged the possibility that he would be murdered during an interview for the CNN-produced documentary *Navalny*, filmed shortly before his arrest. “You are not allowed to give up,” he said. “If they decide to kill me, it means we are incredibly strong. We need to use this power, not to give up, to remember that. Because we are a huge force being oppressed by these bad guys. We don’t know how strong we really are.”