

Navalny Says It's Theater, But Personal

By [Howard Amos](#)

September 25, 2011



Navalny in London giving support to a corruption investigation in Hungary. **Howard Amos**

LONDON — In a rare public appearance outside Russia, anti-corruption campaigner, lawyer and blogger Alexei Navalny told a packed auditorium at the London School of Economics last week that his motivation comes from within.

The line to enter the event snaked 100 meters from the entrance, and about 50 people were turned away at the door.

Those lucky enough to get a seat — about 300 students and members of the public — treated Navalny to a rapturous reception with enthusiastic expressions of support and requests for photographs.

David Woodruff, a comparative politics lecturer at the school, said a potential contradiction between Russia's growing cosmopolitan middle class and a narrowing political and economic space "could be turned into an actual contradiction by the actions of people — people like Alexei."

Navalny, 31, who spoke in broken English, batted away some of the flattery and ridiculed the "superstar blogger" moniker, but he made it clear that his anti-corruption campaign was, above all, a form of theater — with himself in the lead role.

Despite high-profile court cases and dozens of online allegations of multimillion-dollar fraud within state-controlled companies, nobody has been jailed as a result of his work.

"It's very difficult to keep the attention of [your] audience all the time," Navalny said. "It's a type of show."

The campaigner, who wore a tight-fitting purple shirt with rolled-up sleeves, uses his LiveJournal blog as a primary tool of publicity and a forum for exposing corruption scandals.

In November, he published documents purporting to show that insiders from the state-owned pipeline construction company Transneft — in which Navalny is a minority shareholder — had stolen \$4 billion during the construction of an oil pipeline to the Pacific Ocean.

Transneft denied the allegations, and its president, Nikolai Tokarev, has referred to Navalny as a "village idiot." A company spokesman called Navalny a Nazi.

Navalny's blog on the widely used Russian site LiveJournal.ru is the third most popular blog by number of subscribers and has up to 100,000 readers a day. There have been over 1 million comments on Navalny's 2,372 posts since he created his account in 2006.

But the blog is not just a source of publicity. Navalny said that the first time he appealed for money online he received \$250,000 of donations within two months.

He has also created the web site RosPil, which allows visitors to track publicly listed state tenders and identify those that smell of embezzlement or kickbacks — effectively farming out the task of finding corruption to the Internet-literate public, or "crowd-sourcing," his campaign.

More than 20,000 people have made financial contributions to RosPil, Navalny said. Though it is not officially registered, he described it as, "the biggest civil society organization in Russia."

Despite his popularity and his disdain for United Russia, Navalny has shown no sign of wanting to create an official opposition party.

"It's easier to do this job by myself than explain what you should do and how you should do it," he said.

But Navalny does describe himself as a politician and makes little attempt to hide his political ambitions. A former member of the liberal Yabloko party, he said he would participate if Russia ever held a free presidential election.

Navalny's star has been on the rise in the English-speaking world for some time. Significant articles in Western media outlets, including The New Yorker, The Guardian and The New York Times, have followed on from a six-month stint as a world fellow — a training program in international leadership — at Yale University.

But that did not stop Navalny from highlighting the London School of Economics' links to wealthy Russian businessmen — the son of the president of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, for example, was educated at LSE — and complaining that British officials have been reluctant to follow up on corruption allegations against local companies.

Throughout his 1 1/2-hour talk, Navalny emphasized the importance of individuals — rather than organizations — in his work. He said he preferred to target specific people and stressed that the motivation for his work came from within.

"I take this very personally. I think they are stealing my opportunities, my money and the opportunities and money of my children," he said. "I am appealing to other citizens of Russia and asking them to take it personally too."

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/09/25/navalny-says-its-theater-but-personal-a9734>