

# Thriller-Documentary 'Navalny' Opens Online at Sundance

By [Jake Cordell](#)

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The new fly-on-the-wall film details how Alexei Navalny and Bellingcat researchers uncovered the details of the plot to poison and kill the Kremlin critic in 2020. [Instagram / Navalny](#)

“Come on, Daniel, no — no way,” Alexei Navalny tells director Daniel Roher in the new documentary about the Kremlin critic, which premiered this week at the Sundance film festival.

Roher had asked Navalny what message he would give to Russians should he be arrested — or worse — upon his [return](#) to Russia from Germany where he was being treated for nerve agent poisoning.

“It’s like you’re making a movie for the case of my death,” Navalny says in English, laughing. “But let that be another movie. Movie number two. Let’s make a thriller of this film. And in case I’m murdered, then make a boring film of memory.”

Navalny seems to have gotten his request. Roher's fast-paced account of his poisoning and the bombshell [investigation](#) that unmasked his would-be assassins is as much thriller as it is documentary. Combining original interviews with Alexei, his wife Yulia, daughter Dasha and closest aides, as well as behind-the-scenes footage of how the investigation came together, "Navalny" is a dramatic, compelling and accessible portrait of Navalny as David, trying to take on the Goliath of Vladimir Putin.

**Related article:** [Navalny Poisoning Documentary to Premiere at Sundance](#)

For those who have followed Navalny's story, the documentary adds depth and details — if nothing groundbreaking — to the story of the most consequential months of his years-long campaign to unseat Putin, starting with his poisoning in Siberia and medical evacuation to Germany, up to his return to Russia and arrest at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport.

All the different sides of Navalny's character — politician, activist, journalist, showman, husband, father — are on display. Along with questions of legacy, Putin's Russia and what "President Navalny" would look like, Roher also briefly probes Navalny's previous association with right-wing nationalists and asks about his childhood.

But seasoned Russia-watchers looking for something new — or some final answer to the [question](#) of "Who is Alexei Navalny?" — are not the film's intended audience.

"Navalny is a household name to many. After this documentary we hope he will be a household name to everybody," Sundance programmer Sudeep Sharma said in an introduction broadcast before the film.

### **'Totally unbelievable'**

The movie's highest drama surrounds the [extraordinary](#) phone call between Navalny, pretending to be a government bureaucrat, and one of his would-be assassins. In the call, hitman Konstantin Kudryavstev admits to lacing Navalny's underwear with Novichok and outlines how his team had "rehearsed" and "planned" the attempted murder multiple times.

"So we know everything," Navalny says coolly.

And then later after the phone call: "Poor guy. They will kill him. They will definitely kill him. He's a dead man."

"It's totally unbelievable. I would never believe it if I wasn't part of it," he says.

From the vantage of January 2022 — with Navalny [imprisoned](#), his organizations dismantled and team exiled — his desire not to make a "film of memory" is poignant. In his opening remarks at Sundance, Roher acknowledged this dichotomy between the on-screen events — an invigorated Navalny, strategizing, plotting, and energizing his supporters — and the Kremlin critic's current [situation](#).

"It's a very bittersweet experience today. By the time people are watching this, Alexei will have been in prison in tough conditions for about a year. I'm thinking of Alexei today, and I hope when this film is finished, you will be thinking of him as well."

*"Navalny" was commissioned by CNN Films and HBO Max, with Amy Entelis and Courtney Sexton of CNN Films, and Navalny's associate Maria Pevchikh as executive producers. It will be available for streaming in the U.S. on HBO Max. Foreign rights have not yet been determined.*

*Anastasia Akulinina contributed reporting.*

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