

Kremlin Pushes to Extinguish Grieving for Navalny as Election Nears

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A view of the Moscow Kremlin's towers the Moskva City. **Gavriil Grigorov / TASS**

The Kremlin is working to suppress memorials for the late opposition figure Alexei Navalny in a bid to prevent his death from spoiling President Vladimir Putin's expected re-election next month.

Authorities are using harsh detentions of Navalny's grieving supporters and censorship to prevent acts of mourning from turning into political protests, sources in the Russian government, parliament and close to the Kremlin told *The Moscow Times*.

"The presidential administration and Federal Security Service officials discussed a plan on how to prevent the spread of a public campaign in support of Navalny," a Russian government official told *The Moscow Times*.

Like the other sources interviewed for this article, the official spoke on condition of

anonymity since he is not allowed to discuss his work with the press.

With Russia's presidential election quickly approaching, the authorities are determined to stamp out any public unrest that could overshadow the vote or push voters away from Putin.

"One of the problems discussed was how to make sure Navalny's mourning and funeral do not turn into a political demonstration and spoil the election for Putin," a source close to the Kremlin said. "Various options have been proposed, down to the very cynical one of not releasing the body to his relatives until after the election."

"We have a presidential election coming up. We don't need this because it will be a problem for the boss [Putin]," a Russian government official told The Moscow Times.

The official said that the authorities were even weighing the option of never releasing Navalny's body, adding that there have already been "many precedents like that over the years."

Authorities could state that the person was jailed for a terrorist offense or is at risk of spreading a dangerous disease as justification for withholding the body from relatives, for example.

"But in Navalny's case, of course, that would be unprecedented," the official said.

Related article: [Russia Extends Navalny Death Probe as Family Fights for Access to Body](#)

On Monday, investigators [told](#) Navalny's mother and lawyers that they would not release his body for at least another 14 days in order to carry out a "chemical examination."

In the three days since Navalny, Putin's most vocal critic over the past decade, died in an Arctic penal colony, his supporters and sympathizers have paid tribute with makeshift memorials in nearly 200 cities and towns across Russia.

Authorities have responded by [dismantling](#) the memorials and detaining almost 400 mourners, sometimes violently.

At the same time, they appear to be working to stop Russians from leaving expressions of their grief online.

Users of the popular 2GIS map platform have reportedly been blocked from leaving [comments](#) on monuments to victims of political repression on its maps. Russians have used this feature to voice dissent amid a near-total ban on protests and media censorship in recent years.

The penal colony and morgue in the polar Yamal-Nenets autonomous district have refused to grant Navalny's family and lawyers access to his body or even disclose its whereabouts.

According to the independent news website Mediazona, which obtained traffic camera footage from the town where Navalny was being held in prison, his body was likely [taken to an unknown location](#) just before his mother and lawyers arrived to see it.

Related article: [Russian Courts Hand Jail Terms to Dozens of Navalny Mourners](#)

A motorcade believed to be transporting Navalny's body was spotted driving down the only land crossing from the village of Labytnangi toward Salekhard, the regional capital.

The Investigative Committee, which probes major crimes, [told](#) Navalny's mother on Monday that it had extended the investigation into the politician's death for an undetermined period.

Navalny's supporters have launched a campaign demanding his body be handed over to relatives, with nearly 55,000 people signing an online appeal created by the [OVD-Info](#) civil rights group.

Reaction of the elites

While Russian officials and propagandists have publicly blamed Western governments for Navalny's death, in private conversation, many say they do not believe the West played any role.

A dozen Russian government officials and business elites contacted by The Moscow Times reluctantly agreed to discuss Navalny, whom the authorities not only jailed but also put on a list of "terrorists and extremists."

"We can exchange thoughts about what happened with Navalny in our very narrow circle. But we don't even discuss it with our colleagues. It has literally become dangerous," one official said.

"Most people just feel indifferent. There are very few empathetic takes. And some have even gloated," a source close to the lower-house State Duma leadership told The Moscow Times when asked to describe the reactions to Navalny's death among Russian lawmakers.

Five State Duma deputies declined to speak to The Moscow Times about Navalny.

Businessmen from large and medium-sized firms told The Moscow Times they felt "dejection" and "grief," while others said that Navalny's death was "his own fault."

"Why did he come back? He could have lived," said a businessman who used to serve as a senior government official.

A senior corporate executive told The Moscow Times he felt "deeply disturbed by what is happening," but added: "I sit at the office now and realize that I will simply be fired from Gazprom if I start saying what I really think or posting about it on social media."

Several of The Moscow Times' sources in and close to the Kremlin said they were confident the pressure on mourners would dissuade people from publicly expressing support for Navalny.

"There will be a wave of events in his memory — mourning and protests. The most ardent activists will be detained. Then everything will subside and life will go back to normal," said a former senior Kremlin official.

“The regime in Russia wanted Alexei Navalny dead. That's why [his death] happened,” the former official added.

With Navalny's death, Putin has eliminated his most formidable rival, while Russia's opposition has lost its most charismatic figure.

"Navalny represented an alternative path for Russia's future, whether anyone liked it or not. But he was the only alternative, and he doesn't exist anymore," said a source close to the State Duma leadership.

Oleg Ignatov, a senior analyst at International Crisis Group, called Navalny's death a "complete catastrophe" for Russia's anti-Kremlin opposition, demoralizing the movement and leaving it without a figurehead.

“He was able to gather completely different people with different views, of different ages and classes, around him,” Ignatov told *The Moscow Times*. “That is why he posed a threat to the authorities and that is why they were afraid of him. Even in prison, he remained the leader of the opposition. There is no comparable figure now.”

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