

On the Death of Alexei Navalny

by **George Friedman** - February 20, 2024

Alexei Navalny was an opponent of the Russian regime, and for his trouble, he was sent to prison – a gulag, as it was called under the Soviets – after being poisoned the previous year. The prison he was sent to was deep in the Russian Arctic, where someone who had already been weakened by poison might be expected to die, which he did, according to Russian reports, just before last weekend. The cause of death was not revealed, nor was his body turned over to his wife or mother for burial – a common practice even with ordinary criminals. There are perhaps two reasons why this is so. One is that Russian President Vladimir Putin did not want doctors to examine the body and find the cause of death. The other is that Putin has decided that he needs to intimidate and terrorize the population. The possibility remains, of course, that Navalny died of natural causes, but if that were the case, why act in this way?

The mystery runs this way. Russia scored a success in Ukraine. Putin's interview with Tucker Carlson indicated that he is at least considering further conquest to the west and north of Ukraine. Making that threat publicly is a military liability. His primary enemy is the United States, and the issue of continued U.S. aid to Ukraine is in question. The explanation here is that he sees that the U.S. is at least divided on Ukraine and at most tired of the war. If this is so, then he might also have concluded that the more dangerous and ruthless Russia becomes, the greater the likelihood that the U.S. would choose to abandon the Ukraine project.

This week he has two poles to lean on. One is the fall of an important Ukrainian city. The other is that he is prepared to resort to Stalinism, blaming the U.S. for forcing him into this position and further undermining the U.S. position.

It is clear to me that his thoughts are on the United States, and that he wants to display his willingness to engage in ruthless action. It's a low-risk move because failure simply preserves the status quo while destabilizing U.S. will. I am speculating, of course, but I think Putin has made his calculation.

Author: George Friedman

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