

The Poisoning of Navalny

by George Friedman - August 25, 2020

Alexei Navalny, Russian President Vladimir Putin's highest-profile political opponent, remains alive in a German hospital after being poisoned in the Russian town of Tomsk. The incident immediately cast suspicion on Putin himself.

Cynically, there are countless ways to kill a political rival. Poison is a curious one for a couple of reasons. First, lethal poisons require a degree of expertise to create, and some kind of facility to create them in. That means that at least two people are involved in the killing: the chemist and the actual assassin, two kinds of people who don't normally hang around together. Second, it requires credible assurance that the conspirators won't be arrested and tried for their crimes. In other words, it's a method of murder that requires a compilation of expertise, ruthlessness and protection from the state. It's far easier to shoot someone or hit him with a car.

But then, when you think of the technical skill, cunning and amnesty the act demands, your attention is naturally drawn to governments. They have the needed time, money, skill and sometimes motivation to kill someone in such a way that can be crafted into permanent mysteries. The question with Navalny, therefore, is not whether someone tried to kill him, nor whether it was the government, but who would try it and why.

Critics naturally supposed it was ordered by Putin. That may well be the case. The Russians have a history of assassination by sophisticated poison. This was used to punish KGB defectors and those who provided foreign intelligence with information on KGB operations and practices – part of Putin's lore, as a former KGB man. It remains part of Russian Federal Security Service and Foreign Intelligence Service practices today. Indeed, a Bulgarian dissident named Georgi Markov was killed with a poisoned tip of an umbrella during the Cold War. There were undoubtedly others. Therefore, we know that death by poison was a Russian tool in the Cold War — and was likely used by other intelligence agencies.

But it was rarely used for domestic suppression. Stalin ordered death by a bullet in the neck. After the Cold War, as Russia sought to transform itself into a liberal democracy, political killings tended to disappear. Even after Putin came to power, he held power through a variety of means but never fell sufficiently vulnerable for such public murder of opponents.

Bear in mind that the Russian government, like all governments, has layers of bureaucracy and personnel, many of whom have the ability to put together the teams necessary to execute a citizen. It's not unheard of for these kinds of institutions to exercise enough initiative and throw something like this together by themselves.

Even so, it is hard to imagine any lower-level official ordering the Navalny operation. It was far too public, and the repercussions far too difficult to predict, for such a bold move. The architect's own life would be on the line. The order would simply have to come from higher up.

That leaves the question of why. Navalny himself was not a threat to Putin's power, yet his killing could hurt Russia's international standing. Indeed, Navalny wound up in a German hospital a week after Chancellor Angela Merkel thanked Lithuania for aiding Belarusian demonstrators. She was shifting her position and now will likely shift some more. Economically, Germany is an indispensable ally for Russia. Why put more pressure on Berlin to become hostile?

Domestically, a murder this blatant could martyr Navalny at a time when Russia is a little restive but not dramatically so. There had been demonstrations in Siberia of some minor concern. The economy is weak but so far there have been no cries of despair.

The attempted murder of Navalny, if indeed that's what it was, is not an act of self-confidence but an act of concern. The fear had to be political and the threat one of a serious challenge to the regime. That isn't yet known, and Putin might well have misjudged the situation or the consequences, which means he is losing his touch – a serious matter in its own right. But in the end, the why is the essence of the matter, and the inability to fathom the reasoning is perhaps the most important sign.

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