

Navalny's funeral: the largest wartime political demonstration

Maria Domańska

Alexei Navalny, who died in a penal colony in mid-February, was buried at Borisov Cemetery in Moscow on 1 March. In connection with the funeral, Russian authorities implemented extraordinary security measures around the cemetery and the church where the funeral service was held. The entire area was surrounded by metal fences, numerous police patrols conducted identity checks and searches of individuals heading to the ceremony, street cameras were installed and internet communication was jammed. Additionally, the funeral service was shortened, and only close relatives of the deceased were allowed to attend.

After Navalny's death the government attempted to prevent his family from revealing the funeral details to the public (for example, his mother had no access to his body for nine days, and successful measures were taken to prevent his family from holding the funeral on 29 February, the day of Putin's state-of-the-nation address to parliament). People who spontaneously gathered to commemorate Navalny in the days following his death were often harassed and intimidated, and some of them were arrested.

The central government in Moscow and regional authorities across the country banned memorial marches for Navalny and Boris Nemtsov, an opposition activist murdered in February 2015. In the days leading up to the funeral, authorities at various levels warned students not to participate in 'illegal gatherings'. State-controlled media largely ignored the funeral and instead focused on conducting a smear campaign against the opposition activist's widow Yulia Navalnaya, who had previously announced her intention to continue her husband's work (neither she nor her children participated in the ceremonies for reasons of security).

Regardless of this, tens of thousands attended the farewell to the deceased, including the ambassadors of Poland, the EU, the US, France and Germany. Chants of support for Navalny as well as anti-war and anti-Putin slogans were heard. For several more days, queues hundreds of metres long formed at the politician's grave. Commemorative initiatives were also seen in many other cities, where arrests occurred (over 100 people in 21 cities) and police dismantled makeshift memorials.

Commentary

- The authorities made every effort to prevent a high turnout at Navalny's funeral and to suppress any displays of solidarity with the deceased politician, for whose death the Kremlin is responsible beyond any doubt. This was driven by concerns about the anti-

Putin undertones of the ceremony, which took place two weeks before the sham presidential elections. The plebiscite of support for Putin aims to demonstrate his indispensability as Russia's leader in the face of existential conflict with the West, and to show that his opponents are 'traitors' and 'agents' who nevertheless represent an insignificant segment of society unworthy of attention.

- Taking into account the realities of Putin's neo-totalitarian system and the high risk of repression, the number of people who came to the cemetery must be considered significant, likely exceeding the government's expectations. This poses an immediate PR challenge for the Kremlin, but is unlikely to threaten the course of the March 'elections'. It is noteworthy that for the first time since the start of the full-scale invasion, the police did not react with violence when the participants chanted anti-Putin and anti-war slogans. Disrupting the funeral ceremony could have lowered the Kremlin's approval ratings even among its loyal, conservative and religious electorate.
- It is, however, in the government's interest to effectively intimidate 'disloyal' individuals and prevent further acts of protest, so we should expect further repression after the presidential 'elections', particularly attempts to erase Navalny's memory from the Russian information space. According to human rights defenders, in recent days courts in at least four regions of the Russian Federation have deemed Navalny's name an example of extremist symbolism. Keeping the Russian public in a state of extreme atomisation, mutual distrust and a sense of helplessness against the system will remain one of the government's strategic goals.