Friday, Feb. 16, 2024 / What dies with Alexei Navalny?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOEL: People sometimes speculated about whether the Russian opposition leader Alexi Navalny was crazy brave or just crazy.

*LUKE: He was heroically brave. I mean, insanely brave.*

SCORING IN—STARS AND SHIFTING CHORDS

NOEL: Vladimir Putin had Navalny poisoned, disappeared, imprisoned // and today, the Russian authorities declared him dead at the age of 47.

*<CLIP> Luke Harding, The Guardian: He was a patriot of a democratic Russia, of a free Russia, of a Russia that actually doesn't exist and I don't think will be existing anytime soon. ~~And~~ it was that patriotism, ultimately, that that really cost him his life.*

NOEL: Navalny’s life was so dangerous that one time he was asked what he’d say to Russians from beyond the grave.

SCORING FADES OUT

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/04/19/navalny-message-to-russians-origseriesfilms-5.cnn)*> Alexi Navalny, “Navalny” documentary: for the situation when I am killed, is very simple: not give up. Producer: Do me a favor, answer this one in Russian. Navalny: SPEAKS RUSSIAN: FADE.*

NOEL: The life and afterlife of Vladmir Putin’s bravest adversary, coming up on Today, Explained.

[THEME]

NOEL: Luke Harding is the senior international correspondent for The Guardian, and author of several books about Russia including “Mafia State.” I asked Luke: what does he think happened to Alexi Navalny?

LUKE: Well, I think Alexei Navalny was murdered by the Kremlin, almost certainly with the personal authorization of Vladimir Putin, Russia's president.

NOEL: Why do you think this happened now, Luke?

LUKE: I think for two reasons.

SCORING IN—NEW TENSION ALL THUMBS

LUKE: One is that there are elections coming up in Russia. Whenever you say the word elections, you have to do little marks, inverted commas around it, because obviously it's not a real competitive vote. It's a sort of coronation. But but what you have to understand is that the Kremlin, Putin and the people around him are notoriously paranoid. And they have long regarded Alexei Navalny as a threat and an irritant. And so for them, this is sort of tidying up ahead of elections. And as, as Stalin famously said, no, man, no problem. Now, now Navalny is gone, there is no problem for Putin in terms of possible opposition protests against him. And at the same time, I think, I think the big reason, the most compelling reason is what's happening internationally. And in particular in the US. And what's happening is that Putin looks across to America and he sees weakness and division. He sees Donald Trump saying very loudly, very clearly that if he's reelected as president, he will not come to the aid of NATO's allies.

*<CLIP DONALD TRUMP: No I would not protect you. In fact I would encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills <applause>…”:*

LUKE: He sees Republicans in Congress blocking vital aid to Ukraine, which is allowing Russian troops to push forward as we speak on the battlefield. I think the wind is in his sails. He thinks things are going in his direction, that he can prevail in Ukraine, that the West is pretty feeble and that America in particular is, is paralyzed. And so in a sense, he's doing this because he can do this. He knows there’ll be words of outrage, condemnation and so on. And those guys that are at the top of Russian power, they take some pleasure from that. They enjoy discomforting the Kremlin's enemies and they enjoy sticking it to America.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Let's talk about Navalny himself. What made Alexei Navalny so significant, so important?

LUKE: I think what made, um, Navalny so important and significant was the fact that he actually could talk to people.

*<CLIP> NAVALNY: “ [SPEAKING IN RUSSIAN] Who jails people? CROWD: PUTIN!”*

LUKE: I mean, he was the nearest thing that that Russia had to, to a really strong ummm politician, a genuine politician as opposed to a kind of Soviet-style apparatchik or bureaucrat. He could stir people up And he was brilliant on social media, his, his video and investigations into Putin's personal corruption and, those around him clocked up millions of views.

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW: “In 2017 after announcing his intentions to run for president Navalny was attacked with green dye, twice. NAVALNY: “Maybe the Kremlin thinks I will not record videos with a green face, he said. But now even more people will watch.”*

LUKE: So he was a genuine threat despite being barred from state television, television, despite having no access to conventional media resources. He got a profile. He got a following. In any democratic situation, he would have been Russia's president. And now, of course, that's never going to happen.

NOEL: Tell us about Aleksey Navalny's early life and how he came to be where he was.

LUKE: Well, he was a lawyer, initially. He was quite a successful lawyer in the 1990s from kind of European Russia. He grew up there. And I think what was interesting was that that, around about the beginning of Putin's presidential term. He started becoming what you might call an activist shareholder. In other words, he decided to invest, to investigate kind of corruption by the state and by big state companies like the oil and gas giant Gazprom, and other kind of sort of corporate behemoths.

*<CLIP> TODAY SHOW: “In 2011 he started the anti corruption foundation, which exposed the extravagant wealth of Russian officials, including President Vladamir Putin…”*

LUKE: Essentially during Vladimir Putin's Russia, two things have been going on. One is this big, noisy, terrible, nationalist project or imperialist project that we see at the moment unfolding in Ukraine. But the other is simple theft by, by people close to Putin who are now all billionaires. That they've stolen billions and billions of dollars. And Navalny exposed that. He was a nationalist. Some of his views were quite right wing, I think, controversially. And he got more and more of a following. He, he stood to be mayor of Moscow, and obviously he was never going to win, but he did surprisingly well. And then, of course, the Kremlin barred him from formal politics. So he took to the streets, set up his own political party and challenged and vexed the Kremlin.

NOEL: By 2020, Alexei Navalny is the most prominent voice of the Russian opposition. And then something very striking happens. He's poisoned. Can you tell us what happened there?

LUKE: He was dramatically poisoned. What is striking about, about the Kremlin and the Putin regime is that they've got a taste for the theatrical, the flamboyant, the demonstrative. And Navalny was campaigning in southern Russia. And we now know a team of agents from the FSB, that, that's Putin's domestic intelligence agency, successor to the KGB, were following him around actually for, for several years, but, but finally moved in for the kill and that one of them applied poison, Novichok, a deadly nerve agent in Navalny's underpants. I mean, it's it's almost a dark farce. And Navalny went to the airport, to fly back to Moscow. And about half an hour after takeoff, he collapsed. And there's really terrible footage of him howling, and screaming. He's taken off the plane. And, and incredibly, the doctors, who don't know what has happened, treat him with atropine, which is actually a kind of antidote to Novichok. And he survives. And he's medevaced to Germany, where he recovers. It takes him about six months, and then he goes back to Russia. But this is the same substance, this this toxic substance which was used, a couple of years earlier in, in England, in a town called Salisbury against the Russian defector called Sergei Skripal. And, and we know, of course, that, that it's only Russian spy agencies that have access to it. And just the final twist in this extraordinary story is that when he's recuperating, he works with the investigative online outfit Bellingcat and calls up one of his poisoners and tricks his poisoner to confessing everything.

*<CLIP> BBC NEWS: BELLINGCAT: “Navalny stayed in character for 49 minutes, and kept bullying the poor guy to keep give him more information and more information!”*

*<CLIP> HBO DOC: BELLINGCAT: “Unbelievable! NAVALNY: Poor guy. BELLINGCAT: I think you will be president, seriously, after this. NAVALNY: They will definitely kill me.”*

LUKE: It's astonishing. I mean, he was brave. He was daring, he was extraordinary. And, and, boy, we're going to miss him now he's gone.

NOEL: What happened after he returned to Russia? Tell us about his last few years.

LUKE: I mean, I was watching in real time as he as he flew back on the plane from from Berlin to Moscow. It was full of journalists.

<CLIP> THE TELEGRAPH: [clapping] JOURNALIST, SHOUTING: Navalny, aren’t you afraid?

LUKE: He, in classic Navalny style, spent a half a flight watching Rick and Morty cartoons. He was a big fan of the show. And then he gave a press conference during that, basically telling the world that he was going back, that he wasn't afraid. And he goes to passport control and of course, of course, of course, he's he's arrested, is detained by uniformed Putin officers, who take him away. And what what's. What's sort of sad really is thinking back about those images. There's a kind of hug for his wife, Yulia, that they have a brief embrace and that kiss each other on the lips. And that's it. Off he goes. And he doesn't emerge. I mean, from that point onwards. He you hear from occasionally, either directly, sometimes via social media, via Twitter X, and sometimes through his lawyers. But he disappears into this dark, unaccountable prison gulag system in Russia. And he's he's sort of bounced from place to place. So sometimes he surfaces and then he goes missing for a couple of weeks. And his last. Last place he was incarcerated was was in this, grim prison 2000 miles away from from from Moscow, near the Arctic Circle, which is traditionally where where Stalin sent his enemies to, to the frozen north. And there, of course, far away from from journalists, far away from international observers, I think he was murdered.

NOEL: If if your suspicion is correct, and we should say it's the suspicion of a lot of people. An autocratic world leader has murdered a popular opposition leader. This is a very big deal. What would Vladimir Putin have been thinking?

SCORING IN— WATCH THE TUNNELS  
  
LUKE: Well, I mean, first of all, Vladimir Putin doesn't care about human life. It's a matter of complete and breezy indifference to him.

SCORING IN—SHADOW MAN

LUKE: He doesn't care about killing people, but he is very keen on symbolism. And I think, the timing of of Navalny's death is, is to do with US weakness. The fact that Congress and the Republican leadership won't, won't pass aid packages to Ukraine. It's to do with upcoming presidential elections of Russia, which he will win, of course, minimizing risk there. And it's also to do with the Munich Security Conference, which opened today in Germany. And I think what's what's interesting about that is the Munich Security Conference. A lot of people have forgotten. But in 2007, in his second presidential term, Putin denounced U.S. hegemony or, as he put it, kind of the unipolar world. In other words, the current kind of political system dominated by Washington. And he made it clear that he intended to disrupt it, that Russia had been cheated, was being encircled, taken for granted, its voice was being ignored in international affairs, and he would no longer play by the White House's rules.

*<CLIP> PUTIN, 2007, MUNICH: “One state, and of course first and foremost, the United States, has overstepped its borders in every way. It imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?”*

LUKE: That was a statement of intent back then. And of course, now as as Russia's enemies, as he would see it gather in Munich, they are all talking about one thing, which is Navalny's death.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Coming up, Luke Harding will be back with us on the fate of the Russian opposition WITHOUT Alexi Navalny.

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: *Today, Explained*, we’re back with Luke Harding, The Guardian’s Senior International Correspondent. Luke, how are Russians reacting today to Alexi Navalny’s death?

LUKE: Russians are being relatively muted. I mean, the ones inside the country, of course, there hasn't been kind of huge or vocal condemnation, but you wouldn't expect that because you post something on Twitter critical of Putin or, against the war and you're pretty quickly kind of rounded up by the police and very often sentenced to jail terms of seven, eight, nine years. What, what we have been seeing are very clear responses from political allies of Navalny living outside the country, in the Baltic states, in Europe or in London, or elsewhere. They all say the same thing that the Navalny was murdered, the Kremlin murdered Navalny. Putin personally murdered Navalny. And I've just been watching Navalny's wife, Yulia, who's at the Munich security conference, giving such a moving and powerful speech.

*<CLIP NAVALNY ARC Wife says Navalny would've wanted to be there> WIFE: I guess you all have already seen this terrible news coming from Russia. I was thinking for a long time what should I do? Should I go here or fly straight to see my kids? But then I was thinking what would have Alexei have done? But I’m sure he would’ve chosen to be here. To come to this stage.*

LUKE: And she then essentially says that she holds Putin and his circle personally responsible for everything that has happened to Russia, her country, to her family and to her beloved husband.

*<CLIP NAVALNY ARC Wife holds Putin responsible> WIFE: But if it is true, I want Putin and all his allies, all his friends, his government, I want them all to know that they would be held responsible for what they have done with our country, with my family, with my husband.*

LUKE: She speaks for about three minutes. It's incredibly moving. It's so sad. And she's right. It's what Navalny would have wanted. He would have wanted people to carry on, to fight to, to kind of continue with his legacy.

NOEL: Has the Kremlin said anything today?

LUKE: Well, the Kremlin is doing what it always does, which is hide behind bureaucratic obfuscation. There was a statement from the Russian Federal Penitentiary Service saying Mr. Navalny collapsed. Doctors did everything they could to revive him. But very sadly, after half an hour, he was pronounced dead, which is bewildering. Navalny appeared yesterday on a video looking gaunt and thin, but also cheerful and essentially himself joking and laughing with prison staff in a brief court appearance. So he goes from that to being dead. And clearly something happened to him between yesterday and today. I sort of think that it's going to be a long time before we know the full truth about what happened to Navalny.

NOEL: What's the status of the opposition in Russia now without Navalny? Who else, who else sticks in Putin's craw? Who else threatens him politically?

LUKE: I think there is no opposition to, to Vladimir Putin or not, not much. I mean, in terms of formal opposition, there hasn't been any for a long time. There is what you might call system opposition in the shape of the communists, who kind of formally oppose Vladimir Putin, but in reality have been co-opted by the Russian government and pose no real threat but they’re a sort of outlet for discontent. And then there's the kind of liberal opposition, the non non systemic opposition, which Navalny led very successfully. And they've been pretty much wiped out as Russia has lurched from authoritarian country to totalitarian state, which more and more resembles something out of George Orwell in 1984. Where up is down and black is white and war is peace and freedom is slavery or slavery is freedom. There was a kind of token opposition candidate who was supposed to be on the ballot paper for for March’s presidential election, and he's recently been disqualified. So it's a dictatorship.

NOEL: Luke, sometimes in a case like this, you have an opposition leader who's killed. And the people that are left behind, the opposition that are left behind, they capitalize on it by getting people angry and out into the streets and protesting. This is a move that should infuriate some percentage of Russians, right? But it sounds like what you're saying is there is no leader to take the baton from Navalny. There is nobody who can successfully call a million people out into the streets in protest of this.

LUKE: I mean there were leaders. There was someone called Boris Nemtsov, former deputy prime minister in the 1990s, who was actually quite similar to Navalny. He was ruggedly good looking. He was charismatic, popular. The problem was that he was also murdered. He was he was shot dead outside the Kremlin. Nemtsov is gone. Navalny is gone. A whole host of other critics where I am in London have also been murdered, such as, Alexander Litvinenko, who was, FSB whistleblower working for Putin's security services, who denounced Putin, and also Litvinenko's patron, a Russian oligarch called Boris Berezovsky, who was found mysteriously hanged at his ex-wife's home, in the British Home counties And so this is the problem, is that anyone who really has stood up to Putin in a sort of serious way has met with a murky end. Russia is very different from the U.S. or indeed any other democratic society. Where in America, for all of the bitter partisan divisions, there is a conversation, quite a noisy, shouty conversation. In Russia there is no conversation. What there is, is 24/7 propaganda which extolls the regime and its leaders and Putin, but also peddles myths and fairytales that America wants to destroy and occupy Russia, that the Europeans are decadent and corrupt and effeminate. And, and what I also found kind of quite bewildering is that there are a few kind of prominent Americans. I shan't name them. But you know who I'm talking about…

NOEL: I sure do.

LUKE: …who seem to love Vladimir Putin and think that he is a kind of good example of what America should become, which I find quite chilling. It would be funny, were it not for the fact that actually this project to make America into a kind of Russia or a Russia lite appears to be in full swing.

NOEL: Vladimir Putin's anger, as you've described it, is in part that he thinks the West is interfering in his Russia. How is the West responding today to Alexi Navalny's death?

LUKE: Well, I mean, the West is responding with, with predictable outrage and condemnation, and shock and sorrow.

*<CLIP NAVALNY ARC Kamala Response> HARRIS: Whatever story they tell, let us be clear: Russia is responsible.*

LUKE: I mean, Navalny was I mean, a lot of European leaders have have met Navalny personally, that they've they've seen him he's spoken to the European Parliament when he was poisoned. One of the people at his bedside was the former German chancellor, Angela Merkel. And they're not mincing words. I mean, the Latvians have said that Putin murdered Navalny. David Cameron, the British foreign secretary, has said that he holds the Russian state responsible for what has befallen Navalny. And there's a lot of condemnation. But you can see Putin kind of laughing at all of this. The more discomfort his enemies feel, the better it is for him. He's also made a public appearance and seems in a tremendously good mood today. I mean, the question is, what could the Europeans do? Well, they're already arming Ukraine. They're already trying to boost defense production and to make more artillery shells, which the Ukrainians desperately need. I think, really, all eyes turn to America and to Mike Johnson and to the Republicans. I mean, will this kind of shift them out of their opposition to, to Ukraine and sort of support or quasi-support for Russia, or will they just kind of ignore it and say, well, dictators kill people. That's the price of doing effective politics. I don't know, but I think it's a kind of big moral test for those people. And let's see if they pass it.

NOEL: What do you think Alexei Navalny's legacy will be?

LUKE: I think Navalny's legacy is the idea – and for now, it is an idea, it's not being realized – that Russia can be a normal, successful, democratic country where there are genuine elections, where where leaders can campaign, they can make promises, they can be held to account, where there is rule of law, where institutions like the police or the security services work for the people rather than against the people.

SCORING IN—INTERGALACTIC RADIO

LUKE: And that sounds almost like a utopian vision. But I think it's important because there is an argument which says Russia is so vast, it's such a big country, so sprawling. that it can never be a democracy, that it's impossible, the, the weight of history is too great. And Navalny was saying, hey, guys, that's not true. We live in a modern world where people have smartphones, where there are, VPN connections, where there is Internet, where you can make a video exposing corruption and 5 million people will watch it and like it.He was saying that Russia doesn't have to be that sort of horrendous sort of Soviet creature, that it could turn into something kind of brighter and better. And I don't know if that's going to happen. I would wish it to happen. But he has opened up that possibility that there's an alternative vector for Russia with the right leadership, with the right international support, and with the right politicians in Washington. And so I think that's a tremendous legacy. And it's just a really sad day and awful that he had to pay so heavy a price to make that point.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Luke Harding of The Guardian. His most recent book INVASION: about Russia and Ukraine is Today’s episode was produced by Miles Bryan and Jesse Alejandro Cottrell <CAH-trull>. Our editor is Matthew Collette. Fact-checking by: Laura Bullard, Amanda Lewellyn, Avishay Artsy. Rob Byers is our engineer. I’m Noel King. It's *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]