

# [***Trump co-opts Navalny's legacy as a smokescreen for his own legal morass***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BCN-T8M1-JBSS-S2TJ-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Alexey Navalny [*died a political martyr*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/16/europe/alexey-navalny-dead-russia-prison-intl/index.html) after returning home to confront Russian President Vladimir Putin's brutal rule. But that's not stopping Donald Trump from coopting his heroic legacy to [*suggest false equivalence*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/politics/trump-legal-rulings-navalny-death/index.html) with his own legal troubles.

The ex-president has been criticized by opponents for days over his refusal to condemn Putin after Navalny, a Russian opposition figure, died in a Russian penal colony in circumstances that have still not been properly explained.

Given the chance to do so in a Fox News town hall on Tuesday, Trump again showed his habitual refusal to criticize a Russian leader who has crushed democracy and has a long record of persecuting political opponents. He offered a tempered tribute to Navalny, before returning to his own false claims of political persecution.

He said the Russian dissident, whose body still has not been returned to his family, was "a very brave guy" but that he probably should not have returned to Russia ahead of his imprisonment. Then, Trump returned to his obsession with his own treatment in his own country that unlike Russia offers constitutional guarantees of the right to a fair trial, political freedoms and is a place where voters get to choose their president.

"It's happening in our country too. We are turning into a Communist country in many ways. And if you look at it, I'm the leading candidate, I got indicted. ... I got indicted four times. I have eight or nine trials ... all because of the facts that I'm in ***politics***," Trump, the front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination, said in the Fox News event. Later, when referring to a $355 million civil fraud judgment against him last week, he added that "it is a form of Navalny, it is a form of communism or fascism."

[*President Joe Biden*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/joe-biden) brought up his predecessor's refusal to call out Putin's culpability in Navalny's death during a fundraising trip to the West Coast.

"Trump fails to even condemn him. It's outrageous," he said.

There is no world in which Trump and Navalny can be compared. For one thing, Navalny returned to Russia despite almost dying after a poisoning effort - that he blamed on Kremlin agents - using a nerve agent.

Despite once arguing that the US Constitution should be terminated, Trump, who has pleaded not guilty in his criminal cases and has denied all the charges against him, is entitled to the presumption of innocence. He was indicted by grand juries of his peers in his criminal cases in which he is entitled to a trial by jury. He also has the right of appeal - that he has taken up multiple times already. None of these protections exist in the Russian legal system. And despite Trump's claims that he's a victim of persecution, the ex-president is being prosecuted according to the rule of law, including for his attempt to overturn the 2020 election and over his hoarding of classified documents.

In fact, Trump's authoritarian instincts suggest that he has more in common temperamentally with Putin than Navalny. The absolute presidential immunity from prosecution that Trump is asking the Supreme Court to grant him and his vision of an unconstrained presidency seem closer to the Russian model than the American one.

Trump has variously described Putin - an accused war criminal over his invasion of Ukraine - as "a genius" and "smart" and frequently took steps while he was president that appeared to satisfy Russian goals as much as long-term US interests. He even sided with the Russian leader's denials of election interference in 2016 instead of taking the word of the intelligence agencies that were then under his control.

The only president in US history to seek to defy the will of voters after a democratic election and to stay in power - like a Russian autocrat - is Trump.

A fraught moment with Russia turns into a key 2024 election issue

The ex-president's refusal to speak frankly about Navalny's death is coming at a moment when Washington's fractured relations with Moscow and a bitter debate about ongoing US support for war-torn Ukraine is causing deep political divides and is emerging as a key issue in the likely general election clash between Biden and Trump.

The president has not hidden his disgust at House Republicans in his predecessor's thrall who have refused to pass his latest $60 billion arms and ammunition package for Ukraine that has just been endorsed by a bipartisan majority in the Senate. Biden has harshly condemned Trump's remark in a recent campaign rally that he would encourage Russia to invade NATO partners that did not meet their targets for defense spending. The White House said on Tuesday that it is readying a new round of sanctions on Russia following Navalny's death that will join the punishing regime of restrictions that have already been imposed over the Kremlin's war in Ukraine.

And Biden is already seeking to use Trump's attempt to draw comparisons with Navalny as part of a new effort [*first reported by CNN's MJ Lee*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/20/politics/joe-biden-donald-trump-wild-comments/index.html) to sharpen his campaign's attempt to portray his predecessor as unfit for a return to the Oval Office.

"When Navalny died last week, when the world holds Putin responsible, Trump fails to even condemn him. It's outrageous," the president said at a fundraiser in Los Angeles on Tuesday night, according to a pool report. "The bottom line is Republicans have to decide who do they serve, Donald Trump or the American people, because that's where it is right now."

Biden also seized on Trump's comments in a new social media video that was released before Trump's town hall event with Fox was broadcast.

The president also made a fresh attempt to highlight Trump's hostility to NATO allies that has raised concerns that he would try to pull out of the alliance if he wins back the White House in November and thereby dismantle a trans-Atlantic security architecture that emerged from the allied victory in World War II and helped win the Cold War against the former Soviet Union.

"What the former president said is so dangerous. He said he would encourage Russia to and I quote, do whatever the hell they want, end of quote. A statement heard around the world. It does nothing but encourage bad behavior," Biden said.

The White House, seeking to build massive pressure on rookie House Speaker Mike Johnson, has also taken to blaming recent Ukrainian reversals on the battlefield, at a time when its armed forces are rationing ammunition, on the Republican refusal to move the arms package. On Saturday, it said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's forces were forced to withdraw from the town of Avdiivka because of dwindling supplies, resulting in Russia's first notable gains in months.

As the second anniversary of the Russian invasion approaches on Saturday, Biden has also assured Zelensky of continued US support - but given the political stalemate in Washington, it's not clear that he will be able to honor his pledges.

And longer term, given Trump's hostility toward Ukraine and his deference to Putin, it's clear that Ukraine's future, not just America's, will be on the ballot in November.

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