

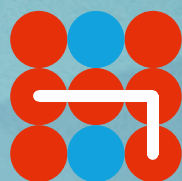
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# The Navalny poisoning case through the hybrid warfare lens

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# The Navalny poisoning case through the hybrid warfare lens

## Summary

The poisoning of Russian opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny with a nerve agent of the Novichok variety appears to have been an act of murderous domestic repression. It remains unclear whether the Kremlin instigated the attack – although the choice of poison means it must at the very least have been a powerful figure within Russia – but it has certainly chosen to seek to cover it up. Navalny's evacuation to Berlin and Germany's subsequent outspoken position on the attack have also made it an increasingly acrimonious international incident, with Russian official and unofficial mouthpieces alleging all kinds of plots and conspiracies.

Viewing the incident through the prism of hybrid war offers some interesting perspectives on past thinking and possible future options. It suggests that the methods and mindset of hybrid war are now infecting domestic politics. It helps explain the stridency of Moscow's reaction to Western criticisms, as well as its nature. It also provides insights into how the West can respond, and the inevitable backlash that will follow.

On 20 August, opposition leader and anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny was on a flight back to Moscow from Tomsk in Siberia. He had been filming an exposé on local embezzlement and also publicising his 'Smart Voting' programme to encourage tactical voting against the Kremlin's United Russia bloc in the forthcoming local elections. Suddenly, he fell violently ill. Fortunately for him, the flight crew promptly diverted to Omsk, where he was quickly given atropine, the standard treatment for nerve agent poisoning.

However, professionalism was soon supplanted by propaganda. A team of Federal Security Service officers ensconced themselves at the hospital in Omsk;<sup>1</sup> the medical team began denying any possibility of poisoning; a media campaign started suggesting everything from a publicity stunt to Western 'provocation' to discredit the Kremlin.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately for Navalny, a German charity offered to evacuate him to a hospital in Berlin and after considerable international pressure, the Russian

government agreed to let him be transferred. After more than two weeks, Navalny was taken out of a medically induced coma on 7 September and, at the time of writing, continues to recover. However, according to the German authorities, he was poisoned by a new, slower-acting but more lethal form of Novichok, a family of nerve agents developed by the Soviet Union in the 1970s, and used in the attempted assassination of double agent Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

What appears to have been a domestic act of repression has since become an international incident, especially as Moscow reacts to calls for a transparent investigation with strident accusations and flat denials. It is not easy to understand just why this happened after Navalny had been tolerated for over a decade, and how Russia has chosen to react to foreign condemnation, but considering the incident through the prism of hybrid war offers some interesting perspectives on past thinking and possible future options.



## Hybrid adhococracy

When the Russian leadership uses the term *gibridnaya voyna* – hybrid war – they are referring exclusively to what they see as a Western approach to destabilising regimes through subversion that may lead to violent intervention.<sup>4</sup> For the Kremlin, everything from the downfall of the Ghaddafi regime in Libya in 2011 to the Ukrainian ‘Euro-maidan’ represent not popular uprisings against corrupt and unresponsive governments, but Western machinations. Nonetheless, even during Soviet times, Moscow had a keen awareness of the scope for aggressive campaigns of subversion, and this is manifest in two parallel approaches adopted today.<sup>5</sup> The Russian military is well aware of the greater scope for sabotage, disinformation, subversion and other ‘active measures’ in preparing the modern battlefield.<sup>6</sup> In this respect, such activities as suborning enemy commanders and sending demoralising text messages to enemy soldiers’ cellphones are adjuncts to the use of force.

However, for the civilian national security establishment – who are dominant in shaping overall policy – the same instruments can be used not as a prelude for military action but as a substitute. The notion essentially parallels ‘political war’, as envisaged by veteran American scholar-diplomat George Kennan: achieving national ends in strategic competition using all means, overt and covert, short of open war.<sup>7</sup>

As a result, the notion of hybrid war, as defined by the West, has utility when it comes to understanding Russian actions, but only when understood in Russian terms. In other words, as a two-pronged approach, the presence of disinformation, for example, need not be an inevitable prelude to the arrival of ‘little green men’, and also one that is both centrally controlled and deliberately uncontrolled. There are major activities and operations carried out by state agencies at the instigation of the national leadership. However, more common are smaller-scale efforts generated at a lower level of state structures, such as by an individual ambassador, government media pundit or local Foreign Intelligence Service *rezident* (station chief), or else by non-state actors such as businesspeople and pundits. They are generally acting on their own

initiative, working towards what they believe the Kremlin’s wishes to be.<sup>8</sup>

The virtue of this twin-track approach is that the ‘freelancers’ bring their own imaginations, contacts and ambitions to the table, making it much harder to predict and deter their actions. If their ventures fail, the Kremlin can disown them and has spent no resources on them. If they succeed, it will reward the ‘freelancer’, and may well take over the initiative and magnify it. Of course, this is flexibility and economy at the cost of control: ‘freelancers’ may actually inadvertently undermine state policy. For example, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Moscow launched a soft power campaign with its ‘From Russia With Love’ medical aid missions to Italy, the USA and Serbia. Whether or not these were likely to have had any real success, they were compromised from the first by the way in which a number of semi-autonomous actors were spreading destructive disinformation about the virus in the West.

This dichotomy between the top-down ‘power vertical’ and the bottom-up activities of institutions and individuals trying to please the Kremlin reflects the way Vladimir Putin runs his country at home, too. This is an ‘adhocracy’, an essentially informal and de-institutionalised style of governance in which formal responsibilities and job titles matter much less than how one can please the leader; your role and tasking today may well not be the same tomorrow, even if your formal position remains unchanged.<sup>9</sup> The same issues of management and accountability visible in foreign interference are also evident at home: individuals can be targeted, companies dismembered, and assets seized, not because the Kremlin ordered it, but because someone assumes the Kremlin would have ordered it.

## Is hybrid war coming home?

The fact that Russian politics can be lethal can hardly be questioned given the litany of enemies of the Kremlin who have died, from opposition leaders such as Boris Nemtsov (shot in Moscow, 2015) to journalists such as Anna Politkovskaya (also shot, 2006). However, the Putin regime has not been gratuitously murderous, relying much

more on marginalising, intimidating and, if need be, imprisoning its critics.

Navalny's poisoning suggests one of two possibilities. First, that – like so much of Russia's hybrid war abroad – this was not initiated by the Kremlin but some other powerful interest, which presumed Putin would approve. Again, as with so many 'free-lance' initiatives outside the country, little thought was likely given to the potential international implications. Putin may be unhappy about the latter, but because he depends on this free-wheeling approach both to manage his country at home and to stir up trouble abroad, he has no alternative but to retrospectively give the attack his blessing and launch a state-driven cover-up. After all, this is likely to have been what happened when gunmen working for Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov murdered Nemtsov.<sup>10</sup>

The other possibility is that the zero-sum, wartime mentality behind the hybrid war campaign abroad has come home. As far as Putin and his hawkish inner circle are concerned, Russia is locked in an existential struggle for autonomy from a Western-dominated international order, and its status as a great power (something these products of the Soviet era consider to be its birthright). They have come to see criticisms of human rights abuses in Russia as hypocritical attempts to delegitimise their country, and the encouragement of civil society and independent media as efforts to nurture fifth columns. Above all, they consider the various 'colour revolutions' against authoritarian allies in other post-Soviet states, apparently including the present protests in Belarus, not as organic uprisings against corrupt and unresponsive rulers, but as 'special operations' of Western hybrid war aimed at curtailing Moscow's self-proclaimed sphere of influence in this so-called 'Near Abroad'.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, they look at diplomatic, economic, and even cultural relations as conflict by other means. In this political war, their assumption is that a beleaguered Russia must always be on its guard – and must take whatever means necessary to protect itself against assumed threats.<sup>12</sup>

Until recently, this kind of maximalism was not applied at home. There was limited scope for civil society and even political opposition, as long as it observed certain tacit rules. Navalny's forensic

and dramatic video exposés of corrupt officials, for example, never touched upon Putin or his family. However, it may be that these days are over. When speaking to a liberal-leaning radio editor, Putin reportedly once drew a distinction between enemies – to be fought, but with whom in due course one could come to terms – and traitors, who could only be eliminated.<sup>13</sup>

If the uncompromising and Manichean worldview that drives hybrid war abroad also begins to be applied at home, then a figure such as Navalny, who seeks to undermine the Kremlin's authority and the legitimacy of its state, would perhaps be seen as a traitor, not an enemy. And thus, fair game.

## The hybrid war response

The hybrid war mindset is also evident in Moscow's handling of the poisoning at an international level. It genuinely appears to see the Western response not as genuine outrage, but as a cynical attack, an 'information weapon' directed at undermining Russia's standing in the world.

Even before Navalny was released into German care, the usual disinformation mills had started grinding out their propaganda, intended to blame the victim, obscure the circumstances of his poisoning in a cloud of alternative scenarios, and prepare the ground for claims of a Western plot. The usually pro-Kremlin tabloid *Moskovskii Komсомоlets* suggested that Navalny had drunk moonshine before the flight and possibly also taken sleeping pills.<sup>14</sup> Dmitri Kiselev, head of the official news agency *Rossiya Segodnya*, said that 'if Navalny really was poisoned, it was the Americans or the English. Just another dirty trick. That's their style.'<sup>15</sup> Dmitri Peskov, the official Kremlin spokesman and a more artful propagandist, simply affirmed that Navalny had certainly had no traces of Novichok in or on him when he left Russia, implying that if any were found, they were administered by the Germans.<sup>16</sup>

After all, Moscow has tried to position itself as an innocent party unfairly excluded from any investigations. Politicians, diplomats and the General Prosecutor's Office have all reproached Berlin for refusing to share what information it has gathered. This is hardly surprising, given that the Russian government is potentially the instigator

of the attack, stands accused of also having been behind the murder in Berlin of Chechen militant Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in 2019, and appears to have already pre-judged the case given that a preliminary investigation by the General Prosecutor's Office found no indication of any crime having been committed against Navalny.<sup>17</sup>

This bid to deny that anything happened and to control or at least insert itself into any investigation is a familiar tactic, already visible in cases from the 2014 shooting down of flight MH17 to the 2018 attack on Skripal. After all, what we are witnessing is the usual pattern of denial, misdirection, disinformation and outright lies. However, two specific aspects of this cover-up campaign shed light on the wider dynamics of its hybrid war operations.

First is the extent to which the disinformation acquires its own momentum, by design. The Kremlin may have started the campaign, but it does not seek to micromanage it. Quite the contrary: the very range of alternative narratives and voices in play is a central element of the Russian approach. Not only is 'freelancing' encouraged amongst Russian actors – even Kiselev, a figure at the heart of government propaganda, was likely directed to get involved, but not given specific talking points and allowed to create his own – but useful narratives from sources with no direct connection to Russia are amplified.

Thus, contrarian Western commentators naturally sceptical of their own governments, who in good faith may question the official narrative, find themselves interviewed, quoted or otherwise magnified by Russian or Russian-linked media outlets and social media accounts.<sup>18</sup> The fact that their views and those of Russian propagandists may not coincide is not a problem for the Kremlin but, perversely, an advantage. This is the second way that the Navalny case serves to illuminate a central goal of Russian disinformation. Its aim, after all, is not to try and convey a single message – which can be investigated and refuted – so much as to make it seem that there is such uncertainty and disagreement about the very facts of the case that it is impossible to know the truth.

## Implications and recommendations

If the ideology or culture of the Kremlin's hybrid war is creeping into Russian domestic politics, the result is likely to be a messy and increasingly dangerous environment for critics of the government, both real and perceived. Freelance repression will become, for some, a means of displaying loyalty to the regime, and for others an excuse to prosecute personal feuds.

Meanwhile, it is also coming to dominate the Russian government's external relations. In many ways, it does not really matter whether or not the Kremlin truly believes that it is in an existential political struggle against a hypocritical and hostile West that mobilises talk of human values, international law and treaty obligations simply as a political weapon against Russia. The fact is that it seems to operate on that basis, and signals to the 'freelancers' that this is the assumption on which it is working, and which it therefore expects them to accept.

This poses all kinds of challenges for the West in knowing how best to respond. The traditional instruments of diplomatic pressure and rebuke, such as sanctions and public critiques, have relatively little traction on the Kremlin. They have value in demonstrating outrage and cohering coalitions of protest, but given that Putin and his inner circle appear to believe that they are in nothing less than a political war, such measures will at best influence tactics, not strategy. In other words, if a particular objective or gambit is seen as counter-productive or unable to generate results commensurate with their costs, the Kremlin may well pivot away from them – but only towards something else. It is sometimes worth doing this to prevent certain varieties of hybrid war that may be particularly noxious or dangerous, but if it simply shifts the battle to a new field, potentially one in which the West is even less well-prepared, then the overall gain may be minimal. For example, the use of personal sanctions against senior Russian figures involved in human rights abuses at home or malign activities abroad is entirely defensible as a means of conveying Western aversion to their actions. However, the assumption that this would also deter or rein in subversive activities abroad proved to be naïve; if

anything, relatively easily tracked financial transfers to particular causes and individuals has simply been replaced with covert *chernaya kassa* ('black account') moneys that are much harder to trace.<sup>19</sup>

In this specific case, it will be crucial for the West to focus on desired outcomes and create strategies best suited to delivering them, rather than resorting to routine responses that the Kremlin will anticipate and likely either have prepared for, or else consider acceptable costs. These goals are, presumably, to protest the apparent shift towards more brutal repression, to press for a genuine – which means transparent and ideally internationalised – investigation into the poisoning, and to raise the stakes for Moscow's apparent non-compliance with its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention.

There is a law of diminishing returns in Western rhetoric in that the Kremlin is so used to being criticised by now that another demarche or statement is unlikely to have any real impact. Personal sanctions may be useful in keeping problematic individuals and their money out of the West but have little or no effect on policy, and serious sectoral sanctions beyond possible measures against the Nord Stream II gas pipeline appear politically unlikely. It is therefore perhaps worth considering more imaginative and adventurous options that nonetheless do not degenerate into fighting hybrid war with hybrid war – not least because in such a struggle, an authoritarian regime such as Putin's Russia would generally be able to maintain escalation dominance.<sup>20</sup>

Hybrid war depends on deniability, on obscurity, and on division. Responses ought to address these very conditions. Attempts to dodge responsibility, especially by demanding proof of actual Kremlin involvement, should not even be engaged with: the government is ultimately answerable for the culture of murderous adhocism in Russia. Instead, there ought to be a common agreement to maintain a campaign of symbolic rebukes such as

regularly raising the case with Russian interlocutors up to and including Putin – which will no doubt irritate them, especially as Putin famously refuses to even refer to Navalny by name.

On obscurity, the Russian system has proved notoriously mercenary and porous, with all kinds of information for sale, so a bounty could be offered for solid and verifiable information on what happened and who was involved. As previous enquiries by investigative journalists such as Russia Insider and the West's Bellingcat have demonstrated, it is by no means impossible to shed light on even the darkest operations.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, as the campaign of expulsions following the Skripal case demonstrated, all such measures are most effective when conducted on as multinational a basis as possible. This need not mean a lacklustre lowest common denominator approach, but an opportunity for some nations to demonstrate leadership and challenge others to join them. The central message must be that every time hybrid war operations are punished, it makes everyone safer, by creating disincentives for Russia or for other countries that might be tempted to follow its example.

Underpinning all of this, however, must be a constant awareness that the Kremlin will see Western responses to the Navalny poisoning as foreign 'hybrid war', and will respond in kind. Berlin's unusually swift and tough response, for example, may lead to an increased Russian campaign of disinformation and disruption around 2021's pivotal Bundestag election. Likewise, the more the West defends Navalny, the more the Kremlin will use that as 'proof' he is nothing less than an agent of subversion. This is not a reason to do nothing, but rather to ensure that any planning of measures to influence Russia takes place in parallel with consideration as to how to deter or minimise any reaction. The logic of hybrid war, after all, is that every move – real or perceived – has to have a counter-move.

## About the author

**Mark Galeotti** is an expert in Russian politics and security affairs. He is the director of the consultancy Mayak Intelligence as well as an honorary professor at UCL SSEES, a senior associate fellow with RUSI, and a senior non-resident fellow with the Institute of International Relations Prague. He read history at Cambridge University and politics at LSE before a career divided between the worlds of academe and policy. He has been head of history at Keele University, chair of the NYU Center for Global Affairs and a visiting professor at the EUI (Florence), MGIMO (Moscow), Charles University (Prague) and Rutgers (Newark). His numerous books include *The Vory* (Yale, 2018), *Russian Political Warfare* (Routledge, 2019) and *We Need To Talk About Putin* (Ebury, 2019).



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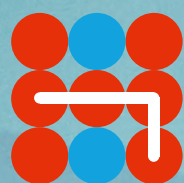
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