

Poisoning of Alexei Navalny: The Plot Thickens

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Summary

Russia's high-profile opposition leader Alexei Navalny's poisoning has led to intense speculation about not only the perpetrator but also its timing and motive. Widely conflicting diagnosis emerging from Russia, where Navalny was first treated, to Germany, where he was airlifted for further medical treatment, have further fanned this speculation. Unsurprisingly, the needle of suspicion has fallen on the Russian government. The purported use of the lethal Novichok nerve agent is strikingly similar to the alleged Russian playbook of eliminating dissenters. The OPCW report has also raised more questions than answers, including a possible clandestine chemical weapons programme. Meanwhile, the Russian government has alleged the involvement of its adversaries in staging this assassination attempt. Circumstances indicate to there being more than what meets the eye. Given the stakes involved, will the real picture ever come out?

On 20 August 2020, Russia's most high-profile opposition leader Alexei Navalny fell virulently sick mid-flight while enroute to Moscow from Tomsk where he was campaigning for the forthcoming local elections. Placed in a medically induced coma in Omsk, where the flight made an emergency landing, he was soon airlifted to Berlin for further medical treatment once his condition deteriorated. After spending more than a month in the hospital, Navalny has now been discharged and is expected to make a full recovery.

Conflicting Diagnosis

Given the stature of Navalny in Russian politics, the speculation about his illness has deepened on account of the hugely conflicting reports emanating around his diagnosis. Russian medical experts who treated Navalny have blamed these series of events on his "metabolic disorder" which led to a "sharp drop in blood sugar".¹ They have ruled out any foul play while he was in Russia.²

On the other hand, Germany, which conducted its own tests including on Navalny's urine and blood samples apart from the water bottle that Navalny had used on the day of travel, has alleged poisoning through cholinesterase inhibitor.³ This substance is part of the lethal Novichok nerve agent family. Germany's position has been corroborated by the International Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).⁴ The Organisation conducted its own tests based on technical assistance sought by Berlin.⁵

Therefore, if one goes by the German and OPCW diagnosis, Navalny was poisoned using a chemical weapon. Under the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), the

use of a nerve agent to poison is considered an act of using chemical weapons.⁶ Given the sophistication needed to handle these agents, the European Union (EU) led by Germany has accused the Russian state⁷ of being complicit in his poisoning. This has led to a fresh round of European sanctions on Russian individuals and the organisation⁸ that the EU considers to be involved in the act.⁹

OPCW Report Raises More Questions Than It Answers

Interestingly, OPCW, the principal organisation responsible for implementing the CWC, in its report on Navalny highlighted his poisoning through “similar structural characteristics as the toxic chemicals that form part of the Annex on Chemicals to the Convention”.¹⁰ This Annex identifies the chemicals that the 193 countries which are signatories to CWC are prohibited from producing, storing, using and transferring except for scientific purposes, and that too with prior intimation to the OPCW. This report should, therefore, have concluded this seemingly open and shut case by identifying the poison and its source of origin. Instead, it throws up more questions than it answers. This includes the nature of the newly identified Novichok toxin as well as the timing and motive behind the poisoning.

Notably, the toxin is not yet banned by the CWC. This raises the prospects of a clandestine chemical weapons programme by a few countries. Moreover, the report not only fails to identify the origin of the poison but has also not revealed the biomarkers used in the attack.

The Needle of Suspicion on the Russian Government

Given the Soviet-sponsored invention of Novichok in the 1980s, the expertise needed to handle the potent toxin and the growing

domestic popularity of Navalny, it is unsurprising that the needle of suspicion has fallen on the Russian state. The fact that the Russian government has been accused of adopting a similar *modus operandi* in eliminating high profile dissenters¹¹ and opposition leaders in the past, gives credence to this suspicion.

But herein the plot thickens. Given that the toxin remains embedded on to human enzyme for an extended period of time even post-mortem, the key question is why would Russia allow Navalny to be airlifted to Berlin considering that the toxin would inevitably show up in tests in Germany. Perhaps, he was sneaked out of the country although this seems highly improbable on account of the scrutiny that Navalny faces. The only evidence of this perceived clandestine operation is Navalny’s statement that President Putin had forbidden him from leaving the country.¹²

Moreover, the elimination of Russia’s most credible opposition leader would run the risk of galvanising the opposition especially at a time when discontentment about the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has grown in magnitude. It could also have undermined Russia’s claims of being a genuine democracy.

Also, there exist other methods of causing death instead of the present circumstances, which have only drawn attention once again to Novichok which the Russian government had been accused of previously using in the high profile poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2018. This would re-paint Russia as not only continuing to engage in targeted killings but also a prolific proliferator of the CWC despite its global assurances of having eliminated its chemical weapons.¹³ This would put Moscow in the crosshairs of international condemnation especially considering it was Russia itself which had recommended the

addition of new chemical formulae of the Novichok family to the updated Annex of the CWC in November 2019.¹⁴

These aforesaid instances of the undeniable fallout lend some credence to the Russian Foreign Ministry's allegation that the poisoning was "staged" by Moscow's "enemies".¹⁵ Given Russia's ongoing confrontation with the West, it is not implausible that the poisoning was aimed at catalysing the growing instability in the Kremlin's neighbourhood. Also, it is pertinent to note that Russia does not have exclusive access to Novichok.

On the other end of this hypothesis, are a range of reasons that build a credible case of the Kremlin's approval, if not outright involvement. For instance, it is unthinkable that Navalny's poisoning, if it indeed did take place in Russia, could be the handiwork of anyone except Russian agencies. Navalny's growing popularity as well as his exposé of a cornucopia of corruption were bound to have unnerved key Russian power stakeholders. Eliminating him at this juncture would prevent him from riding the wave of festering discontentment and revealing more sordid corrupt practices. Perhaps, the perpetrators were hedging their bets that the lack of an alternative opposition leader of Navalny's stature would render the opposition rudderless. This has been borne out by the absence of any mass movement or protest in the aftermath of the August incident. Instead, a concerted campaign has been initiated to discredit Navalny, including branding him an "instrument of Russia's adversaries". In this context, the key issue worth pondering is why did doctors treating Navalny in Russia administer him atropine¹⁶ – a substance used to tackle nerve agent poisoning, when they purportedly did not find any trace of the toxin. Perhaps, Russia's recommendation for the inclusion of the

formulae of Novichok in the Annex of CWC could have been part of its strategy to deny culpability in any cases of future poisoning. Russia would also have likely factored in the lack of bite of any potential European sanctions which in any case today cover practically every aspect of their bilateral ties. Russia's veto power at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) would also shield it from any punitive action, given the fact that the OPCW can only present the merits of a case before the UNSC for further action.

Given the stakes involved, it is unlikely that the real picture will ever come out. The perpetrators are likely to go scot free as well. But what appears certain is that history is likely to repeat itself in the future.

Endnotes:

- ¹ "ÌÈÄ íáâèíèë ñòðáíû ÍÀÒÎ â ðááíòá íää ääüãñòääìè äðóíü "Ííâ÷íê" (Foreign Ministry Accused NATO Countries of Working on Substances of the Novichok group), *RIA Novosti*, September 5, 2020 at <https://ria.ru/20200905/navalnyy-1576820635.html?in=t> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)
- ² Ibid.
- ³ "Alexei Navalny Blames Vladimir Putin for Poisoning", *DW*, October 1, 2020 at <https://www.dw.com/en/alexei-navalny-blames-vladimir-putin-for-poisoning/a-55117309> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)
- ⁴ "OPCW Issues Report on Technical Assistance Requested by Germany", *OPCW*, October 6, 2020 at <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/10/opcw-issues-report-technical-assistance-requested-germany> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ "Statement from the OPCW Director-General on Allegations of Chemical Weapons Use Against Alexei Navalny", *OPCW*, September 3, 2020 at <https://www.opcw.org/media-centre/news/2020/09/statement-opcw-director-general-allegations-chemical-weapons-use-against> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)

- ⁷ The EU has alleged that Russia's Presidential Executive Office was complicit in Navalny's poisoning.
- ⁸ The EU has sanctioned the State Research Institute for Organic Chemistry and Technology (GosNIOXT).
- ⁹ "EU, Britain Sanction Russian Officials over Navalny Poisoning", *Reuters*, October 15, 2020 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-politics-navalny-eu-idUSKBN2701DT> (Accessed on November 9, 2020)
- ¹⁰ Ibid (4).
- ¹¹ In the past, several dissenters have been allegedly poisoned. These include Alexander Litvinenko, Pyotr Verzilov, Vladimir Karza Murza, Sergei Mokhov, Anna Politkovskaya, Yuri Shchekochikhin and Sergei Kripal. Russia had, however, refused to investigate these cases by its law enforcement agencies.
- ¹² "Navalny Says Putin's Statement about Helping Ensure His Release for Treatment Abroad is '100 Percent False'", *Meduza*, October 23, 2020 at <https://meduza.io/en/news/2020/10/23/navalny-says-putin-s-statement-about-helping-ensure-his-release-for-treatment-abroad-is-100-percent-false> (Accessed on November 9, 2020)
- ¹³ "‘Íàðòóøèè çàÿàèè, ÷òì àññà çàìàññù “Íîàè÷èà” ìà òàðððèòòèè Ñìññèè òíè÷èòîê ñòîê òîðìàíó” (Naryshkin Said that All Novichok Stocks in Russia Have Been Destroyed), *ITAR-TASS*, September 15, 2020 at <https://tass.ru/politika/9459127> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)
- ¹⁴ Ibid (6).
- ¹⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2020), "Comment by the Information and Press Department on Discrepancies and Inconsistencies in the Situation Around Alexey Navalny" at https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEO2Bw/content/id/4350818 (Accessed on 9 November 2020)
- ¹⁶ "We're in the Business of Saving Lives, Get It?' One of the ICU Doctors who Treated Alexey Navalny in Omsk Explains How Russian Physicians Handled the Case and Why He Thinks Activists' Criticism is Unfair", *Meduza*, August 29, 2020 at <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/08/28/we-re-in-the-business-of-saving-lives-get-it> (Accessed on 9 November 2020)