

OPINION AND LETTERS



From left to right: The four ministers who tendered their resignation following the Sofia public inquiry.

Navalny and the absence of liberal democracy

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As we mark two years since the start of Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, we are reeling from the shocking news that Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Putin's foremost critic and political opponent, died while serving a prison sentence.

Sadly, Navalny is not the first political opponent to have died.

Navalny himself was also poisoned with Novichok in 2020, and later returned to Russia because he believed that his political campaign needed to be fought inside the country rather than from outside. The charges brought against him, and his subsequent incarceration, was also seen as a way to impede his political role and future.

Whatever the cause of death was or turns out to be, Navalny was ultimately a victim of Russia's shattered democracy and broken political system.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Navalny will remain an important political figure and continue to unite support and hope, even in his death, while his wife,

Yulia Navalnaya and other family members and colleagues will become all the more important political figures.

Navalny's death coincided with the Munich Security Conference where Putin had once given a landmark speech. During the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin criticised the unipolarity of the United States, complained that Russia was being constantly lectured about its democracy and repeated his criticisms about NATO enlargement. It is the speech that is time and again referred to as a turning point in the decline of Russia's relations with the West.



Alexei Navalny used to speak about the beautiful Russia of the future

This took place in parallel with domestic policy shifts. When Putin came into office in 2000, the re-centralisation of political control and greater stability in Russia was needed, following the political and economic collapse of the State during the 1990s. However, over the years, the State became increasingly authoritarian while several constitutional reforms were introduced that ultimately made it possible for Putin to remain as president and has left the door open for him to remain in office for another 12 years. The country moved away from liberal democracy while espousing its own brand of "sovereign democracy".

2024 is defined as the ultimate election year, and Navalny's death also comes a month before presidential elections in Russia. Unfortunately, there are serious doubts surrounding the extent to which elections in Russia will be free and fair.

We often speak about Russia's political culture as being characterised by having a strong central political figure that dominates the political scene. And, to a certain extent, this tradition or culture has been true. But this does not mean that a rich political debate has been absent, and opposition and challenges to the central authorities have indeed been present. Navalny used to speak about the beautiful Russia of the

future. This is the hope that many inside and outside of Russia cling to.

We cannot detach Russia's rejection of liberal democratic principles from the foreign and security policy developments that also have taken place.

Two years later, Ukraine has maintained its resistance in defence of its sovereign integrity, liberal democratic principles, and its own vision of a future fully integrated within European and transatlantic political and security frameworks.

Russia has held its ground and also made territorial gains in recent weeks. But the cost of this war has been significant for Russia: politically, economically, militarily and in the loss of human life. The transatlantic community must recognise that the costs that Russia is willing to bear far outweigh the territorial and political gains it may ever make and will sustain its position in the long term. Yet, this will inevitably impact domestic political morale and stability in the country.

In the meantime, Ukraine's allies must sustain their own domestic and political will and stamina in their support for Ukraine's defence of liberal democracy and territorial integrity.

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