OPPOSING FORCES

Alexei Navalny
Adam Michnik

Foreword by Daniel Treisman

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Ukrainians ... The result was that the only consensus to be found lay in choosing whatever spelling the reader would likely find most familiar (then why not, one asks, “Alexander” instead of “Aleksandr ...”).

If only an editor could be as brave as Alexei Navalny and Adam Michnik, when it comes to words, but an editor has no place behind the barricades, rather, one takes shelter behind the full stop.

Foreword
Daniel Treisman

There are moments in unfree societies when the perceptions of millions suddenly converge. A controversial article slips through the censor’s net and sparks conversations nationwide. A tiny protest metamorphoses into a multi-city uprising. Always unexpected, such events tend to develop rapidly, like a crisis on the stock exchange.

Whatever the details, such moments are, first and foremost, moments of mutual recognition. Citizens realise they are not alone; they constitute a group, a class, a nation. A community – sometimes for the first time – sees itself. And that experience of seeing and being seen is, in fact, what makes it a community.

The result is not necessarily a revolution or other political change. But such moments transform the social landscape, creating new actors and new consciousness. They show how the tectonic plates have shifted. Those in power often respond with violence. However, while clubs and threats can force people back into their apartments, it is much more difficult to erase their memory of the experience. One cannot shoot a moment. Once seen, a community is hard to unsee.

Something like this occurred in Moscow in December 2011. That winter, residents of the capital began to congregate in the city’s central spaces. They came in tens – sometimes hundreds – of thousands. Previously apolitical lawyers, artists, lecturers, writers, businessmen, and many other members of a small but growing middle class found themselves thronging to such gathering points as Marsh Square – actually an avenue on a crescent-shaped river island – or the appropriately named Sakharov Prospect.

The trigger was the blatant fraud that hundreds of
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volunteer observers had recorded during the recent parliamentary election. Protesters demanded a new ballot. But concerns soon broadened. Some began to call for President Putin's ousting. In the Kremlin, officials watched with confusion and then alarm.

Those who met in the squares came away changed. They saw others like themselves, thousands of them. The journalist Maxim Trudolyubov, strolling among the crowds, experienced a strange kind of déjà vu. He kept seeing faces that looked familiar although, he realised, most of them were not.

Many speakers addressed the meetings that winter - popular writers, leftists, nationalists, environmentalists even Putin's former finance minister, Alexei Kudrin. But the one who best caught the mood of the listeners was a 35-year-old activist named Alexei Navalny.

Forty-three years earlier, a similar moment of awakening had transfixed Warsaw. In January 1968, students mobbed the final performance of a production of Deyadyv [Forsfathers' Eve], an epic drama by the 19th Century romantic bard Adam Mickiewicz. The Communist authorities had forced the theatre to cut short its run after audiences started cheering the play's anti-Russian allusions.

A 22-year-old history student named Adam Michnik reported the events to a journalist from Le Monde, whose account was then broadcast by Radio Free Europe. Michnik was expelled from the university and arrested. That March, Warsaw University students held a large demonstration in Michnik's defence, and to demand an end to censorship and

Soviet domination. They were brutally suppressed by the riot police and "worker squads." Unexpectedly, student strikes broke out across the country, in Krakow, Poznan, and other university cities.

Last April, these two men met in Moscow for a series of informal discussions that stretched across three days. This book is the result. The genre is that of the recorded conversation, a literary form as characteristic of Eastern Europe as the absurdist novel or the anthology of "Letters from Prison." Listening in, one almost smells the espresso and cigarette smoke. Michnik is a master of the form. His past partners range from his friend Vaclav Havel to Poland's General Wojciech Jaruzelski, from fellow soixante-huitards Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Bernard Kouchner to the poet Czeslaw Milosz.

The meeting occurred at a gloomy time for the democratic opposition in Russia. The protests of December 2011 had petered out over the following year. A barrage of propaganda from the official media had incited fear and anger towards the West and rallied the public behind President Putin. To the delight of almost the entire population, Russia had torn Crimea from Ukraine and annexed it. And then, not long before Michnik and Navalny's conversations, their mutual friend, the Yeltsin-era politician and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov, had been brutally murdered, gunned down on a bridge beside the Kremlin.

Michnik's biography and writings are already familiar to many Western readers. Born into the stagnant Stalinism of post-War Poland, he plunged early into political activism. At 15, he founded a revisionist discussion club; at 16, in what must be a record, he was personally denounced by the country's Communist leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka. At 18, he was arrested for the first time. Thirty-nine other occasions would follow.

\footnote{Written in 1832, Deyadyv [Forsfathers' Eve] carried clear anti-imperial overtones, with Russophobic sentiments potentially discernible in it as well. Mickiewicz himself, however, denied such claims; around the same period, moreover, he composed "To my Russian Friends" - a poem eulogising the Decembrists.}
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A wave of virulent repression with strong anti-Semitic overtones crushed the student movement of 1968. When not in jail, Michnik spent the 1970s, along with his older friend and fellow dissident Jacek Kuroń, probing the possibilities for common civic action between intellectuals like themselves and the two main pillars of Polish society—the working class and the Catholic Church. A key moment came in 1976 when Michnik and his colleagues formed the Workers’ Defence Committee (KOR) to assist those who had been arrested for protesting against price increases.

In neighbouring Czechoslovakia, the dissident playwright Vaclav Havel had begun formulating the philosophy of non-violent resistance that he would champion in his famous essay “The Power of the Powerless.” Influenced by the writings of the exiled political philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, Michnik was developing something similar in Poland. In August 1978, Michnik, Kuroń, and Havel were among a handful of Polish, Czech, and Slovak dissidents who slipped their police watchers to meet up in the mountains bordering their two countries for an afternoon of toasts and intellectual discussion. Michnik helped arrange the smuggling of Havel’s essay to Warsaw, where it was published first in Polish.

The main idea behind “living within the truth,” in Havel’s phrase, and “living in dignity,” in Kolakowski’s, was to behave “as if” one were in a free country. Like the Soviet dissidents Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, citizens should pretend that the “laws” announced by the country’s rulers were real laws and demand that they respect them. The goal was to create a free public sphere to substitute for the one controlled by the authorities. Instead of complaining about censorship, citizens should publish their own books and newspapers. Rather than accept historical distortions, they should write and teach their own history. And, unlike the conspiratorial movements of the past, they should do all this openly and—where possible—invite their police handlers to the conversation.

In the summer of 1980, Michnik was vacationing in the mountains when revolution broke out. A strike in Gdansk by shipyard workers, angry at the lack of meat in the stores, metamorphosed into a massive uprising of citizens, 10 million of whom were soon members of the banned trade union Solidarity. This had little to do with the intellectuals of KOR. To Michnik, the strike leader Lech Wałęsa’s project for an autonomous union seemed “extravagant and irresponsible.” To his delight, he was proved wrong. Intellectuals, workers, and much of the rest of the population found themselves arm in arm.

After General Jaruzelski imposed martial law in December 1981, Michnik spent several years in jail. However, rather than silencing him, this turned Michnik into an international celebrity in human rights circles. From his prison cell, he managed to publish a stream of essays and open letters telling off his persecutors with a mixture of historical analogy and electrifying bravado. During his total of six years spent in Communist prisons, Michnik wrote five books.

By the late 1980s, the stalemate between generals and citizens was crumbling in the face of Gorbachev’s new foreign policy. In 1989, the ruling party let Solidarity run in the first semi–free elections, and it defeated the Communist candidates in every seat it was allowed to contest in the Sejm, and all but one in the Senate. Michnik helped Wałęsa negotiate a transition with General Jaruzelski that peacefully transferred power to a new democratic leadership.

In some ways, the most remarkable part came afterwards. Unlike certain of his colleagues, Michnik discovered a
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vocation for reconciliation. His motives combined pragmatism — one could not, as in Brecht’s famous couplet, “dissolve the people and elect a new one” — and an allergy to oversimplifications, whether historical or moral. As founding editor of the influential newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, Michnik argued for historical memory combined with tolerance and dialogue: “Amnesty yes, Amnesia no!”

He made up with and forgave his former jailer, General Jaruzelski, accepting the general’s view that martial law had saved Poland from the worse fate of a Soviet invasion. Michnik later recalled how, at Gorbachev’s birthday party one year, the former Soviet leader was amused to see the two Poles walking “almost hand in hand.” Gorbachev also earned Michnik’s deep respect for allowing 1989 to unfold.

Michnik’s refusal to entertain rancour leaves him sometimes isolated amid the Polish discourse of victimhood. Some fault him for his lack of Russophobia. He is, he likes to say, “an anti-Soviet Russophile,” who can — and does — recite Mandelstam at the drop of a hat. He is inspired by the tradition of Russian liberals and freethinkers that reaches back from Sakharov to 19th century political writers such as Alexander Herzen.

Navalny is less known in the West. A few newspaper articles and magazine profiles have described his struggle against the Kremlin but left much unclear about his ideas. This book helps fill in the picture.

Born in 1976, he is from that borderline cohort of Russians who are old enough to remember life under Communism but young enough to have been formed by what came after. The son of an officer in the Soviet missile forces, Navalny spent his childhood on military bases. His grandmother, we learn here, was among the Soviet troops that captured the Reichstag in 1945.

He studied law and then took courses at Moscow’s Financial Academy. For some years, he worked at grass roots organizing for Yabloko, one of the liberal political parties formed in the 1990s, and watched it dwindle away, undermined by a mixture of Kremlin harassment, its own ineffectiveness, and the low appeal of Putin critics in the years of rapid growth. After the party’s leaders expelled Navalny for marching with some radical nationalists, he started to develop his own approach to poking at the increasingly authoritarian political system.

In 2007, he began to buy small numbers of shares in large state companies, and to turn up at their annual meetings to ask embarrassing questions. At Transneft, for instance, he insisted on knowing why the management would not reveal the recipients of the hundreds of millions of dollars of “charitable contributions” the company made each year. In a widely read blog, he exposed corrupt activities of the regime’s insiders and heaped ridicule on the Kremlin’s explanations.

Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation soon became a kind of incubator for online civic activism projects. One site, Rosyama (“Russian Pothole”), enables Russians to quickly and painlessly demand road repairs. After users photograph a hole in the road, the computer system generates a complaint to the relevant authorities. If the repair is not completed within the period prescribed by law, the website automatically produces a complaint to the prosecutors. All the user has to do is print out and mail the forms.

Another site, Rospil (“Russian Kickbacks”), exploits the regulation requiring all tenders for public contracts to be published online along with the winning bid. Navalny’s volunteer lawyers seek out and post on the Rospil website details of tenders that seem designed to favour an insider.

Navalny’s goal, he said, was to make it easy for everyone to spend “15 minutes a day struggling against the xiii
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regime.” He consciously imitates Amnesty International’s strategy of providing members low cost ways to get involved, in AI’s case by encouraging members to write letters to dictators about their political prisoners. One internet project offered a variety of small actions that sympathisers could take, to press for reform, from posting a flier in their entryway to making a donation.

While irritating to the Kremlin, such initiatives drew relatively little response at first. That changed after Navalny emerged as the charismatic figurehead of the 2011-12 mass protests. With Putin’s return as president from May 2012, the authorities struck back. A series of new laws and regulations restricted demonstrations, and imposed a variety of penalties on opposition activism. Targeting Navalny, prosecutors charged that he had stolen a massive quantity of wood from a state lumber company while serving as adviser to the governor of Kirov Region. The case, which investigators had already dropped more than once for lack of evidence, seemed like a joke. But he was convicted in July 2013 and sentenced to five years in a labour camp. With bewildering speed, the authorities then decided to release him and allow him to run in that year’s Moscow mayoral election, presumably to make the result seem legitimate. One Kremlin adviser I spoke to at the time gave him at most 15-17 percent of the vote. He won 27 percent, according to the official results, and maybe more in actuality.

As the protest movement dwindled in late 2012, the prosecutor produced a new case — this time against both Navalny and his brother Oleg, who ran a shipping company. The brothers were said to have embezzled about $1.8 million from their client, the beauty products company Yves Rocher, although the latter denied having suffered any loss. In December 2014, the judge found the brothers guilty and sentenced both to three and a half years in a labour camp along with large fines, but then suspended Alexei’s sentence. Oleg Navalny is serving his term in Russia’s Penal Colony Number 5 in Orel Region—a constant reminder to his brother of the costs of fighting the Kremlin.

In the face of this increasing pressure, Alexei has himself attempted to “live in dignity.” Since February 2014, the authorities had placed him under house arrest, attaching an electronic monitoring bracelet to his ankle. Although Russian law does not permit continued house arrest after a defendant has been sentenced, no one removed the bracelet. So, taking matters into his own hands, Navalny cut it off, posted a picture of it online, and began walking around the city at will. The police officers assigned to trail him at first pleaded with him to return home. After a few weeks, they stopped following. The Kremlin seems unsure what to do about this 39-year-old who won 630,000 votes in Moscow’s 2013 election and whose YouTube videos about corrupt officials can quickly attract 4 million viewers.

Moscow liberals often scold Navalny for his nationalism. In 2006, violence broke out between Chechens and ethnic Russians in the Karelian city of Kondopoga. The next year, Navalny joined with two others to found a “nationalist-democratic” movement called Narod (“The People”). Its manifesto called for honest elections and checks and balances, and denounced provocateurs who preached xenophobia and violence against non-natives. It also demanded the legalisation of handguns and the deportation of immigrants who did not respect Russia’s “law and traditions.”

The conversations presented here should clarify the nature of Navalny’s nationalism today. He comes across as a moderate, European-style conservative. He believes that Russia should introduce the kind of visa regime and work quotas that most Western countries have used for years to manage labour migration. He would like the Orthodox
Church to cultivate a respect for tradition, family values, and Christian teaching, but to stay out of politics. Rather than shunning Russians with nationalist or conservative views, he argues for engaging them in dialogue. Instead of allowing such people to drift towards extremism, he urges efforts to win them over to a kind of “civic nationalism” predicated not on physiology or a sense of national superiority but on universal civil rights and freedoms, on the potential to determine the fate of our country together.” This civic nationalism does not reject minorities: it embraces them. And some well-known Russian liberals of minority ethnicity or religion—such as the economist Sergei Guriev and the journalist Yevgenia Albats—are among Navalny’s strongest supporters.

At first sight, these two fighters for civic and political freedom look quite different. They come from different countries, generations, and parts of the political spectrum. While Michnik started out an idealistic leftist seeking to replace Stalinism with a humanist socialism, Navalny began in the 1990s, by his own account, a “market fundamentalist.” They struggle against different models of illiberal regime. Michnik’s adversary was a Communist party dictatorship, controlled by a distant colonial superpower. Navalny faces a personalised pseudo-democracy with market economics, a determination to crush independent opposition, and little ideology beyond sullen anti-Westernism.

A huge gap separates the technologies of resistance of the 1970s Communist world from those of the current information age. Where Michnik had carbon-paper samizdat, Navalny today has Facebook and Twitter. Solidarity spread its message by means of the “Flying University”—a series of flash seminars held in sympathisers’ apartments; the Russian oppositionists use blogs and internet campaigns.

In temperament, both men are gregarious, but Michnik is an enthusiast, Navalny more of an ironist. Michnik was determined to avoid being pressed into politics. Navalny hungrily seeks an opening. Most of Michnik’s Russian friends are the sort of unworldly dissidents that Navalny says he used to think of as the “neighbourhood crazies.” Navalny’s associates bristle with IT skills and modern knowhow.

Indeed, Navalny—who a few years ago engaged an HR-schick (human resources specialist) to find him a press secretary—exudes a kind of problem-solving, corporate dynamism. He fights corruption with a whiteboard, flow-charts, and company statements, and is probably the only revolutionary who can claim a publication in the Harvard Business Review (Russian edition).

While the Michnik story has a beginning and a middle, although—thankfully—not yet an end, Navalny’s is a work in progress, an early draft. His key challenges lie ahead.

They disagree about some things—in particular, the 1990s. Navalny, perhaps punishing himself for past idealism, sees the decade as a betrayal. At the time, he cheered Yeltsin’s shelving of the parliament in October 1993 in the face of an armed uprising of ultranationalists and Communists. Now he views it as a mistake. He sees the 1996 election as a fraud. Michnik seems less sure that, had the ultranationalists or Communists prevailed, they would have agreed to hand power back later on.

More aggravating even than corruption for Navalny is hypocrisy. He reserves his greatest scorn not for Putin but for Anatoli Chubais, the architect of 1990s privatisation, who now heads a state company and stays quiet about the faults of his boss. Navalny seems to blame Yeltsin for Putin almost more than he blames Putin himself. Even when he agrees with the main point, one feels Michnik at times resisting the younger activist’s generalised rhetoric, the tone of denunciation.

And yet, despite obvious differences, the striking thing
is how much these two men have in common. Both have shown the courage to face imprisonment for their beliefs. (While Michnik spent six years behind bars, Navalny’s street protests have landed him in detention for several two-week spells as well as under house arrest for months.) Each has found the endurance to withstand the daily grind of petty persecution, to survive the enervating ambiguities and slippery slopes of the dissident’s life.

Both seem a little surprised by how often they agree, including on issues where Poles and Russians might be expected to have different perspectives. There is only one route to European modernity (no country has a “special path”). Judicial reform should be the first priority. Lustration must be a matter of court investigations, not politicised reckonings. Democracy and a free press are the only cures for corruption. A legitimate referendum in Crimea will be the only way to resolve that region’s status. They even concur – and this may surprise some Western readers – in their disapproval of Pussy Riot’s performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, although they also both consider the punishment as excessive.

What can Poland’s history of transition teach Russians eager for a more democratic political order? At first, the comparison seems discouraging. If we equate 1968 in Poland to 2011 in Russia, a long path lies ahead before Russia’s dissidents get to their round table talks. Moreover, Michnik insists that Poland’s breakthrough depended on a certain individual: it could not have occurred had Mikhail Gorbachev not made the courageous choice to “open the door.” The Putin regime seems determined to keep all doors, windows, and air vents nailed shut.

Yet history, when it repeats itself, often does so in a new tempo. Changes that required a generation in one country sometimes take only years in others. And Russia today, unlike Poland before 1989, is not under the diktat of an external power. So the constraints on change may not be comparable.

Michnik’s tone is never didactic, but one can detach some lessons from the discussion. The first is to beware of revolutions. In another recent work, Michnik quotes Danton: “In revolutions, power remains at the end with the biggest scoundrels!” If Solidarity was a revolution, it was a self-limiting one. The Polish dissidents knew they could not prevail against Soviet tanks with sticks and stones. By remaining non-violent, they also avoided the emergence of their own Jacobins.

Yet, if one should not force the pace with violence, the second lesson is to be ready when power falls into one’s lap. The scale of Solidarity’s victory in 1989, which came after several waves of mobilisation and repression, took the movement’s leaders by surprise. When a representative of the Communist old guard consulted Michnik about a transition, it seemed to him at first “some fantasy or absurdist scenario.” He “just hadn’t grasped that they could possibly accept their absolute trouncing!” Michnik had to argue with other Solidarity leaders who wanted to stay in opposition and criticise from the sidelines.

A third point Michnik emphasises is the danger of trusting secret police files. Instead, one should view these as sources of rumours and lies rather than unbiased information. If it is not to poison the transition, lustration must be handled carefully, within the framework of a judicial procedure, and not in a political forum or by some ad hoc populist tribunal.

And, finally, the most important lesson is the need for intellectual activists to forge connections to the mass of the population. In Poland, that meant joining forces with factory workers and the Church. In Russia, the great challenge
Navalny faces is to find common language with the people of Russia’s provinces, the ones who do not read his blog or even know his name.

In Poland, KOR and then Solidarity emerged when the dissidents began to help workers in their economic battles, and defend them when they too were targeted by the state’s apparatus of repression. Rather than seeking to persuade ordinary people to share the activists’ concerns, the activists learned the concerns of ordinary people and helped in their pursuit. Faced with economic grievances, authoritarian regimes have a counterproductive habit of turning them into political ones. Thus, opposition to the Communists converged, while support for the old regime dissipated.

The effectiveness of Navalny’s efforts to push Russia toward a freer political order remains to be seen. Will the community formed in Moscow’s snow-covered squares four years ago reappear, perhaps in a new configuration? There are no guarantees. Those in the Kremlin are determined to prevent this, and the patriotic upsurge over Crimea’s annexation has changed the focus, at least for the moment. The return to power of Poland’s illiberal Law and Justice Party in October 2015 suggests that Michnik’s work may also not be over. Meanwhile, this book offers an inspiring view of two dedicated fighters for civic and political freedom engaging with the key questions that confront such activists in authoritarian states around the world.

The isolation in which Russia has today found itself is to the detriment of all and sundry. At such times it is of particular importance to maintain a dialogue with the outside world. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to converse with an individual uniquely experienced not only in battling an authoritarian regime, but in building a new country on genuinely democratic foundations. Adam Michnik is a living legend. A human rights activist, oppositionist and political prisoner, he succeeded, together with his colleagues from Solidarity, in dismantling the old regime without bloodshed, while also creating the most widely read socio-political newspaper in the newly-free Poland. Of particular significance for me is the following: Adam’s entire existence is testament to the fact that it is possible to “live not by lies,” and that the only way to defeat a dictatorship is to preserve one’s inner freedom, even when no other freedoms remain. He was one of the few who dared to dream about a Europe-oriented future for his country during a desolate and stagnant epoch, when even the staunchest optimists thought it inevitable that their present condition would stretch on into infinity. Michnik’s dream became reality. Our three-day conversation has demonstrated that, for all of Russia’s uniqueness, the challenges it is currently facing are not at all as unique as we’ve come to believe. The path we must follow has been trodden by many Eastern-bloc countries; they have succeeded, and so too shall we; I’m more convinced of this than ever before. We shall succeed if we learn to be “free people in an unfree country” – something Adam Michnik himself learned to be, and taught others to be.

Moscow, August 2015