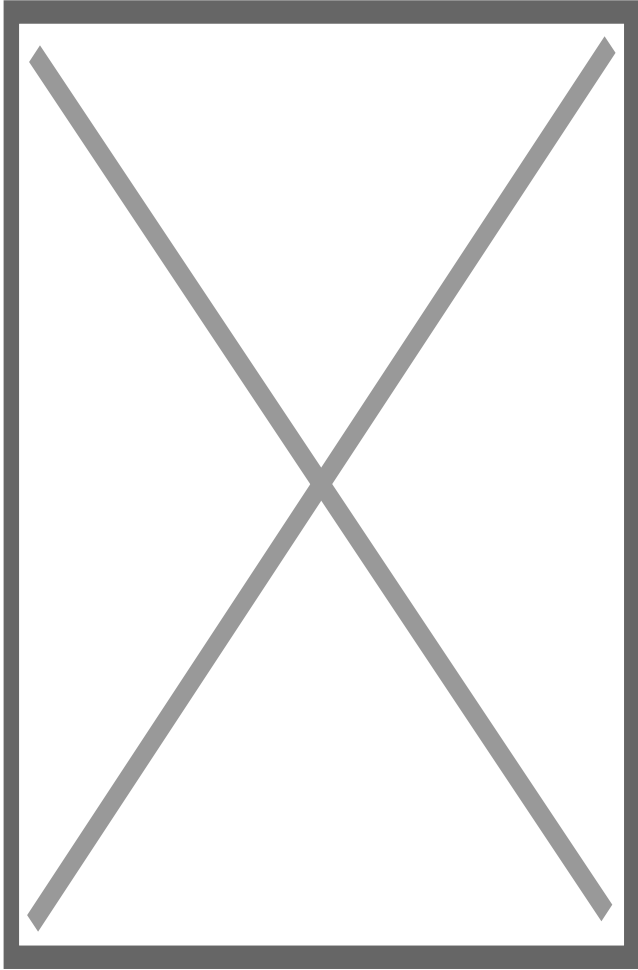


The prison writings of Alexei Navalny

*Patriot* is a posthumous memoir of resistance to Putin. It is also, at its core, a love story.

by [David S. Robinson](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

## In Review



### **Patriot**

A Memoir

By Alexei Navalny

Knopf

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Vladimir Putin knew better than to say his name, referring simply to “this person,” “the defendant,” and, after failing to assassinate him, “the Berlin clinic patient.” The late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny chose a more confrontational title for himself: *patriot*. Despite the term’s frequent misuse, it aptly conveys Navalny’s challenge to the “party of crooks and thieves” that currently runs his country.

*Patriot* is a vivid account of opposition politics under a brutal dictatorship. It is also, at its core, a love story. Navalny expresses deep and abiding love for his homeland, his political work, his wife, Yulia, and their children. These loves are all strengthened, as his prison writings attest, by his Christian faith.

Navalny’s love for Russia, from its rich literature to its melancholic landscapes, is evident throughout the book. He even affectionately refers to the ironies of the Russian national character, with its “bravado about enduring privation, which could so easily be avoided.” This becomes a point of pride in comparison with other nations: “Well, yes, we say, the Japanese do make good cars, but just let them try to assemble a functioning car from the spare parts of three others and some rusty scrap metal the way our neighbor Vasily managed to.”

Out of love for his people, Navalny rejected fear on the campaign trail. “The gist of my political strategy,” he writes, “is that I am not afraid of people and I am open to dialogue with everyone.” He adds that no serious political leader can simply turn their back on fellow citizens whose views (whether left or right, nationalist or liberal) they personally dislike. Notably, while he clearly opposes Putin’s “neo-imperialist nationalism”—he tells a Russian court that the war in Ukraine is “immoral, fratricidal, criminal”—he warns that attempts to discredit the nationalist movement as a whole are counterproductive.

Navalny was committed to speaking the truth and exposing corruption in the autocratic status quo. That commitment was motivated in part by his childhood experience in the Soviet Union, where “the mind-boggling discrepancy between what political workers said and the reality of life was obvious.” Navalny thought that people still know the difference, despite the prevalence of cynicism and conspiracy theories among his contemporaries. “Some things everyone can see,” he maintains, such as Putin’s ostentatious palace over and against the poverty of the Russian people. Navalny also invites people to see what he describes as “the beautiful Russia of the future”—a land characterized by freedom, justice, and prosperity for all citizens.

In pursuit of that vision, Navalny maintains that he is a politician, not a “dissident.” Although he respects other forms of resistance, he was not interested in leading a marginal movement. He based the Anti-Corruption Foundation on two principles: transparency and normality. “The only way we were different from a fancy start-up,” he recalls about the organization’s Moscow office, “was that we were battling Putin.” Although the fight brought “predictable downers,” they kept a more or less typical workplace: “Our hipster office remained just as hipsterish, only now the riot police sawed through the door with a chain saw, burst in with semiautomatic weapons, and made everyone lie on the floor.”

Despite the arrests, property seizures, and Novichok poisoning, Navalny loved his job. “I know one thing for sure,” he declares, “that I’m among the happiest 1 percent of people on the planet—those who absolutely adore their work. I enjoy every single second of it.” Even when imprisoned, he would not stop working: “Every single day I ponder how to act more effectively, what constructive advice to give my colleagues who are still at liberty, where the regime’s greatest vulnerabilities lie.”

Navalny’s account of life in prison, recorded in diaries and correspondence from 2021 to 2024, is published in this book for the first time. Although he recounts incredible hardship, his deflationary humor remains on full display. He opens by expressing regret for having to give up his more marketable book idea, a political thriller about an assassination attempt using chemical weapons, and resigning himself to a prison diary, “a genre so saturated with clichés that it’s impossible not to write them.”

Navalny matter-of-factly observes the “degrading” of his wishes and thoughts during this period. He acknowledges that while he ought to be thinking (and readers would be expecting) “something philosophical about life and politics,” his mind returns again and again to “coffee, my sore back, and other routine stuff.” Then there are the painful details of his hunger strike, though Navalny narrates even that with somber levity: picture a skeleton staggering around his prison cell, swatting at mosquitos with a rolled-up court order, as a way of motivating your children to finish their dinner.

Navalny describes his deprivation as a way of motivating those who have become complacent about politics, whether from privilege, despair, or both. He refers to weeks spent in a punishment cell known as the SHIZO—a “concrete black hole” measuring 2.5 meters by 5 meters that’s shared by three prisoners. He also recounts being denied winter boots during brief “exercise” sessions in an ice-covered concrete well. Given the conditions he faced at the bottom of Maslow’s pyramid, Navalny found it strange to receive letters from the outside “about depression, gloom, and apathy.” His response is brisk: “Seriously? Come on, cheer up. If you’re alive and well and out there, you’re doing all right. Finish your pumpkin latte and go do something to bring Russia closer to freedom.”

At the root of Navalny’s persistence is his faith. He says at the end of the book that being a Christian “makes it easier to live your life and, to an even greater extent, engage in opposition politics.” Here again he is quick to deflate any pretensions: as a believer he’s already been exposed to “constant ridicule” at the Anti-Corruption Foundation, and he expects that others “will now consider me a nut job with a Messiah complex.” Nevertheless, he means it:

My job is to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won’t let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.

Of course, Navalny’s own family also had to endure their share of hardships. Even so, he says that his wife, Yulia, never spoke a word of reproach about his political activism. “She hates the people who have seized power in our country, probably even more than I do,” he relates. “And that motivates me to do what I do.”

Navalny’s deep love for his wife is evident throughout the book. In a birthday letter to Yulia, he expresses anger about the layers of glass that keep them apart—in the courtroom, during prison visits, when she sees him on television. He also admits that without her, his sense of humor was flagging. “As for the glass,” he promises, “sooner or later we’ll melt it with the heat of our hands. And comedies will be funny again. I love you.”

In a penal colony north of the Arctic Circle, Putin’s regime finally managed to put Alexei Navalny to death on February 16, 2024. Undeterred, Yulia Navalnaya has carried on her husband’s work. So will all those who resist tyranny out of love for their country.