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NAVALNY CRACKDOWN WILL BRING EUROPE, AMERICA CLOSER

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Nationwide protests and mass arrests followed the imprisonment of anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny on his recent return to Russia. The authorities' heavy-handed response has attracted international condemnation. Both the European Union (E.U.) and America are preparing more sanctions on Russia, which felt emboldened enough to humiliate a top E.U. representative publicly during a recent visit to Moscow. Russian Foreign Ministry officials claim to have been [shocked by Europe's](#) subsequent anger and Sergei Lavrov, the Foreign Minister, now says his country is [ready to cut ties](#) with Europe if new sanctions follow. Other countries living under authoritarian rule will watch how closely (and quickly) Europe and the new American administration work to respond.

Russia and the CIS

These protests are the most direct challenge to Vladimir Putin since 2011–12, when Dmitry Medvedev returned the presidency to him. Over 10,000 people have been arrested since demonstrations began on January 23rd. Anger at deep corruption is at the heart of the protests; Russia's own 2015 National Security Strategy identifies corruption as a key national challenge. Navalny's political rise began when he started blogging in 2008 about corruption allegations at some of Russia's state-controlled corporations (he nicknamed his blog the 'mass complaints machine'). Despite crackdowns on the opposition, house imprisonment and repeated arrests, Navalny has kept uncovering and challenging corruption at the heart of the State, showing ordinary Russians how this extends to [the very top](#).

The Kremlin's response, unsurprisingly, has been to accuse America of seeking to destabilise Russia internally. Authorities perceive anti-government protests as part of a U.S.-sponsored strategy of regime change. Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, [urged the West](#) to tackle its own democracy problems before criticising Russia, pointing to the storming of the U.S. Capitol and anti-lockdown protests in several western countries. Genady Zyuganov, leader of the Russian Communist Party, [argued during](#) a Duma meeting that ongoing protests were nothing to do with Navalny; he was just an "incendiary shell to set fire to...and destroy Russia".

The Kremlin has long been preparing to tackle internal unrest, establishing the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiya*) in 2016, tasked with ensuring public order. The internal unrest of 2011–12 prompted plans for this paramilitary security force, under Interior Ministry control, reflecting enduring concerns about internal destabilisation.

Putin likely draws comfort from events in Belarus. It has experienced almost-daily protests and violent crackdowns since the August 2020 presidential elections in which the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, claimed victory amidst widespread vote-rigging allegations. Still, there is a thecsi.org.uk

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lack of consensus in Russian media that the ‘Belarusification’ of protests in Russia will work. Some [reports](#) suggest that authorities will use ‘Putings’ – pro-Putin rallies – to counter protests and dominate the streets. Whilst [others warn](#) that Navalny has put the Russian authorities in a difficult situation: they either make him a martyr or show weakness, neither of which the Kremlin wants.

Europe and America

But that will be difficult. Lech Walesa, the former Polish president and dissident, [nominated Navalny](#) for the Nobel Peace Prize after his arrest, keeping him high on international agendas. Poland, the Baltics and others have been preparing [harsher sanctions](#) against Russia whilst pressing the E.U. – i.e. France and Germany – to harden its own sanctions. This is now likely after the fiasco earlier this month that saw Russian authorities publicly humiliate the E.U. by expelling three European diplomats monitoring unrest, just when the E.U. Foreign & Security Affairs Representative, Josep Borrell, was in Moscow.

Borrell, a Spanish socialist, has [attracted criticism](#) for being ‘soft’ on Russian aggression (though less than his predecessor Federica Mogherini, the former Italian Foreign Minister and communist activist described as being “[more Italian than Italians](#)” on letting Russia off). Borrell claims he and his team could not have foreseen events during his disastrous Moscow visit but this is [not quite](#) so. Yet even though France has sought [another](#) strategic ‘dialogue’ with Russia, Germany remains by far the greatest obstacle to a stronger European response to Russian aggression.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier says Germany owes Russia completion of the controversial Nord Stream 2 (NS2) gas pipeline, which bypasses Ukraine, because of [all the destruction](#) Germany caused Russia during the Second World War. This overlooks the inconvenient fact that present-day Ukraine actually suffered most of the damage back then. Meanwhile, Chancellor Angela Merkel, due to step down in September after 16 years, and Peter Altmaier, the Business Minister, [both oppose](#) linking NS2 to Navalny. And Armin Laschet, Merkel’s successor as Christian Democratic Union party leader (and maybe even as Chancellor), has long [courted Russia and China](#), raising transatlantic concerns.

Russia’s humiliation of the E.U. gives the new American administration an opening to bring Europe closer to Washington’s way of thinking on tackling an aggressive, kleptocratic Russia. President Joe Biden has ordered a [comprehensive review](#) of intelligence on hostile Russian activity against America and has appointed David Cohen to return to the Central Intelligence Agency as deputy director. Formerly a highly successful under-secretary for terrorism and [financial intelligence](#) at the Treasury Department, Cohen is an expert on illegal money flows, equipping him well to counter malign Russian influence exerted through corruption and ‘dark money’ against America and its allies.

To do this, Cohen and the new administration have formidable financial and legal tools at their disposal. These include the [existing and expanded](#) Protecting Europe’s Energy Security ([PEESA](#)) and Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions ([CAATSA](#)) Acts, and [recently-introduced](#) Congressional bills proposing the Holding Russia Accountable for [Malign Activities](#) and Global Magnitsky Human Rights [Accountability Reauthorization](#) Acts.



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OUTLOOK

Russian authorities will continue their hardline approach to protests, to punish and deter. They are [acutely aware](#) of September's Duma elections and will seek to head off any revival of springtime protests (both through overt repression and covert efforts to divide opponents). Expect American sanctions to go further than European ones in the near term, and even more so once the review of Russian activities against America concludes in the spring. At that point, the Biden administration will likely sanction key Kremlin players and Russian oligarchs worldwide, using the combined powers of PEESA, CAATSA and other Acts. The aims will be to deter further Russian State interference while indirectly showing support for Russian citizens resuming anti-corruption protests around then.