

Alexei Navalny's Use of Subtext and Symbolism Lives On

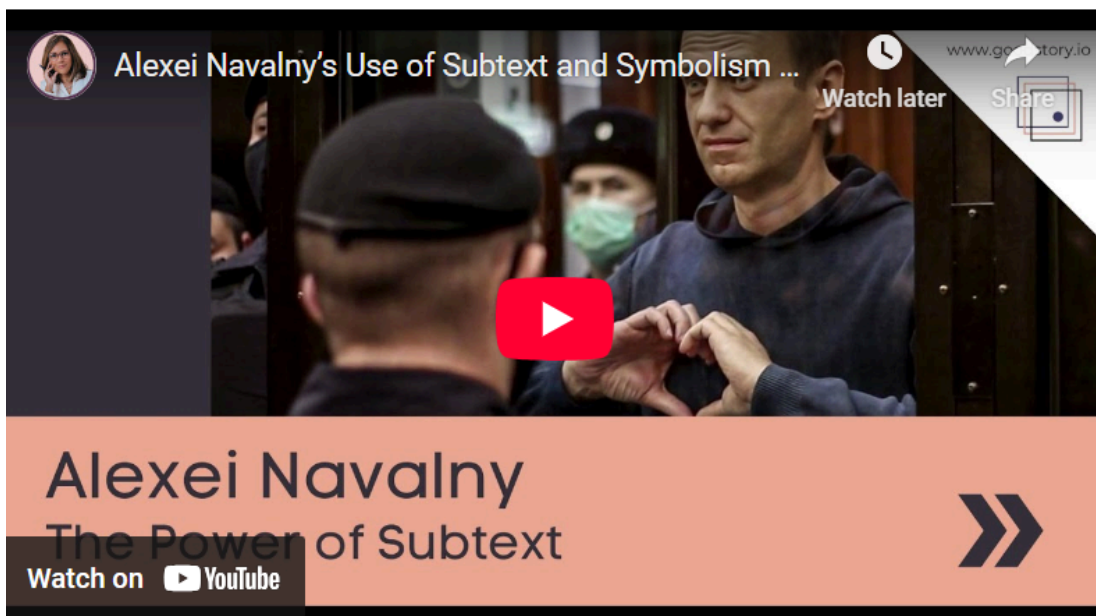
His wife and mother leverage nonverbals to get the last word.

By Chitra Ragavan

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Key points

- Dissident Alexei Navalny relayed messages of courage while behind bars as a prisoner in Russia.
- Now, Navalny's wife and mother are using subtext as a weapon to rally Russians and the world to protest.
- Subtext is the art of nonverbal communication, and digital subtext is a powerful 21st-century tool.
- Navalny's burial is bound to be a window into the power of symbolism.

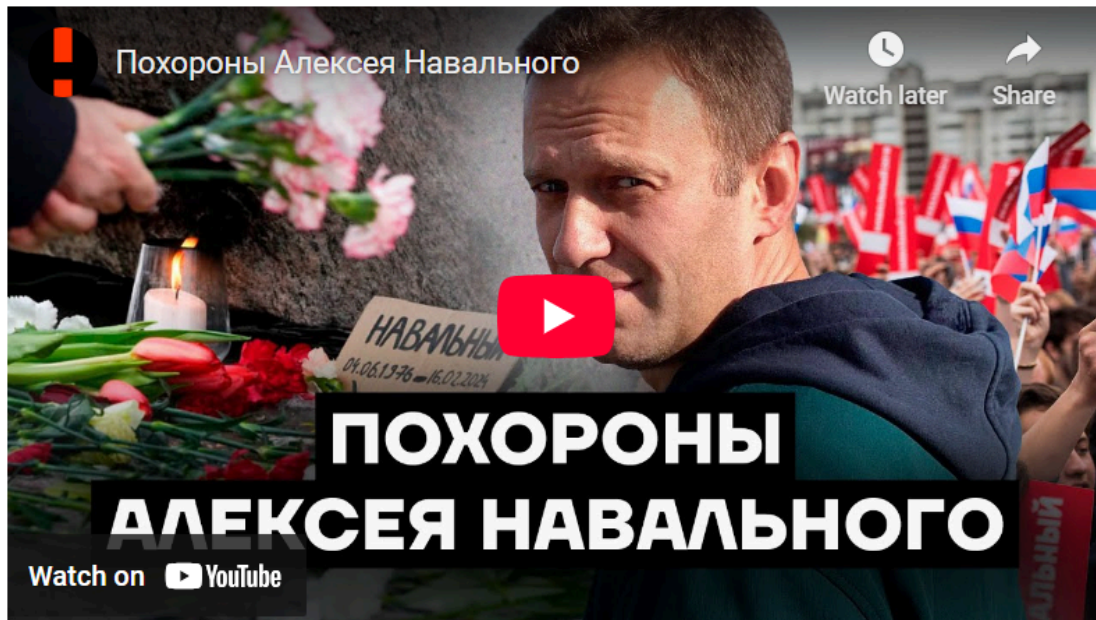


As she readies to bury her husband, Alexei Navalny, at Borisovskoye Cemetery in Moscow, Yulia Navalnaya is on a tear.

First, she took to Twitter to [post videos](#) and exhortations to demand that Russian President Vladimir Putin return her husband's body. She also shared [a video](#) of Navalny's mother, Lyudmila Navalnaya, describing how authorities were blackmailing her into giving her son a secret burial, "without a farewell." She persuaded dozens of Russian celebrities to weigh in on the cause. Then she lambasted Putin for murdering her husband and thwarting a public burial.

Even without English translations, Yulia and her mother-in-law are speaking volumes. They are practicing the art of "[digital subtext](#)," an electronic version of non-verbal, unspoken cues to reinforce spoken messages that dissidents and prisoners have had to rely upon in high-stakes communication. They were quiet yet steely as they tried to get Navalny's body back. Now, they rally Russians and the world to help carry on his mission to challenge Putin.

In this battle, they won this past weekend by getting Navalny's body returned to them for his burial, which is set for Friday, March 1, at 4 a.m. ET. Even the promotional image for a [live-streamed burial](#) – and the decision to broadcast it to the world – is a clear, unspoken, and defiant message to Putin: You will not deter us.



In grief, they communicate a profound message: They are experts at leveraging subtext, through body language and nonverbal cues, to send strong messages globally, just like Navalny did. They are rallying people to their cause to get the Russian citizens out on the streets.

A Masterclass in Subtext

During his [final court appearance](#), a day before his death, presumably by Putin's orders, Navalny delivered a masterclass in the use of subtext to convey power and authority at a moment when he was physically powerless.

In the courtroom, he stood behind bars in grim black prison pants and a shirt, tall and erect, worn but still relatively healthy given two years of imprisonment in harsh and cold gulags, solitary confinement, food deprivation, and other cruelties designed to crush him. He stood casually, looking cheerful, relaxed, and confident as he laughed and cracked jokes about the judge's salary and his funds depleting from constant fines imposed on him.

Navalny could easily have been socializing at a tony Russian oligarch's dinner party. At that moment, the prison bars melted away. He exuded courage. "Your Honor, I will send you my account number so that you can use your huge salary as a federal judge to 'warm up' my personal account because I am running out of money," he said, receiving smiles and nods in return from the judge and prison officials.

The subtext: Navalny conveyed a simple message to his captors and Putin with his words and body language: "I am in charge here. You can break my body. But you can't break my spirit, soul, and humanity. You can't break me."

Jailed since January 2021 when he arrived back in Russia after recovering in Germany from being poisoned by Putin's minions, Navalny may have been a pauper in prison, but he constantly tapped his powerful currency of humor and vocabulary to remind Putin of his unshakeable bond with the Russian people and their deep hatred of their fearless leader.

A day after his court appearance, the 47-year-old opposition leader was dead. Russian authorities claimed that Navalny had died after collapsing and losing consciousness at the penal colony north of the Arctic Circle, where he was serving a lengthy jail term.

Poking the Bear

Like many successful dissidents, including Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi, Navalny was a master of symbolism and subtext. He knew that it was the best way to goad and bedevil his thin-skinned nemesis, Putin, even if it put his life in grave danger. He was poking the bear.

With his trademark humor, Navalny also used subtext imaginatively to keep the spirit of the Russian people alive in these dark times as they grieve the loss, as of last December, of 315,000 soldiers – fathers, brothers, and sons – to the war in Ukraine and as their

standard of living and freedom erodes by the day (Since his death, 400 Russians in 39 cities [have been arrested](#) just for laying flowers in public places in Navalny's memory).

Navalny had a ruthless opponent in the subtext department. Putin allowed the world to see a seemingly healthy Navalny, and then he snuffed out his life. He was conveying his own powerful, unspoken message: "I killed him. And I am not sorry."

And, by refusing to return his body, Putin signaled the strong possibility of foul play. He didn't have to say a word. But the world got the message: "I don't care. I am invincible." And Russian activists also got the veiled threat: "You could be next."

Days after her husband's death, Yulia Navalnaya signaled she would assume her husband's mantle to continue the fight against Putin. Just hours after she received the shocking but then-unconfirmed news that Navalny had died, Navalnaya made the courageous decision to give a surprise speech at the [Munich Security Conference](#) in Munich, Germany.

With a straight back, clear-eyed focus on the audience and steady pitch in her voice, her body language conveyed strength and confidence. She was there instead of being with her kids, she told the subdued audience, after asking herself what Navalny would have done had he been in her shoes: "He would be on this stage."



“If it’s true, I want Putin, his entourage, Putin’s friends and his government to know they will pay for what they have done to our country, to our family, and my husband,” she said to a standing ovation, which also communicated a clear message of solidarity with the widow.

The Sigh That Spoke Volumes

Even more than her words, there was a moment of powerful subtext from Navalnaya when she released a sigh in a deep, penetrating silence in the room, a shimmer of tears in her eyes but unbowed and resilient in her public moment of grief.

The sigh had a tragic subtext: “I have been afraid of this for years. Now, it has finally happened. It’s real.” Indeed, “[political silence](#)” can be used as a [political rhetorical strategy](#), communications experts say. There isn't much study about the use of subtext by political dissidents and prisoners likely because regimes typically kill them so that they are no longer a threat from behind bars.

As millions of global citizens and world leaders paid tribute to Navalny with flowers,

candles, and accolades, his mother [shared a video online](#) with her own evocative use of subtext: She courageously stood in the Arctic Circle outside Russian federal prison IKU-3, “Polar Wolf,” where her son took his last breath, the curls of barbed wire speaking volumes behind her, the flash of snowflakes sparkling around her, as she spoke deadpan, her eyes covered with dark sunglasses.

A viewer didn’t even have to understand a word of the Russian she spoke in order to understand her subtext: “I am strong. I am not afraid. I want my son back.”



Even after they got Navalny's body back, his wife and mother continue to reinforce one single message repeatedly, in the quietest of voices: Putin must go. Their opprobrium speaks volumes, perhaps even more than the 500 sanctions, mainly symbolic, that President Joe Biden has issued against Russia to punish Putin for his crime.