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# Aleksei Naval'nyi and Populist Re-ordering of Putin's Stability

JUSSI LASSILA

## *Abstract*

This essay examines Aleksei Naval'nyi's political discourse in order to answer the question why Naval'nyi in particular has become the most visible oppositional figure in Russia since 2011–2012. It is argued that the principal reason for Naval'nyi's success lies in his populist re-ordering of Putin's eclectic principles of people, patriotism and the rule of law. By simplifying the political space between 'us and them' under his anti-corruption activism Naval'nyi has managed to challenge the regime in its own terms. At the same time this straightforward style separates him from Russia's other political figures who have been unable to provide compelling ideas for larger oppositional mobilisation. In this respect, regarding Russia's weak political institutions, eclectic usage of political ideas and personalistic political culture, Naval'nyi appears to be a natural alternative.

WITHIN THE LARGE-SCALE PROTESTS IN RUSSIA IN 2011–2012, Aleksei Naval'nyi became the front man of the new oppositional movement. Although the protests, and Naval'nyi himself, have received well earned attention, his ideational role with regard to the Putin regime has not been sufficiently conceptualised. This essay examines Naval'nyi's political discourse in order to answer the question why Naval'nyi in particular, the depressing situation of Russia's opposition in 2015 notwithstanding, has distinguished himself as the most visible oppositional rival of Putin. In terms of Russia's post-Soviet political trajectories and of political modernisation at large Naval'nyi can be seen as a political actor who aims to transform latent public demands into a populist message and whose thread is a straightforward division between the people and the elite. The principal danger of Naval'nyi for the regime is, on the one hand, that he does not represent any substantially new principles that are different from Putin's rule as, let us say, the anti-Western opposition did in relation to Yel'tsin's rule in the early 1990s. Instead, the core of Naval'nyi's political message can be seen as a re-ordering of the central components of Putin's 'non-ideological patriotic stability', which are the people, patriotism (national dignity), and the rule of law. By demanding integrity from these principles, Naval'nyi has turned them against the regime. On the other hand, Naval'nyi's rhetorical simplicity and the straightforwardness of his anti-corruption activism create a notable difference from Russia's tradition of political intellectuals who have been apt to promote abstract and lengthy ideological visions instead of rhetorical simplicity for the sake of mobilisational expansion.

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First I present the argument as to why there is a point to study Naval'nyi, and why populism becomes a relevant framework for such a study. Then I briefly discuss Putin in the light of populism and move towards a symptomatic reading of populism as a relevant frame for the study of Naval'nyi with regard to Putin. The central point is in Ernesto Laclau's definition of populism as a particular articulatory logic. After introducing the essential circumstances of the emergence of populism in Putin's Russia, I move to a selected sample of Naval'nyi's writings and views in order to support my thesis concerning Naval'nyi's importance and the danger he poses for the regime. I conclude that under the current political leadership the only way to challenge Putin politically in terms of ideas is the populism represented by Naval'nyi. While this populist pressure provides a real challenge for the regime as long as the current *status quo* between constitutional freedoms and the actual repression is preserved, it hardly creates any solid basis for the development of party ideologies and the competition between them.

### *Why Naval'nyi?*

Previous studies have clearly demonstrated that Russia's protest wave in 2011–2012, and to some extent in 2013, were the most serious hitherto for Putin's regime, not least because of the protests' negative, anti-regime consensus between various oppositional groups (Greene 2013; Gel'man 2013, 2014). This consensus can be linked to the overall development of post-Soviet Russian protests. According to Graeme Robertson, Russia's post-Soviet protests have gradually developed from the locally driven protests with restricted repertoires of the 1990s to urban-centred symbolic rallies with multiple themes over the course of the 2000s (Robertson 2013). In addition, the change in the usage of the state's symbolic politics with increasing repression, from the pre-protest era to the post-2011 situation, indicates the challenges that public dissent had posed for the Kremlin's political legitimacy (Smyth *et al.* 2013; Smyth & Soboleva 2014).

The central personality in the protests' recent development, expansion and novel techniques has been Aleksei Naval'nyi, a lawyer and blogger, born in 1976. Indeed, after the regime recovered from the December 2011 shock and managed to calm down the protests by establishing Vladimir Putin in his third presidential term,<sup>1</sup> Naval'nyi distinguished himself as the most capable threat to the Kremlin's *status quo*. At the latest this happened during his successful campaign in the Moscow mayoral election in August–September 2013, his exclusion from the state-controlled television channels notwithstanding. Against all expectations and opinion polls, his winning second place in the election with 27.24% of the votes (Tsentrāl'naya izbiratel'naya 2013), proved his skills of combining highly creative use of the internet with traditional oratory on the streets. At first sight, an important reason for the 'Naval'nyi phenomenon' can be found in his professional background, attached to his oppositional political position, and skilfully mediated through the internet. As a lawyer he is well aware of Russia's legal practices and has significant experience in spearheading legal challenges on behalf of minority shareholders in large Russian companies, including Gazprom, Bank VTB, Sberbank, Rosneft, Transneft, and Surgutneftegaz, through the Union of Minority

<sup>1</sup>This was enabled, not least, because of the opposition's organisational incapacity and the abuse of the regime's administrative resources (Gel'man 2013, 2014).

Shareholders.<sup>2</sup> This knowledge and experience has greatly facilitated his agility against the Kremlin's administrative violence, and has moulded his reputation as an anti-corruption blogger, the most common epithet related to Naval'nyi since his establishing the RosPil project (Laruelle 2014).<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the fight against the corruption, that has been blessed and exploited by the regime, became the backbone of Naval'nyi's political career. The ambiguity of the state's information policies, with its censored television but almost freely expanding internet, has certainly facilitated Naval'nyi's 'Anti-Corruption Foundation' to spread the message in Russian society, particularly in the urban *milieu*. In 2013 Naval'nyi was the most cited blogger in Russia (Medialogiya 2013) and in August 2015 his Twitter account had more than one million followers.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the very nature of Russia's electoral authoritarian regime under Putin has unintentionally built a political martyrdom around him. By arresting and releasing him after various lawsuits, the Russian state has not only demonstrated the weakness of its legal institutions but also the regime's overall difficulty in responding non-coercively to political challenges.

Besides professional factors, Naval'nyi certainly represents an emerging political generation whose adult experience has been mostly post-Soviet (he was 15 when the USSR collapsed) (Gel'man & Travin 2013; Gel'man 2014, pp. 108–9). However, Naval'nyi's political freshness has cast an interesting shadow on those expectations which have basically relied on his liberal agenda: his more or less explicit orientation towards ethno-civic nationalism (Moen-Larsen 2014). Naval'nyi has been a key figure in Russia's national-democratic movement (or, *Natsdem*) and one of the founders of the movement *Narod* (Laruelle 2014).<sup>5</sup> Marlene Laruelle has pointed out that despite some representatives of the *Natsdems* rejecting the label of national-democracy,<sup>6</sup> it has certainly challenged the traditional division of post-Soviet Russian nationalism between imperialists (either Soviet or anti-Soviet) and ethno-nationalists (comprising various xenophobic and racist movements) (Laruelle 2014, pp. 277–78). These two major strands of Russia's nationalism, including their internal and mutual variations, have shared a common anti-Western, or even anti-European position. By contrast, *Natsdems* highlight Russia's orientation to Western civilisation (Western Europe),<sup>7</sup> with a strong ethno-nationalist standpoint. This supports the idea of Russia as a democratically ruled, European oriented state in which ethnic Russians should have a dominant role. Unsurprisingly, the successes of xenophobic populist parties in Europe figure as an important reference point for many *Natsdems* (Laruelle 2014, p. 277). Against this backdrop, the war in Ukraine and the Western sanctions have caused a serious crisis among European minded nationalists. Their anti-Putin stance, but overall support for 'Novorossiya', has largely merged into the official

<sup>2</sup>See, Yale World Fellows, available at: <http://worldfellows.yale.edu/alexey-navalny>, accessed 28 October 2015.

<sup>3</sup>RosPil was the first of Naval'nyi's large-scale anti-corruption projects. It was established in December 2010, focusing on corruption in state purchasing. The project enables people to report on suspicious purchases on its site and the specialists of the project then investigate them in more detail. Like later Naval'nyi's projects, RosPil works on the basis of donations which have proved to be an effective funding source.

<sup>4</sup>For Naval'nyi's Twitter account, see <https://twitter.com/Navalny>, accessed 26 October 2015.

<sup>5</sup>The name is derived from 'Natsional'no-russkoe osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie'. Naval'nyi established the movement in 2007 after his disappointment with and expulsion from the Yabloko party. See the manifesto of the movement, available at: <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article17321.htm>, accessed 26 October 2015.

<sup>6</sup>As well as some observers of Russia's nationalism.

<sup>7</sup>For instance, see the programme of the National-Democratic Party (*Natsional'no-demokraticeskaya partiya*) (Programma Vserossiiskoi 2014).

policies of the Kremlin while some of them, like Naval'nyi, have remained as harsh critics of the Kremlin's policies towards Ukraine.

The situation for the opposition and Naval'nyi in the summer of 2015 was not particularly promising. Various repressive measures had become more common and the murder of the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 raised well grounded concerns of a further spread of political violence, either beyond the control of the Kremlin, or partially under its guidance. Last but certainly not least, the backbone of the regime, President Putin, has enjoyed high-level public support with his harsh anti-Western and anti-liberal rhetoric. It is thus not surprising that Oleg Kashin, a well known oppositional journalist and political commentator, pointed out in July 2015 in the oppositional web journal *Slon.ru* that there is no point for the opposition to take part in any elections in the current system because it will not change it; either the oppositional candidates risk their lives, or they become part of the systemic opposition which is for Kashin the same as the regime (Kashin 2015). For Kashin a particular example of this was the plan of the democratic coalition under the oppositional party *Parnas* to participate in four regional elections held in September 2015.<sup>8</sup> As was expected, all candidates in all four regions except one (Kostroma) were disqualified and it became clear that the coalition had no chance of challenging the regime in the elections. A couple of days after the publication of Kashin's column, Naval'nyi met him in the live debate programme *Klinch* on *Ekho Moskvy* radio station and harshly condemned 'his friend' for downplaying his coalition's aim of participating in the elections (Naval'nyi 2015). For Naval'nyi, Kashin's views were hypocritical and insulting since he and his 'comrades are and will be absolutely independent from the system'; they risk their lives, and their main purpose is to put pressure on the regime (Naval'nyi 2015).

It is not difficult to agree with Kashin and to see Naval'nyi's angry defence mainly in terms of saving a politician's face. Nevertheless, there are some important reservations concerning Kashin's cynicism. First, in the light of the many repressive measures against Naval'nyi over the last four years, it is worth asking why the regime worries about him since the overall performance of the opposition is weak and the popularity of Putin seems to be high. And, from the other side of the coin, it should be asked what motivates Naval'nyi to sustain such optimism in the struggle with all-encompassing non-democratic rule. A probable psychological explanation lies in the simple satisfaction that he receives from the large-scale publicity, particularly *via* the internet. In this sense, even without any access to political power, a paradoxical proof of his political importance is the regime's repression which seemingly motivates his continuing political activism. However, these explanations offer little for the examination of Naval'nyi's political ideas and his obvious importance in the oppositional segment in Russia's politics.

Hence, despite the protests in 2011–2012, Naval'nyi's ideational role with regard to the Putin regime has not been sufficiently conceptualised. In this essay I argue that Naval'nyi, as a manifestation of Russia's personalistic political culture, is a mirror image of Putin in terms of detaching the regime's loose ideational concepts for his major political capital. Naval'nyi can be seen as a political actor whose discourse aims to transform latent public demands into a populist message and whose thread is a straightforward division between the people and the elite. Given his visibility among the opposition since the 2011–2012 protests and in the Moscow mayoral election in 2013, it seems the message has been effective. The central

<sup>8</sup>These regions were Novosibirsk, Kaluga, Kostroma, and Magadan.

argument of the essay is that Naval'nyi's importance, and the danger for the regime, lies, on the one hand, in the way he re-orders the central components of Putin's 'non-ideological patriotic stability', based on the loose ideational concepts of people, patriotism (or national dignity), and the rule of law. By demanding integrity from these concepts, Naval'nyi has turned them against the regime. In other words, as a political challenger Naval'nyi does not represent any substantially new principles for Putin's rule, but his rhetorical simplicity and straightforwardness in relation to his anti-corruption activism create a notable difference from Russia's tradition of political intellectuals with their abstract and lengthy ideological visions. Let us now scrutinise this populist aspect in more detail.

### *Putin as a populist*

It is difficult to find a political concept which would be more casually and loosely used than populism. In common journalistic usage it applies to any politician who stands out from his or her colleagues and speaks to the people in an understandable way. Whereas broader public understanding typically requires simplifications, emotional colouring, or a habitus not common in the correctness associated with existing political 'expert' institutions, populism is a mode of speech which somehow distorts the existing order of making politics.

When it comes to populism's negative colouring, it is no wonder that various authoritarian rulers are labelled as populists from the viewpoint of political cultures categorised as more democratic. For instance, Putin can be defined as a populist quite easily. His numerous anti-Western statements, particularly over the course of the Crimea's annexation in 2014, still speak to the people as an awaited remedy to the nightmarish 1990s which are associated with poverty, crime, national meaninglessness and lost superpower greatness. Against the international condemnation of the annexation, Putin can be seen as a national populist. His approach has broken, in a manner of speaking, 'the bad spell of the international (Western) norms which are not our sovereign norms' (Putin 2014). According to Edwin Bacon, Putin's narrative asserts that the time has come 'to refute the rhetoric of the Cold War' since a strong and independent Russia with national interests which demand respect is back on the agenda, and the insistence on respect for national interests was a key factor which led to the absorption of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian Federation (Bacon 2015, p. 245). In a similar vein, Putin's *machismo* over the course of his rule has seemingly spoken to many Russians, presenting a populist image as the leader who does not care for the grey correctness of previous Russian rulers.<sup>9</sup>

Seen in these terms, however, populism hardly provides any analytical rigour if it is simply reduced to ideational flexibility, particularly in Russia where ideological positions have not become fixed on the political map. Thus, repetitive controversies of ideational positions that a politician might express, such as Putin's paternalistic *machismo* or Zhirinovskii's rants, should not be reduced to populism. As Ernesto Laclau has noted, 'A movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents—whatever those contents are' (Laclau 2005b, p. 33). Vladimir Zhirinovskii is a paradigmatic case of a politician who may say anything, and this certainly resonates with populist stylistics, but he lacks the structural core of populism. Since the core of this articulatory logic is the division between the powerful

<sup>9</sup>On Putin's *machismo*, see Sperling (2015).

and powerless, or the elite and the people, a major stumbling block in Putin's (as well as Zhirinovskii's) 'national-populism' is the incredibility of this division.

Of course, in some respects, the Kremlin's emphasis on national sovereignty against Western elites and their domestic lackeys creates the mode of identification in which the Russian people and their leader can figure as a powerless victim against alien elites, particularly when claiming the West's antipathy towards 'us' is a central resource in the Kremlin's domestic (and foreign) politics. Furthermore, the beginning of Putin's rule can be seen as a successful anti-elite identification in which Yel'tsin-era oligarchs, largely hated by the people, were overruled along with the previous liberal and democratic principles of the 1990s political elite, culminating in the arrest of the oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovskii in 2003. Since then, however, the regime's major challenge in terms of the people–elite division has become how to compensate, or to surpass, the notion of elite in Russia's political discourse, not least due to its irrevocable link to the Kremlin. The obvious eliteness of the current regime cannot create a sustainable populist position due to the extensive institutional power of the president—inherited from Putin's predecessor, the 'national-populist' Yel'tsin (Gel'man 2013). In addition, Putin's official state patriotism has used lots of energy in creating a sense of national greatness, in particular after the annexation of the Crimea, whose thrust has been the idea of the sovereign people of 'the great nation' who are supposedly reluctant to see themselves in the position of oppressed victim.

*Populism as an empirically grounded mode of identification: Laclau and Putin's Russia*

It is difficult to find a politician who could avoid the stamp of populism completely. Likewise, it is equally clear that there are politicians who are more populist than others. Francisco Panizza distinguishes three ways of approaching populism: empiricist, historicist and symptomatic. The empiricist approach has attempted to find a distinctive group of attributes that would characterise populism; the historicist reading has highlighted the relationship of populism to particular social and historical circumstances, particularly with regard to Latin America; while the symptomatic reading of populism—by incorporating some features from empiricist and historicist approaches—has treated the phenomenon as an anti-*status quo* discourse which simplifies the political space between people and the elite (Panizza 2005, pp. 2–3). Robert Jansen also distinguishes three traditions in the study of populism, although defines these traditions differently, in terms of three generations. The first generation, according to Jansen, focused on Latin America on the basis of modernisation theory and structural Marxism; the second generation focused on the discourse of populism and was interpretative; and the third generation focused on populism's political-institutional features, particularly with regard to the wave of populist leaders in Latin America in the 1990s. According to him a fundamental problem in all the previous three generations in populism studies has been their tendency to treat populism as a thing, and as a corrective he proposes the concept of populist mobilisation, which he sees as a 'sustained, large-scale political project that mobilises ordinarily marginalised social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people' (Jansen 2011, p. 82).

I partially share Jansen's view when he pinpoints populism as a political practice, but disagree with his argument that the symptomatic approach as a whole (in Jansen's terminology



the discursive interpretive approach) would treat populism as a thing. While Jansen defines populist mobilisation as an approach which shifts the focus from the social content of populism and from the ends toward which it is directed to the means by which it is achieved (Jansen 2011, p. 82), Panizza argues for a symptomatic reading of populism principally as a political action whose central ideational tenets are framed by a simplification of the political space between people and the elite. In this discursively constructed simplification ideational fluidity and vagueness can be seen as a means of mobilisation whose efficiency is linked, one way or another, to the discourse (form and content of ideas) that a political actor uses. To relate this to Naval'nyi, whereas he has certainly distinguished himself as the most capable rival of Putin among the non-parliamentary, actual opposition, it is justified to argue that Naval'nyi's discourse plays a central role in the political success allowed to him in the Putin system. Yet, I certainly agree with Jansen's criticism of discursive interpretative approaches of populism which tend to simplify the relationship between ideas and mobilisation which is actually a complex process (Jansen 2011, p. 80). Nonetheless, it is the discourse, a politician's public voice including its semiotic and interactive dimensions, which constitutes his or her political image, the contact surface people may grasp. It is obviously true that Naval'nyi has managed to mobilise supporters whose political views differ from each other and persons who support him regardless of his particular views. However, while particular views might be rejected, it goes without saying that some views must be accepted in order to formulate any basis of mobilisation for him. This prompts us to ponder his 'contact surface' in more detail.

Hence, in line with a symptomatic reading of populism, I follow Francisco Panizza (2005) in arguing for an understanding of populism as 'a mode of identification available to any political actor operating in a discursive field in which the notion of sovereignty of the people and its inevitable corollary, the conflict between the powerful and the powerless, are the core elements of its political imaginary' (Panizza 2005, p. 4).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, populism's conditions are principally linked to the crisis of political representation of the dominating political establishment, and 'a successful constitution of new identities and of a representative link with those identities' (Panizza 2005, p. 11). In terms of a crisis of political representation, Ernesto Laclau, who has been the most prominent and cited scholar in the symptomatic approach of populism, has highlighted the inability of the institutional system to absorb the plurality of popular demands that exists in a society (Laclau 2005b). It is worth mentioning that Laclau's overwhelmingly theory-oriented and extensive reading of populism has led to a problematic understanding of the relationship between populism, politics and institutions. While aiming to define populism as an analytical concept in the field of politics, Laclau shows an overall tendency towards contentious politics resulting as a conflation between politics and populism which are positioned against institutions. That is, true politics is always something which is beyond institutions (Panizza & Miorelli 2013, p. 308). My aim is not to provide a corrective to Laclau's problematic bias. Rather, I suggest that in the lack of true parliamentarism and institutional democracy Russia's political dimension of politics is emphatically contentious and Naval'nyi is an ideal case to which Laclau's biased view of populism applies. In this vein, the case of Naval'nyi and Putin-era Russia exemplifies Laclau's theory-laden reading of populism with a relevant empirical basis. Let me explain this.

A central starting point for Laclau's theorisation of populism is a demand; how it is expressed and fulfilled (or remained to be unfulfilled) in a society. In a case where an individual

<sup>10</sup>See also Kazin (1995).



or a single group of people demand, let us say, better waste management in the region where they live, and a municipality responsible for these issues is capable of fulfilling this demand, the logic of difference that the municipality follows manages to prevent the emergence of any frontier or chasm within the social (Laclau 2005b, p. 36). Here waste management figures as a part of a highly institutionalised social immanence, in which various demands can be satisfied in an administrative way. The logic of difference means that the demand for better waste management remains separate and different from other demands (such as better schooling or health care). In an opposite case however, where the demand is not fulfilled, it leads to a local frustration. If, as Laclau continues, 'for whatever reason, the variety of demands that do not find satisfaction is very large, that multiple frustration will trigger social logics of an entirely different kind ... all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied' (Laclau 2005b, pp. 36–7). In this case the issue is about the logic of equivalence which means that 'each individual demand is constitutively split: on the one hand, it is its own particularised self (for example, waste management); on the other, it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of other demands' (Laclau 2005b, p. 37).

Following Laclau, by juxtaposing these two different logics in social and political practices, we can see 'the conditions for either the emergence or disappearance of a popular subjectivity':

the more social demands tend to be differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system, the weaker the equivalential links will be and more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity; conversely, a situation in which a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist, creates the conditions leading to a populist rupture. (Laclau 2005b, pp. 37–8)

Russia's generally weak institutions hardly provide any productive basis for evaluating their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. The point which resonates better with the case of Russia is the people's sense of institutions *vis-à-vis* the supposed priorities of the people's societal demands. It can be asserted that before 2011—and to some extent after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014—Putin's course of societal stability has managed to absorb the people's demands and keep them differentiated within the presidentially governed 'institutions'. When citizens' mundane difficulties are mirrored against the fear of uncertainty, it seems that for many Russians these do not cumulate with each other which would lead to a large-scale frustration. Instead, it seems that Putin's personalistic vigour has been a successful substitute for the weak institutional system and problems that this system proliferates. Still, Russia's post-Soviet development has created a highly productive soil for the emergence of a popular rupture.<sup>11</sup> The regime has little chance to deny its institutional responsibility for various demands if the people do not share the priority of societal stability against poor institutions anymore. Protests in 2011–2012 were a momentum when the growing institutional incapability could no longer fulfil various demands of the people on the basis of the hitherto greatest importance of the 'stability under the secure leader'. Now separate demands (with a demand for fair elections as the main trigger) created an effective chain of equivalential demands (such as political freedoms, residential costs, traffic jams, the elite's privileges, and failed immigration policies). What is more, in order to have an equivalential chain of demands, representatives of different and substantially contradictory demands required the identification of the source

<sup>11</sup>On the nature of protests in post-Soviet Russia, see Robertson (2013).

of social negativity. It follows that the social (including the political) are divided into two camps: power and the underdog (Laclau 2005b, p. 38).

This division was emphatically present in the 2011–2012 protests. It was a generalisation of cleavages rather than a particular set of reasons for dissatisfaction or of abstract democratic (or nationalist) ideals that characterised the populist shift in strategies of the opposition (Gel'man 2015, p. 180). As noted by Gel'man, 'the asymmetry of the populist strategy turned the previous dimension of political conflict, between a strong regime and a weak opposition, into a new one between a hostile state and civil society' (Gel'man 2015 p. 181). The ideological rootlessness of Russia's political map was also reflected in the protesters' identification with issues. Protesters were not only reluctant to position themselves in terms of left or right (Bibkov 2012), but also reluctant to identify themselves with regard to social classes. Despite certain socio-economic and geographical factors being common for the protesters—who were socio-economically representatives of the city middle class who are not dependent on the state—they mainly disavowed identifying themselves as representatives of the middle class. Instead, according to Artemii Magun's study, 'people' was the most significant identification frame for participants (Magun 2014).<sup>12</sup>

### *Representational crisis in Putin's Russia*

In terms of Russia's semi-consolidated, or unconsolidated authoritarian rule, the essential source for the crisis of political representation can be seen in the nature of Russia's 'dual state' (Sakwa 2015). Over the course of Putin's rule, the gap between constitutional, democratically oriented citizen rights and the patrimonial administrative regime has become wider, and 'the absence of clear boundaries between the two generates conflicting political practices and a syncretic policy process' (Sakwa 2015, p. 193). Before 2010 syncretism and continuously conflicting political goals were not a problem for Putin's political legitimisation, although they certainly demonstrated a basic structural problem for Russia's political modernisation. However, with the protests and the re-election of Putin in March 2012, these problems have increasingly become a challenge for the Kremlin's political legitimisation as well. In 2014–2015, 'Putin had returned, but the country and the political system had evolved ... (t)he tightening of the screws represented a political defeat of the system itself, shifting towards overt coercion and losing whatever remained of the inner resources of dynamism and renewal' (Sakwa 2015, p. 206).

The lack of ideologically established parties, and of competition between them (reflecting an artificial parliamentarism), as well as the lack of durable collective action among citizens (reflecting a weak civil society), has hindered the development of any ideologically-based rule, either democratic, authoritarian or fascist (Hanson 2006; Kailitz & Umland 2010; Roberts 2012; Gel'man 2013, 2015). According to Stephen Hanson, since the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia has been not only a weak democracy but also a weak autocracy (Hanson 2007). Following Hanson's notion of weak ideological system, it is the Kremlin's fear of systematic ideological turns while sustaining the presidentially led *status quo* that provides the major pool for the political discourse of Naval'nyi.

This major pool is the Kremlin's ideal political discourse that I generalise using the concepts of 'the rule of law', 'patriotism' or 'national dignity' and 'the people'. Its intended

<sup>12</sup>See also Gontmakher and Ross (2015).

process of signification (popular associations) should move freely between these concepts and provide an official logic of equivalence between particular demands (though authoritatively supplied from above). Patriotism in particular has become the central discursive frame for various legislative measures and policy programmes (Sperling 2009; Daucé *et al.* 2015). For the 'rule of law', corruption has figured as a central constitutive other and Putin personally has enjoyed a reputation as an active anti-corruption fighter while the state's measures in this field are not generally trusted (Levada 2015c). In the ideal discourse of the Kremlin, corruption must be differentiated away from citizens' concerns into supposedly effective 'institutional immanence'. The strength of this pseudo-ideological constellation is in its banality. It goes without saying that all rulers and citizens wish to be surrounded by law-obeying compatriots. Patriotism as a form of societal engagement is uncontested as long as its reputation remains neutral; everyone can feel himself or herself patriotic towards the country, territory, or region in which he or she lives. As long as the temporal distance from the dark experiences of the 1990s can be manipulated as a 'collective yesterday' and contrasted with an equally important image of stability and security, the constellation seemingly fulfils its role as a necessary idea-like component for the Kremlin's political 'alternative without alternatives'. However, along with various problems, new and remaining ones, the banality of the constellation becomes its major weakness. While the initial idea of the discourse's concepts is in their ambiguousness, it is open to competing interpretations under formal democratic principles as well. Let us now take a look at how Naval'nyi's competing interpretation can be illustrated (see Figure 1).

What is essential for Naval'nyi's populist challenge is the way he restructures the Kremlin's discourse into a classical populist frontier between the elite and the underdog without abandoning the central signifiers of this discourse: the rule of law, patriotism or national dignity and the people. Moreover, he is not inventing any new signifiers either. This is a major difference from the ideational tendency of Russia's opposition who (like Kashin discussed above) have been apt to abandon the regime's political signifiers as a whole. By the same token the existing regime's morally corrupted, criminal, or impotent stance is often condemned

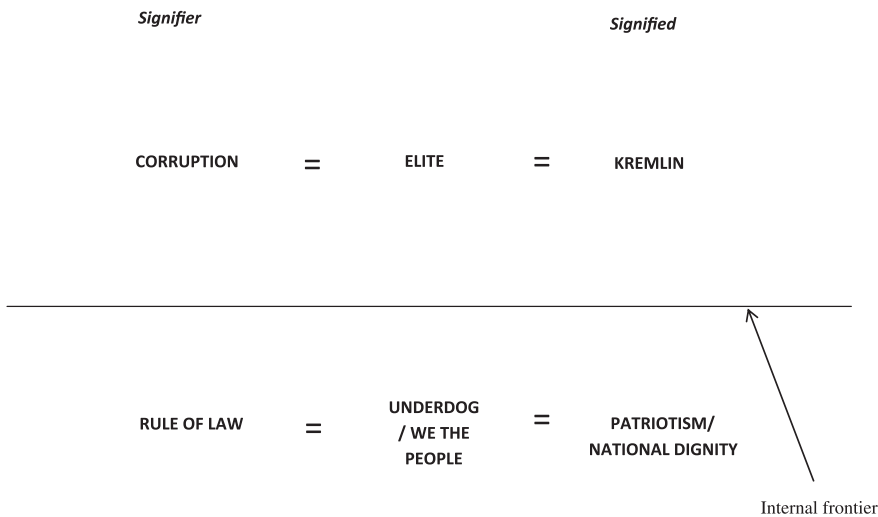


FIGURE 1. THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF NAVAL'NYI.

along with various intellectual and historical allusions and references to abstract political ideals, either in terms of democracy, or some kind of nationalism. Naval'nyi is emphatically more straightforward and simple. By highlighting the barrier between the rule of law and the people with national dignity against the bad elite and ubiquitous corruption, Naval'nyi's discourse vividly encapsulates Laclau's assertion on the relationship between equivalential and particular demands floating in society. Laclau points out that 'an equivalential chain can weaken the particularism of their links but cannot do away with it altogether' (Laclau 2005a, p. 120). What Naval'nyi weakens in the Kremlin's ideal discourse is the official role of the supply-side of the citizens' supposed demands, generalised into the above discussed concepts of the rule of law, patriotism, and the people, and the presidentially governed fight against corruption. Each of these particular demands is preserved in Naval'nyi's discourse, but now a new equivalence between the demands is provided which is actually not a novel equivalence but a dislocation of the demands. Retelling Laclau, this dislocation requires an equivalential inscription which means that any emerging 'people' (as a new popular subject) is going to present two faces in order to be recognisable: one of rupture with an existing order and the other introducing 'ordering' where there is basic dislocation (Laclau 2005a, pp. 121–22).

In the light of Naval'nyi's writings it is no exaggeration to assert that his political discourse conflates the internal frontier between the elite and the underdog. In so doing, the centre of the previous political discourse—the Kremlin—must be particularised into a chain of equivalence in which it figures as a simple 'ring' with other sources for unfulfilled demands. In Laclau's words, 'each individual demand is its own particularised self while it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of other demands' (Laclau 2005b, p. 37). It follows that the name of corruption (signifier) is a 'true' name of the elite (signified), or *vice versa*. Consequently, the demand for the rule of law must be signified on the other side of the internal frontier in the way it manages to attach other unfulfilled demands of the previous political discourse into its chain of equivalence, in this case, patriotism or national dignity. In terms of the latter, Naval'nyi can openly articulate xenophobic and ethno-nationalist dimensions of patriotism which are largely supported by ethnic Russians, and which are overly problematic for the regime.

### *Naval'nyi's style*

Concerning the vast number of posts in Naval'nyi's blog, which is his central political forum, over the course of his political career, it is impossible to provide a systematic analysis of these texts. Hence, the following, highly restricted sample of Naval'nyi's views aims to pinpoint the aforementioned framework of populism.

In the midst of the emerging Ukrainian crisis and of the process of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Naval'nyi was under house arrest (convicted in December 2013 and under a suspended sentence after March 2015). Regardless of his exclusion from the streets, and of the court's ban on his using the internet, he continued to have messages posted to his blog by his wife or colleagues in the anti-corruption network. As such, these are good examples of Naval'nyi's legal agility against coercion in terms of avoiding physical responsibility for his political activism. On 19 March 2014 Naval'nyi published the post titled 'Who would you like to see under the sanctions?' followed by the list of businessmen and their relatives forming Putin's inner circle. The very title of the post reveals one of Naval'nyi's central

trademarks: a constant reference to citizens on the basis of telephone polls conducted by his anti-corruption team. For instance, for the question 'Which of these groups must be exposed to visa sanctions and freezing of their stocks abroad?' the answers were divided and described within the following options (Naval'nyi 2014a): 'businessmen' who belong to the most inner circle of Putin (Boris and Arkady Rotenberg, Yury and Kirill Kovalchuk, and Gennady Timchenko) (19.4%); oligarchs (such as Roman Abramovich, Alisher Usmanov, Oleg Deripaska and Alexander Mamut) (10.3%); high-ranking members of 'United Russia' (16.1%); high-ranking members of the government and the administration of the President (15.2%); children of the authorities who are 'doing business' in state companies (15.9%); directors of state banks, state companies, or companies under the state's control (9.7%); and propagandists (such as pro-Kremlin journalists Oleg Dobrodev, Vladimir Kulistikov, and Vladimir Solovev among others) (13.4%).

Each of these categories was further specified by pointing to which businessmen, oligarchs, or other categories should be the first to be sanctioned. There is no exact information available concerning the geographical division or the socio-economic nature of the sample, no mention of respondents who did not answer (here the whole 100% is covered), nor whether the poll was structured, semi-structured, or open. In general, it seems that the reported options for answers, whose style is revealingly biased, leave little space for rejecting the basic criticism posed on 'crooks and thieves', the most famous of Naval'nyi's slogans for the ruling party during the mass protests in 2011–2012. The basic point is to harness citizens into the fact that Western sanctions are reality in a way which conforms to Naval'nyi's overall pro-Western position, and consequently, fits with the internal frontier between us and the bad elite. Naval'nyi, in a manner of speaking, discusses with the people how the sanctions should be targeted, and this orientates him towards further actions on the basis of '*vox populi*' information.<sup>13</sup> For instance, before showing the poll's results in the post, the leader in the category of businessmen that should be sanctioned, billionaire Gennady Timchenko, was introduced as follows: 'The crook Timchenko became billionaire due to the corrupt distribution of our oil. Tell me, you who love Putin, would you also want to see that these billions returned to the Russian people who were so often mentioned yesterday?' (Naval'nyi 2014a).

While addressing an obvious rhetorical question to supporters of Putin, Naval'nyi aims to transform the evident popular support for Putin's venture in Crimea into a simplified frontier which divides the Russian people from Putin's corrupt lackeys. In other words, he does not accuse the Russian people, who were repeatedly mentioned in Putin's speech on Crimea on the day before the post (18 March 2014), but aims to redirect Putin's appeal to Russians as a dishonest move insofar as Putin is the equivalent with such figures as Timchenko. So, the changed political atmosphere in 2014 notwithstanding—from Putin's constantly decreasing popularity to its sudden recovery—Naval'nyi resorts to those demands of the people which are still seemingly capable of creating an equivalence with other demands against the regime: Russians' antipathy to corruption and the regime's incapacity to adhere to the rule of law, which are crystallised in its corrupt figures.

<sup>13</sup>Naval'nyi's potential influence on the US sanctions against Russia became apparent after his interview in the *New York Times* on 20 March 2014 (Naval'nyi 2014c). The interview largely followed this post by informing Naval'nyi's list of the most optimal persons that should be sanctioned. The article caused a dispute among those nationalists who had been Naval'nyi's supporters before the annexation of Crimea. The latter event became an important watershed among Russia's European-oriented nationalists.

Naval'nyi's views on Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine provide a vantage point to his situational populist logic. A week earlier, on 12 March 2014, Naval'nyi used his dialogue with the people by answering 'questions which had occupied his supporters', in this case on Ukraine and Crimea (Naval'nyi 2014b). The post includes polls which seemingly fit with the thrust of his argument. The first poll concerns citizens' perceptions concerning insults that Russians have experienced in post-Soviet territories, and it shows that Chechnya is the main source in this respect. While attempting to justify his systematic critique against the Kremlin, Naval'nyi transforms the increased support for Putin's manoeuvres in Ukraine into 'real insults against Russian people'. According to Naval'nyi, the Kremlin attempts to hide these while being afraid of the Ukrainian scenario in Russia:

What do you say about the trampling of Russians' rights in Ukraine and Crimea?

The whole 'United Russia' with Putin's federal councils and yes-men of culture are double-faced animals and enemies of the Russian people. Where were they when hundreds of thousands of Russians were deported from Uzbekistan and Tadzhikistan? Where were they when Russians were mutilated in Chechnya? Why do they not talk about Chechen bandits who were not punished, those who are called 'representatives of us', who rape people and receive probation orders? Recent history knows hundreds of cases when Russians' rights have been truly trampled on, also with violence. Crooks of the Kremlin are silent about these, and they have started to sing their song only just when a hypothetical threat has appeared for Putin's golden baguette.<sup>14</sup> (Naval'nyi 2014b)

Naval'nyi uses here an openly ethno-nationalist card against the Kremlin's seemingly successful imperialist 'counter-strike' that the crisis in Ukraine and Crimea's annexation opened for nationalist sentiments in Russian society over the course of 2014. The second poll of Naval'nyi's post illustrates Russians' attitude to potential referendums in the subjects of the Russian Federation that are seeking more autonomy. The poll shows that 55% of Russians supported the referendum in Crimea (which Naval'nyi regarded as a huge mistake) (Naval'nyi 2014b). These figures allegedly do not allow Naval'nyi to criticise the Kremlin's adventure in Crimea with ethno-nationalist or anti-corruption arguments. Instead, now we see an imperialist twist in the name of 'every normal citizen of the Russian Federation' which figures separately from his overall condemnation of the referendum held in Crimea:

Is it right that Crimea belongs to Ukraine?

Of course not. The point that Crimea was given to Ukraine by chance is unreasonable and insulting for every normal citizen of the Russian Federation. It was illegally removed by a voluntary decision of the despot Khrushchev. Thus, the CPSU and all the idiots of the Politburo are responsible for this. It is good to remind communists about this, who are now so eager to fight with Ukraine. The 'necessity' to pay rent for the Black Sea naval base also causes angers. Crimea is great, beautiful. My wife and I spent our first holiday there. (Naval'nyi 2014b)

It is no wonder that Naval'nyi's obvious ideational opportunism—a more or less obvious corollary of the populist logic of articulation—has raised various suspicions about him on both

<sup>14</sup>This refers a golden paperweight in the shape of a baguette, which was found in Yanukovich's palace in Kyiv and which symbolises the corruption of rulers.

sides of the opposition. Perhaps the most familiar and revealing case among Naval'nyi's liberal supporters is the critique presented by the writer Boris Akunin. While announcing himself as a supporter of Naval'nyi, Akunin has also expressed deep suspicions of his nationalist thoughts (Akunin 2012). Again, by using the results of opinion polls conducted by his political and anti-corruption team, Naval'nyi replied to Akunin by referring to the views of 'average Russians'. According to the poll concerning Naval'nyi's position with regard to the issue of nationalities (*po natsional'nomu voprosu*), 51.6% of Russians regarded Naval'nyi's position in this respect as clear, while according to 42.7% the position was unclear and it required explanation (according to 5.7% his position was clear but unacceptable) (Akunin 2012). Within these figures, Naval'nyi sees the ideal state as a kind of nation-state in which the concepts of nation, people and citizens are populistically blurred and described while attacking the dominant, imperialist and corrupt form of patriotism:

The source of power in the nation-state is the people (*natsiya*), citizens of the country, not the class-based elite (*soslovnaya elita*) which uses slogans of taking half of the world and of global dominance. ... The state we need is one that guarantees comfort and a decent life for the citizens of this country. The nation-state is the European way of Russia's development, our sweet (*milyi*) and comfortable, and in this case, strong and desirable, European house (*domik*). (Akunin 2012)

However, ideologically this does not create any notable difference from the vague identity-political assertions of the Kremlin, particularly before the Ukrainian crisis, although the imperial dimension has coexisted with European-oriented views of the nation-state. Naval'nyi's relationship towards Stalin is perhaps the most revealing in terms of showing his adherence to popular views. Whereas for Akunin, Stalin (and largely the whole Soviet Union) is the key symbol of the 'other' for his liberal principles, for Naval'nyi the issue is secondary. As one poll suggests, the debate on Stalin will be solved automatically along with an improvement in the standard of living.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Naval'nyi's response to Akunin comes rather close to official views which show an overall reluctance and ambivalence towards Stalin and Stalinism:

Hitler and Stalin were the main butchers of the Russian people. Stalin executed, starved and tormented my compatriots, this is clear for me personally. However, I'm against this being an 'eternal' question and I don't see any point in this 'de-Stalinisation' etc. I don't understand what it means as a concept of state policy. Well, do you want some 'de-Stalinisation'? Then let your kid read the 'GULAG Archipelago'. If he's too lazy to read the 'Archipelago', then let him read the article 'Stalin's repressions' in Wikipedia. Everything is there briefly, understandably, objectively written and with sources. It is necessary to react to acute challenges (*otvechat, na vyzovy vremeni*) independently, without endless political allusions. 'The question about Stalin' is a question for the discipline of history science, not about ongoing politics. (Akunin 2012)

Akunin's reservations about Naval'nyi largely illustrate liberals' general reservations about him. For instance, a visible liberal politician Vladimir Ryzhkov has repeatedly voiced suspicions about Naval'nyi's nationalist views and consequently Naval'nyi's role as the new leader of a non-systemic opposition (Ryzhkov 2014). Among the nationalists, reservations about Naval'nyi have been based on similar principles as those of the liberals, although the support

<sup>15</sup>In this poll conducted by Naval'nyi's team, respondents were asked whether the issue of Stalin is acute or not. According to 54.2% the issue will be solved 'if we can create a successful state', 27% responded that it is dangerous that the issue is not solved, and the rest did not want to hear anything about Stalin (Akunin 2012).



to Naval'nyi among anti-Putin nationalists has been more tactical than the support among liberals. For the latter Naval'nyi has appeared as a true leader. The first critical moment for pro-Naval'nyi nationalists was his support of the Pussy Riot performers—largely condemned by his close nationalist backer Vladimir Tor (also known as Vladlen Kralin) (Tor 2012). The second critical moment was more fundamental: the nationalist publisher and commentator Yegor Kholmogorov declared Naval'nyi's reluctance to support the annexation of Crimea and the 'Russian national revolt' in Ukraine as his political suicide (Kholmogorov 2014).

Naval'nyi has been reluctant to defend his position against nationalists' accusations which implies his ambitions to maintain potential multi-ideational anti-regime coalitions as a tactical resource for the future. While sustaining a critical position towards the Kremlin's Ukraine policies, he persistently avoids criticising fellow citizens for their sympathies for these policies. Indeed, as his views on Crimea have revealed, he is generally sympathetic to the idea of seeing the peninsula as a part of Russia, and does not foresee its return to Ukraine in the future, as he pointed out in a long interview for *Ekho Moskvy* in October 2014 (Naval'nyi 2014d). Again, in his view the ultimate solution concerning Crimea and Ukraine is the people and their right to vote as they will, though sometimes these decisions are not good for Russia. Thus, while seemingly acknowledging prevailing pro-Russian (and pro-Putin) views in Crimea—even in the case of the more democratic circumstances of a potential new referendum—for Naval'nyi the choice of the Crimean people to join 'conservative Russia, and leave pro-European democratic and anti-criminal Ukraine might be a good choice for them' (Naval'nyi 2014d). However, by the same token, he points out his already known view of the sameness between Russians and Ukrainians; he does not see any difference between the nations, and integration, as 'a natural process', is inevitable between Russia and Ukraine (Naval'nyi 2014b, 2014d). On the further question of the European Union, raised by the interviewer, the editor-in-chief of *Ekho Moskvy*, Aleksei Venediktov, Naval'nyi elaborated as follows:

The European Union—is it a single state? Yes and no. On the one hand, for the population this means some principal things; to sit in a car, to arrive and observe that there were no borders. On the other hand, everyone has their own (*svoi*) language, national costume; everyone dances their own folk dance. And a similar thing must happen between Russia and Ukraine. (Naval'nyi 2014d)

Here we see a kind of oppositional mirror image of Putin who has spelled out identical views on the relationship between Russia and Ukraine (Putin 2015). However, for Putin this integration should move on the basis of a Russian alternative and of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, while for Naval'nyi Ukraine's pro-European course should be the main guide for Russia to follow. Naval'nyi's adherence to 'popular knowledge' and its resonance with the official views seemingly prompted Venediktov to ask about those who have moved back to Putin loyalists from the recent protest movement (Naval'nyi 2014d). Naval'nyi's answer was that 'in each of us we may find a stupid formulation of the latent electorate of Putin' (Naval'nyi 2014d). In line with his tendency to use populist-type hyperbole, he continued by saying that 'in a particular system of world views you and I can agree with Putin 146%, and there's nothing horrible in that ... we are not trying to divide and construct a black and white world, we point out that there are, of course, different nuances (*ottenki*)' (Naval'nyi 2014d). Comments like these illustrate that Naval'nyi is a diehard politician but also a populist in terms of the symptomatic approach to populism in which an anti-*status*

*quo* discourse with its division between the people and the elite occupies the central role. For Naval'nyi the issue is not about ideological cleavages between the regime and the people. It is about the division in which the side of the people is the right side, and the side of the elite is the wrong one, irrespective of the ideological preferences of the two sides, or the people's sympathies for the elite. Naval'nyi's answer to criticisms that there are holes in his argument and that his concepts are vague is that it is the people who will know the truth and Naval'nyi unavoidably positions himself as a guardian of their radical democratic knowledge. This is also the level at which he identifies the major difference between himself and his political ally, Mikhail Khodorkovskii:

He [Khodorkovskii] says that he does not want to work with everyone. In general I understand him. He's tired. He says I'm fed up, I don't want to waste my time anymore by talking with people I don't like, who will never understand me. For me, however, all people are pleasant, and after my campaign in the mayoral election the major conviction has been, absolutely, that it's wonderful to talk with any pensioner, soldier, policeman, with anyone. (Naval'nyi 2014d)

After his campaign in the Moscow mayoral election of October 2013, 54% of Russians, the highest so far, knew who Naval'nyi was, whereas in June 2012 after the protest waves, the figure was 35%, and in April 2011 it was only 6% (Levada 2014, 2015a). In January 2015, 50% of Russians knew who Naval'nyi was (Levada 2015a). So, it seems that under the current circumstances, particularly without mainstream media access, the public awareness of him has stabilised around the 50% mark. The popular perception of Naval'nyi coincides with his ideational opportunism. Whereas in 2013 approximately 30% of Russians viewed him positively and 20% negatively, in early 2015 these figures were opposite: 17% saw him positively, and 37% negatively (Levada 2015b). As has often been the case in Russians' views towards current political actors, the clearest majority of Russians have been indifferent towards him (Levada 2015b). The 2013 poll revealed that he was almost systematically liked and disliked for the same reasons (Levada 2013): he is supported because of his anti-corruption activism (16%) but suspected because of his relationship with 'corrupted schemes' (17%); he is liked because of his persistence against those in power (12%) and disliked because of his persistence to get into power (16%); or, he is disliked because of his nationalist views (13%) and suspected because of his 'links with the US' (14%) (Levada 2013). These figures find support in the ambiguity of the middle class's political preferences in Russia, particularly related to the protests in 2011–2012 (Bibkov 2012; Magun 2014; Gontmakher & Ross 2015). It is Naval'nyi's oppositional position as such in the Putin-system which seemingly creates this support or distaste rather than an ideology or some deeply argued political principles. Consequently, in terms of his political discourse, it can be argued that it is his populism that facilitates these kinds of perceptions.

### *Conclusions*

Marlene Laruelle correctly asserts that Naval'nyi can only disappoint those who expect from him a modicum of theoretical construction: 'he is a doer, not a thinker ... his goals are eminently political: the broader the support, the better, (h)e is thus not interested in theoretical constructions and refuses to engage in debate over what can be identified as contradictory stances' (Laruelle 2014, p. 279). However, within the framework of populism I would argue

that Naval'nyi's ideological incoherence and reluctance to sink his teeth into ideological debates are not only secondary regarding his political success but also elementary features of a populist argumentation: all-encompassing ideological principles are constantly compensated for by 'situational principles' as far as they serve the grand principle of 'we the people against the elite'. According to this logic, a sense of righteousness can be established by reference to the wrong of the other—as Naval'nyi has certainly proved by his numerous revelations of the elite's corruption—when ideological inconsistencies of the generally right cause become a secondary issue. Or, to put it another way, all ideological principles can be used or abandoned according to how they fit into the bigger picture, that is, we the people against the elite.

When it comes to Naval'nyi's democratic engagement, his ardent optimism regarding democratic procedures in Putin's pseudo-democratic hegemony can be approached with the help of Laclau's prism of populism as a political opportunity caused by the looseness that democracy as a concept allows in Putin's electoral authoritarianism. The issue is not so much about Naval'nyi's democratic ethos but rather about a political populist ethos which challenges the differentiated logics of the regime concerning the citizens' democratic rights, and elections in particular. In other words, the democratic façade of 'elections' is constantly activated as a constitutionally legitimate demand for elections without quotation marks. Whereas such demands have been a commonplace for the opposition in non-democratic regimes, including Russia, Naval'nyi has distinguished himself by simplifying and re-ordering the constitutional notions of democracy into obvious rights of the Russian people. In other words, instead of emphasising particular ideological commitment against the regime, its minimal public resonance notwithstanding—as numerous but small intellectually framed demonstrations for constitutional rights or for various nationalist and religious visions have shown—for Naval'nyi the 'Russian people', implicitly or explicitly, figures as a major justification in attacking the regime. The readiness to shift into the regime's position and challenge it in its own terms is the central point here. For example, in relation to the elite's position on Crimea, if the aim is to create domestic tourism, or to promote domestic products as opposed to sanctioned Western imports, that is fine, but since the elite is ineffective, corrupt, and hypocritical in pursuing these aims, the Russian people is justified in demanding better.

Under the centralised and inconsistent authoritarian rule which is surrounded by multiple socio-economic challenges, Naval'nyi's scandal-revelationary tactics for the politically indifferent population has been the most effective that has emerged from the real opposition under the Putin regime. At the same time it seems that the only way to challenge Putin politically in terms of ideas, that is, discursively, is the populism represented by Naval'nyi. It is also unsurprising that this challenge is channelled into a person regardless of wider networks and a seemingly effective organisation behind him. Charismatic leaders are endemic for populism and populism's negative stance towards existing political structures and ideational establishments. In this respect Russia is an optimal context for figures like Naval'nyi. Populism in the Russian case can be seen as a political facet of the society in which 'low levels of impersonal trust [in state institutions are] balanced [or compensated] by strong interpersonal trust' (Ledeneva 2013, p. 11). In other words, weak and practically non-established party ideologies are compensated by the trust in persons in politics. Following Francisco Panizza's account on what he sees as the heart of populism's narrative, 'populism both depoliticises and hyper-politicises social relations ... and the populist leader often places him/herself symbolically outside the political realm, or at least he/she is not a politician like the others'

(Panizza 2005, pp. 20–1). It is not far-fetched to apply this description to ‘non-political’ Putin. Indeed, by inserting Russia’s post-Soviet political process into populism’s core, we may assert that Putin managed to depoliticise the Yel’tsin-era societal relations between liberals and conservatives—while Yel’tsin had previously ‘hyper-politicised’ Gorbachev’s *perestroika*—by projecting people’s mundane need of law and order into a loose framework of paternalistic patriotism. Along with the regime’s decreased capacity to sustain its depoliticised initiative along with the regime’s irrevocable routinisation, it became growingly vulnerable to new initiatives. However, whereas in the case of Russia these new initiatives can hardly stem from any established competing institutions, a figure like Naval’nyi remains a very plausible alternative. What is more, the ‘big’ ideas used in this alternative are not competing ideas but a populist restructuration of the existing ones; the rule of law, the Russian people and patriotism—though now in terms of national belonging with the demand of ethno-civic boundaries instead of abstract historically driven state-imperial ambitions.<sup>16</sup>

So, while it seems that Russia’s weak institutions facilitate populist political initiatives that are not filtered or organised by established institutional constraints, we can ask whether this is good or bad for Russia’s democratisation process. On the basis of populism’s history in America, Michael Kazin sees the difference between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ populism as the difference between a sincere democratic faith and an instrumental faith (Urbinati 1998, p. 111). In general, American populism has been used as a strategy for political inclusion and, according to Michael Kazin, it has become a democratic expression of political action (Kazin 1995). In terms of Russian populism, including its *narodnichestvo* tradition, Artemii Magun argues that the Russian populists, ‘despite the diverse trends, all aspired to democratic politics in which “the people” itself would act’ (Magun 2014, p. 184). Naval’nyi follows this tradition by constructing a popular subject against the authoritarian, or semi-authoritarian, regime. Hence, as distinct from the USA, it is premature to discuss potential outcomes of this populist soil for party politics in the Russian tradition since the real political competition between parties has not seen the light of day in Russia. In general, Naval’nyi’s discourse and opportunism work because he is not allowed to make decisions at any political level. His radical democratic views of the people’s obvious will to decide on their own issues works as a demand as long as this right is violated. These are important and necessary demands. Nevertheless, it remains an open issue how multilevel democracy will work when (or if) this right is guaranteed. Will the resources of the state be distributed more democratically than in the 1990s and the reactive need for an authoritarian leader wane into a real political competition? Russia’s ideational paradox is that consistent ideological alternatives are missing, and if there are any, they lack mobilisational potential in terms of large-scale political inclusion. Consequently, populism as a logical alternative to the existing situation has not much to offer if power is achieved after a successful populist rupture since populism hardly includes any consistent ideological alternative.

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<sup>16</sup>For more on Naval’nyi’s role in this respect see Hutchings and Tolz (2015).

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