Russian Opposition Leader Alexei Navalny Poisoned; Russian Doctors Block Family's Attempt To Transfer Him To Berlin

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<https://www.npr.org/2020/08/21/904612108/officials-block-family-s-attempts-to-transfer-navalny-from-siberian-hospital>

Alexei Navalny's family is asking the Russian government to allow them to move him from a Siberian hospital to a hospital in Berlin, after doctors refused to authorize the transfer. Navalny, an outspoken critic of President Vladimir Putin, remains in a coma due to an apparent poisoning.

Navalny's wife, Yulia, has [sent a letter to the Kremlin](https://twitter.com/navalny/status/1296769338683338754) formally requesting approval to evacuate him. An emergency medical plane is waiting to take the politician from a hospital in Omsk to specialists in Germany. But doctors at Omsk Emergency Hospital No. 1 say his condition is too unstable to allow for travel.

Navalny spokeswoman Kira Yarmysh disputes that assertion, accusing doctors in Omsk of having no interest in treating Navalny, but in covering up a crime. She was traveling with the opposition figure Thursday when he suddenly fell ill.

A clearly frustrated Yulia Navalny spoke to the media outside the hospital, calling the situation "outrageous" and saying that it is "clear authorities are trying to hide something from us. We demand they let us take him to doctors we trust," according to [a translation](https://twitter.com/olliecarroll/status/1296790404378120192) by journalist Oliver Carroll of The Independent.

German doctors in Omsk were allowed to visit the hospital on Friday — but Yulia Navalny was not permitted to speak to them, and [witnesses say](https://twitter.com/alburov/status/1296787469686407170) the doctors were whisked out of the facility and driven away. Police and security officials blocked journalists and people from Navalny's camp from approaching the vehicle.

Yarmysh [posted a video](https://twitter.com/Kira_Yarmysh/status/1296796346419118081) from inside the hospital showing what she said were officers turning Yulia Navalny away when she went in search of the doctors. Some of those men were in plainclothes; others wore fatigues.

After the German doctors left, Yarmysh [said via Twitter](https://twitter.com/Kira_Yarmysh/status/1296800336255111168) that they had determined Navalny can be safely transferred to Berlin via the specially equipped plane.

"The plane that departed from Nuremberg to pick up Navalny was organized by the Cinema for Peace foundation," [The Moscow Times](https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/08/21/doctors-bar-navalnys-evacuation-to-germany-as-confusion-surrounds-presence-of-poison-in-system-a71213) reports. "The German NGO had previously airlifted Pussy Riot activist Pyotr Verzilov to Germany after he suffered a suspected poisoning in 2018."

On Friday, Alexander Murakhovsky, the chief physician at the Omsk hospital, said the staff has diagnosed Navalny with a metabolic disorder, linked to a drop in blood sugar.

"This is really contradictory information because officials have told Navalny's colleagues that, in fact, a toxic substance had been found and that it's so poisonous that people around him have to wear protective suits," NPR's Lucian Kim reports.

The diagnosis presents a paradox, says Navalny's doctor, Anastasy Vasilyeva, who flew to Omsk on Thursday. If Navalny is suffering from a blood sugar imbalance rather than exposure to a potentially lethal toxin, she says, why not allow him to be moved to Berlin's Charité hospital?

Accusing Murakhovsky of "mean-spirited doublespeak," Vasilyeva said via Twitter that the metabolic disorder was caused by poison – and she offered her own explanation for the delay in approving his transfer.

"If he's been diagnosed with nothing more than a metabolic disorder, why not let Alexei go to Berlin? This is because they're waiting for three days so that his system clears the poison and it becomes impossible to detect in Europe the presence of a toxic substance in his body," Vasilyeva said, according to a translation by the [Interfax news agency](https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/69628/).

Both Vasilyeva and Yarmysh are posting images from inside the Omsk hospital, seeking to counter officials who say conditions there are no worse than at the Charité clinic. Their photos show battered walls and hallways, and conditions that look to be less than pristine.

Navalny's aides and family say he was poisoned when he drank tea at an airport in Tomsk before taking off for Moscow on Thursday morning. He lapsed into unconsciousness soon afterward, forcing an emergency landing in Omsk – and prompting widespread speculation that yet another Putin foe had been poisoned.

Navalny, 44, is a powerful force for Russia's opposition, with a large online following that has grown despite scant coverage of him in state-approved media channels. He rose to fame by investigating corruption and mobilizing against Putin's regime — and he attempted to run against Putin in the 2018 presidential election but was[barred from doing so](https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/08/584369719/banned-from-election-putin-foe-navalny-pursues-politics-by-other-means).

This is the second time Navalny has possibly been poisoned. The first instance came last summer, when he was hospitalized days after being jailed for calling for street protests.

A number of Kremlin foes have been poisoned or killed during Putin's 20 years in power. Recent high-profile cases include the use of a Novichok nerve agent to poison former KGB spy [Sergei Skripal](https://www.npr.org/2018/09/05/644782096/u-k-charges-2-russians-suspected-of-poison-attack-on-skripals) and his daughter Yulia in the U.K. But Navalny's possible poisoning also brings to mind the targeted killing of Kremlin critic and [former spy Alexander Litvinenko](https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/01/21/463798058/russia-s-putin-probably-approved-plan-to-kill-spy-british-report-says), who died after drinking tea that was laced with polonium-210 in a London hotel.