

RURAL BROADBAND INSIGHTS FOR CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE



WITH PARTNER JONATHAN CHAMBERS

Co-ops Connect FYI

By Jonathan Chambers • Feb 23, 2024

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Remember Alexei Navalny



Two years ago, I penned these words:

Tonight, I will light a candle for those who continue to fight against tyranny. For Alexei Navalny, jailed by Putin in Russia...

Stand with them. And should they perish, hold onto their memory.

On 16 February 2024, Alexei Navalny perished, murdered by Putin.

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Two years ago, I wrote about Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after devoting almost all my newsletters to broadband. Afterward, I received a few requests to be removed from my newsletter distribution. I also received many responses of encouragement.

At the risk of losing readers, I'm going to offer a few observations about Russia.

The Russia I've Known



Russia is a country with a rich history.

- That history includes great hardship and suffering, which produced some of world's greatest writers of poetry and literature — Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn.

- Russia also produced some of the world’s most brutal dictators — from the tsars to the communists to Putin, who leads the country today.
- Secret police, forced labor camps, assassinations of political opponents. These have been the norm for Russia — before, during, and after the rise and fall of the communist party.

Those who grew up during the Cold War era, who studied and trained to protect America, recognized the threat posed by Russian/Soviet expansionism.

That threat is a reality today, *not just in Ukraine, but for the world.*

Eight months ago, I was in Israel visiting one of my wife’s former colleagues, Natan Sharansky. Sharansky is a famous Russian dissident, a “refusenik” during the Soviet era. Refusenik was a term for those who wanted to emigrate from the Soviet Union but were denied exit visas.

While the U.S. has a border problem because people want to come in, the Soviet border problem was that people wanted to leave. In 1978, Sharansky was convicted of treason for speaking out against the Soviet government; he spent more than eight years in the Soviet Gulag. In 1986, as part of a prisoner exchange, he was allowed to leave the Soviet Union for Israel.

I was living in the Soviet Union when Sharansky was released. I was a graduate student at Columbia University, studying abroad that year in Moscow. I wanted to pursue a career in intelligence and considered my time in the Soviet Union invaluable.

When Sharansky and I met last year, he and I talked about technology and agriculture, a focus of my wife’s work in Israel. I described the impact of deploying broadband on farms – to fields, grain silos and even chicken coops. “These aren’t the chicken coops of your youth,” I said jokingly.

Sharansky responded: “I know. I have visited farms with chickens stuffed in cages. *It’s like the Gulag.*”

Then he laughed, a childlike laugh that didn't betray the torture he suffered in the Gulag. "After I visited that farm," he said, "I never again have eaten anything except 'free range' chickens."

Sharansky was able to escape the Soviet Union because the U.S. engaged in a prisoner exchange. Sharansky, now an Israeli political figure, had been corresponding with and speaking up for Navalny. He thought there should be a prisoner exchange for Navalny. He knew the torture and likely fate Navalny would meet. Navalny had been poisoned. His wife had been poisoned.

In December, Alexei Navalny was sent to a penal colony north of the Arctic Circle. **This week, he was murdered.**

In Memoriam



In honor of Navalny's life and in the spirit of hope, I'm reprinting the words I wrote just two years ago:

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When I was a young man, I had the great fortune to be a witness to history:

- **I lived in Moscow** during the first years of the Gorbachev presidency, the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union.
- **I was in Warsaw** during the summer of 1989, while the Solidarity movement and the Jaruzelski government began a power-sharing arrangement, which led to the peaceful transfer of power and the end of Soviet control of Poland.
- **I was in East and West Berlin** the week the Wall came down, crossing one last time through checkpoint Charlie.
- **I was in Johannesburg and Capetown** months before the release of Nelson Mandela, a man who walked away from 27 years in prison with forgiveness in his heart.
- **I was in rural Nicaragua** as an official observer for the 1990 elections, which led to a peaceful transfer of power from the Sandinistas to the presidency of Violeta Chamorro.
- **I was in Bangkok and Phnom Penh** in 1990, meeting with Prince Ranariddh and then with Hun Sen prior to negotiations that led to elections, peace, and the capture of the leaders of the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

Though I never believed in the “end of history,” the events over a brief period of time in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Asia, had a profound impact on my views.

I came to believe that anything is possible, that there are true heroes to be admired and followed, that there is a deep reservoir of good in the world that can and does prevail over evil.

I came to believe especially in the divine spirit of dissidents: Natan Sharansky, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Nelson Mandela, and men and women dating back to Job who question power and authority.

Jews mourn by lighting a light. When our world is darkened, we light a candle.

Tonight, I will light a candle for those who continue to fight against tyranny. For Alexei Navalny, jailed by Putin in Russia. For Volodymyr Zelenskyy, for the Snake Island defenders, for anyone who would face down a warship or a tank, whether that be in Moscow, Kiev, or Hong Kong.

Stand with them. And should they perish, hold onto their memory.

As my rabbi says:

*“**We have memory**, and from memory will come wisdom. Wisdom brings strength, and strength will yield hope.*

*“**With hope**, there will be renewal and ultimately redemption ...*

*“**We will go forward** carrying an ancient vision of righteousness and peace.*

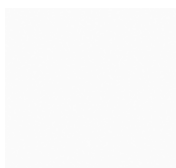
*“**Or, in the American vernacular**, the vision of freedom and justice for all.”*

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