

Shining

15 March 2024



On February 16, Alexei Navalny died in the «Polar Wolf» penal colony. «But none of you have changed» — this is, in essence, the conclusion that some of the politician’s supporters drew after checking out some social media groups and found that locals weren’t organizing spontaneous memorials and barely seemed to have noticed the tragic news at all. Our reporter Ivan Kozlov went beyond examining social media groups. He went beyond the Arctic Circle, into the permafrost zone, visited the small village of Kharp, and found out that its residents aren’t indifferent, rather, their way of life seems immune to any changes.

Be careful, watch out

If I had a cover story, I would have blown it before even reaching Salekhard.

— Are you by any chance going to Kharp? — asked a man in his forties sitting next to me.□

— I am, — I replied immediately, without thinking.

— Be careful, — he replied.

At the tiny airport of Salekhard, we exchanged a few more meaningless phrases; my interlocutor recommended a cheap cab app (which I was not going to use), said goodbye and disappeared from my sight forever, at least that's what I thought.

I arrived in the capital of YaNAO (Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region) on the morning of February 24th, the second anniversary of Russia's invasion. It seemed important to stay here for a while, there was no reason to hurry to Kharp anyway: by then, Alexei Navalny's body had already been lying in the Salekhard morgue for days. Besides, in Salekhard there was at least an improvised memorial to commemorate the politician. In Kharp, nothing had been organised.

I reached this memorial near the monument to the victims of political repression at dusk. In the morning, judging from photos posted on socials, there had been flowers at its foot, but by now everything has been thoroughly cleaned up. The monument was hidden from prying eyes by an arc-shaped granite wall, from behind which, while I was taking photos, a policeman appeared. After taking a few steps, he realized that I was holding a camera, not flowers, and forgot his usual script. The policeman froze and, after a couple of seconds, said:

— Hello.

— Hello, — I replied.

At this point the dialogue stalled, and we stood in silence for a few seconds.



Life in Salekhard is unimaginable without reindeers. It is easier to buy venison than turkey at the local market

Two other policemen had been waiting for their colleague behind the granite wall. It looked like they had been on duty here all day, since people had managed to organize an alternative memorial near the sign «To a man who fulfilled his duty as a journalist»: no one seemed to have noticed it, and Navalny's photo, as well as a few modest bouquets, were now covered with snow.

The snow was coarse and wet. Neither Salekhard nor Kharp in the following days lived up to my expectations of what February should be like above the Arctic Circle: it was around zero degrees Celsius outside, but in the daytime, the temperature was even higher.

From the memorial, I walked to the Obdorsky Ostrog [The wooden fortress that became the foundation of the town of Salekhard] and then to the city garden. The trees were covered in snow and decorated with garlands, large bulbs exuding warm light, which made a magical impression. A canopy of those same garlands stretched over the pedestrian street that ran past the garden. They illuminated a street exhibition of photographs: there were portraits of women. I came closer and read the captions: one photo depicted the widow of a soldier who fought in Ukraine, another — the mother of another man who died in combat.

I barely visited the rest of the city. I mostly remembered the bland buildings of «capitalist romanticism,» patriotic murals painted on the sides of buildings, and almost nothing of the city's five hundred years of history. As I was nearing the end of my walk, I read the news that Alexei Navalny's body had been released to his mother. Kira Yarmysh probably announced it with some delay, because it was already quiet around the morgue. There was nothing else for me to do in Salekhard.

Between the owl and the wolf

The road from Salekhard to Kharp with a stopover in Labytnangi, then over the frozen Ob river and onwards, through low pine forests — the journey takes a little over an hour and a half. In the village of Obskoye, on the way, I see a crowded bus, filled with people in FPS (Federal Penitentiary Service) uniforms, on their way to work. Two elderly women chat in the front seat. They are discussing how best to spend the retirement money they've managed to save up.

— I've always wanted to go to Crimea, and now it's possible, you take a plane to Sverdlovsk, then by train. But it's dangerous there now.

— It's dangerous here, it's dangerous there, — the other woman responds, irritated.

— It's dangerous everywhere now. So what, should we not go anywhere?



Makeshift memorial to Navalny near a monument to «a man who fulfilled his duty as a journalist» in Salekhard

After another half an hour of driving through snow-covered forests, passing by occasional dwellings of reindeer herders, the bus arrives at the «Pyatachok» — Kharp's main transportation hub.

«Pyatachok» is the very centre of a small village of six thousand inhabitants. To the south, there is a hospital, a kindergarten, a fish factory and the «Polar Owl» penal colony. Inside it, one might find a few rather familiar faces: Bitsa Park Maniac Pichushkin [Alexander Pichushkin: Russian serial killer known as the «Bittsevsky Maniac» or the «Chessboard Killer». Committed at least 49 murders inside and around Moscow's Bitsa Park, killing most of his victims with hammer blows to the head] and mass murderer major Evsyukov [Denis Evsyukov: Former Russian police major who, on April 27, 2009, while intoxicated, killed two people and wounded seven others at a supermarket in Moscow]. To the north of the hub, the city administration, school, a night club, a cemetery and the «Polar Wolf» penal colony. This is where Platon Lebedev [Platon Lebedev: a Russian businessman, co-founder of the MENATEP bank. In May 2005, he was convicted in the same case as Mikhail Khodorkovsky. He served 10,5 years in a general regime colony on charges of embezzlement, tax evasion and legalization of stolen funds] served his sentence in 2005-2006, and Alexei Navalny died on February

16th, 2024.

«Owl» is located on the outskirts, and «Wolf» is visible from the windows of the local school and neighbouring residential houses. A resident of one of these houses wrote a post in one of VKontakte groups, complaining that she found it impossible to sleep because, at five in the morning, prisoners of the colony would start sweeping snow and making a lot of noise. I didn't notice anything like that, although I lived very close to the penal colony — in the only hotel «Sob», which looked more like a dormitory, squeezed between the river bank, the walls of the colony and the territory of the tuberculosis hospital.

«Kharp» means «northern lights» in the Nenets language. And it's everywhere in the city: in names and on signs (for example, it's the name of both a sports complex and a railway station, although what I found most impressive is a hotel named «Shining» in Salekhard), but I did not manage to see the natural phenomenon itself.

Never mind! Anyway, as we know, the Earth will soon collide with the celestial axis, so these days you can see the northern lights even in the Perm Region. Secondly, Kharp shines in a different way: illumination, bright street lighting and a huge number of garlands that make the central streets as bright as daylight at night. A few years ago, the village looked much more depressing, but the locals with whom I had a chance to talk, in unison thanked the local authorities: by 2024, they managed to replace the entire infrastructure, make the streets look decent and repair the facades of the Khrushchevka houses, which are now covered with «brick-like» tiles. The seemingly new apartment buildings, standing among the old wooden two-storey houses, look so out of place as if in a simulation: their true age is evidenced only by the old dilapidated window frames, which have survived in some apartments.

In reality, these «freshened up» houses are at least half a century old. At first, there was a railroad station here, one of many in the «501st construction project», which killed several thousand prisoners. This transpolar highway project was never completed and was closed after Stalin's death. In 1961, not far from the station, in a place where a gulag subdivision used to stand, a colony was built, later named «Polar Wolf». And only seven years later, in 1968, Kharp was built.



Right in the center of Salekhard, anyone can ride on a reindeer sleigh
The best way to describe what life was like here in the 80s, 90s and 2000s — before the local authorities repaired streets and houses, and before a fish factory, a reindeer meat processing shop and several other enterprises appeared on the territory of Kharp, in addition to the colonies, is using the words of an unknown user of an unknown forum:

«Everything worked until 1999. Quarry, mining, etc. <...> Russian Railroad wagons were loaded with crushed stones of different grades and shipped away. And then the 2000s came — and with them businessmen, dickhead Muscovites, who bought up everything and abandoned, ruined the village, which barely managed to survive the 90s. They thought that the people here were village slaves, who would work for pennies without any benefits. In winter, at -40 „Mercedes“ and „Bentley“ won't even start, the only way to get around are good old UAZ and „Ural“, but these are not the cars worthy of Muscovites. So all the shops, warehouses, etc. — are now abandoned, and everything has been stolen. The patriotic Russian, Moscow spirit only leaves devastation behind it».

The harsh conditions, the temperature dropping to -50 and below in winter, the gloomy atmosphere since much of the local everyday life is centred around the colonies, and the tragic history of the gulag construction site — all of this is true.

But it is also true that Kharp (at least, when it is not freezing cold) does not give the impression of a dark corner, where the worst serial killers and Putin's worst enemies are taken to live the last years of their lives, but of an ordinary village, identical to dozens of similar villages in Perm region or, let's say, in Sverdlovsk region, if it weren't for the beautiful mountain ranges on the horizon and the equally beautiful hills framing the settlement.

«He's dead, so what?»

There's a helicopter pad on one of these hills near Kharp; it also serves as the main viewpoint for tourists, so a few years ago, a local entrepreneur made a gift to the village by installing a frame there, through which the panorama of the city can be seen. Around the frame, metal letters read «Happiness is just around the corner». As a Permian who has had this phrase embedded in his cultural code for ten years, I thought it was important to find this frame, but on the way there I got lost among wooden two-story buildings. Fortunately, I came across a woman in her fifties who was just standing in the middle of the courtyard. I glanced at her.

— What? — she reacted instantly.

When she heard that I was looking for a viewpoint, she offered to walk me there, she said she had nothing to do anyway, she just went out to stand in the snow and had I not approached her, she would have stayed that way.

— You must be tired from all the attention and the journalists? — I asked her.□

— Huh? No, there's no one. Well, there are a lot of these, what do you call them, construction workers. All these unfamiliar faces. Well, they've built a school here now, and they're going to build a club, so there are a lot of them.□

— I see, I thought a lot of outsiders came here because of Navalny.□

— What? — again, she didn't understand. She had never heard that name before.



A boiler room chimney and a church dome — the view that became famous around the world after Navalny's mother published her video message demanding the release of her son's body

The woman showed me the wrong way to the viewpoint, and I ended up in a dead end. Its main attraction turned out to be an anti-aircraft gun glued from tyre scraps, on the muzzle of which its creator wrote in white paint «We will win!». Well, not bad either.

In the morning that dialogue with the woman seemed silly and insignificant to me, but by the evening I was convinced that it was crucial for understanding the lives of ordinary people in Kharp. I kept walking and chatting with the locals, but my attempt to talk to the Federal Penitentiary Service officers was unsuccessful (one of them promised to «make things clear» me). Ordinary passers-by, though they knew Navalny's name, showed no interest in talking to me. Those expressing sympathy for the politician's death were only to be seen on socials, but even there people either ignored me or refused to comment. It was obvious that people were annoyed by the topic: especially considering that after Alexei's death, anonymous users appeared out of nowhere in virtually all of Kharp's social media groups, offending and insulting locals for their lack of empathy, repeating: «the whole village is one big colony».

The only people who had no reason to refuse to talk were those who didn't care.

For example, the owner of an apartment I tried to rent, told me that the attention of the world media did not affect the life of the village at all. There have been changes in Kharp in recent months and years, but mainly due to the growth of tourism: the more popular Kharp became for hikers going from here to the mountains of the Polar Urals, the higher the rents became.

— The demand has always been high, for the last five years for sure, — the woman said. There are very few rentals here, but now the industry is developing, and we will be a regional centre. In recent months, apart from lawyers and a couple of journalists, no one has come here. After his death, [Navalny's] mother was here for a few days, but not much else, nobody brought flowers to the colony or anything like that. It's quiet in general. The locals did not react to Navalny's death in any way.



The facades of Khrushchev houses in Kharp have been repaired, but the condition of wooden two-story buildings leaves much to be desired

One of the locals, Olga (I changed her name because she asked to remain anonymous since her work is connected with the Federal Penitentiary Service, among other things), spoke to me in more detail. Olga felt sympathy for Navalny's mother, and great respect for her behaviour after her son's death. But she did not speak highly of Navalny himself:

— Alexei's death did not make us emotional. The reaction of people is almost unambiguous: «a traitor died» or «he's dead, so what». These events didn't interest me much: it's politics, it's big money, it's opposition between two states, and there are casualties. I cannot say that he is a traitor: he is not a military man, he is not a keeper of state secrets. And the fact that he sold his conscience to another state will remain on his conscience. It's a pity that a man who was still physically strong and intelligent wasted his energy in the wrong direction... If he had stayed in power now, he would have been a corrupt official, like the others, — Olga concluded pensively.

«Yamal has its own state»

Olga herself was near the colony on the evening of February 16 and did not notice anything unusual, even the parking lot was half-empty, as usual. However, the next morning the authorities blocked entrances to the parking, fearing a frenzy, since it is part of a restricted area where filming is not allowed. But even these security measures proved to be excessive: the following evening Olga noticed only slightly more cars than usual, and there were no public actions or impromptu memorials in Kharp neither that same day nor the next. She is sure that there was no one to lay flowers: Olga herself is moderately patriotic, in her opinion, only maximalist youth are genuinely interested in Navalny, and there aren't many of those in the village.

It's hard to say how many «maximalists» there really are in Kharp, but, like everywhere else, they are not the most active in the public sphere, but supporters of the regime are. This became especially noticeable just after Navalny's death when journalists started reading local social media groups. They tried to elicit or buy information from locals and thus provoked speculations. Here is just one typical example:

«Who cares here about Navalny? Yamal has its own state, he is nobody here and his name means nothing, and if there are his supporters, they are smoking nervously somewhere in the corner, they will not find support here».



«Polar Wolf» colony, where Navalny died

When I said that what happened inside the walls of the colony did not seem to be of any interest to the village, Olga, whose daily life is closely connected with the colony, replied:

— It's not that the people here are isolated, it's just that they have a slightly different mentality, and you can tell from the empty nightclubs and restaurants. People work, do their house chores, and oppositionists are considered outcasts. Not because they are happy with the authorities, but because the authorities actually listen to them here. If you write a post in a local social media group and complain about the quality of roads, the mayor himself could reply.

To prove that, Olga sent me a link to a post from the «Labytnangi.Info» group. Its author complained that the door handle at the bus stop «Zapolyarye» was broken (in Labytnangi and Kharp bus stops are covered so that people don't freeze while waiting for their bus). Forty minutes after the post was published, the official account of the Housing and Utilities Department of the city administration responded, and two hours later the same account reported that the handle had been replaced and the problem had been solved.

— Here is a concrete example for you, — Olga concluded and added: — Well, what

kind of opposition can there possibly be here?

Before the storm

On Monday morning, I woke up to the concierge at the door talking loudly: she was telling someone on the phone that there was a storm warning in the village. Outside the window the snow was falling slowly, the sun was peeking through, and it was hard to believe that bad weather was coming.

I packed my things, handed in my key and casually asked about the situation in the village.

— You mean the tourists? — she didn't understand. — No, there are always very few tourists, but they are planning on spending billions on a road to the mountain resort, then maybe there will be more.

I said I don't only mean tourists.

— Oh, you mean that. As soon as Navalny died, these [state investigators] started coming here, asking who of interest checked in here. Just yesterday they came here. So I said, «You're looking in the wrong place! If journalists come here, they rent private apartments, so go and look there, why would they stay here?»

— Yeah, well, yes, — I agreed, just in case, and hurried to say goodbye.



The old cemetery and settlement square in Kharp. A mound of flowers at the monument was left after the February 23rd celebration

In just a few night hours, the snow had piled up to the ankles: snow ploughs were driving around Kharp, and workers were pushing fresh snow off the roofs of buildings. If it were not for their prompt work, Kharp would have been snowed in within a week: you can see that clearly by the cars left in the yards and on the

roadsides, which look more like giant snow drifts. There is an abnormal number of such cars here: apparently, their owners leave the village to go work long shifts elsewhere.

There are jobs in the service sector in Kharp itself, but they don't seem to be popular. At the only local supermarket «Magnit», the atmosphere is tense: there is a huge queue at the cash register, and people are furious.

— It's always like this here, — says one elderly woman to another. — Whenever I come here, there are always no cashiers. Hey, open a second cash register!□

— What can I do? — the cashier responds sluggishly. For some reason, locals don't want to work here.

A cashier named Andrei has been living in Kharp for a while, he came here on a job placement.

— The locals don't want to work, he repeats, in a resigned tone. — I was sent to open a store here. Usually, it's for two months, but for some people these two months become more, and that's how it was for me, too.

In the five minutes of this useless scene, the weather outside changed radically. Kharp turned out to be deceptive: one can relax and find out that the investigators in the hotel were interested in you; one can rejoice at the pastoral snow and be reminded about the «storm warning». The wind hits you immediately, so strong that it makes it difficult to walk in the streets.



A man made of tyres — the work of local craftsmen

I managed to approach the local cemetery only from the very edge: the snowploughs had not reached that part of the village, and the road was covered with snow. I still had some time before my train, so I knocked at the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in the local park (another church — St. Sergius of Radonezh — is located behind the fence of the «Polar Wolf», and the «Polar Owl» has only a small chapel), but it was closed. We later contacted its rector, Father Michael, who has been serving here for more than ten years, by phone. It was already after Navalny's body was taken to Moscow, and his associates could barely find a priest to give him a burial. We talked about life in the village (Father Mikhail also said that it was as if nothing had happened, no one had lit candles for God's servant Alexei or left memorial notes), and then I asked him if he would have agreed to serve Navalny's funeral.

— As I understand it, he did not commit suicide and did not belong to another religion," the priest replied, «and I do not see any other reasons why we should not give him the last rites.

— Well, in Moscow for some reason they could not find anyone who would agree, they almost didn't find anyone.

Father Michael did not understand why it took so long to find a priest, and when I told him, he asked:

— But they did find one, didn't they? And what happened to the man who gave the last rites? Nothing, right?

He didn't even seem to understand why I was asking these strange questions: the situation that Navalny found himself in in Moscow after his death seemed unimaginable here in Kharp, where everything happens in a calm and orderly fashion.



This is the view of Kharp, if you take a couple of steps away from the Sob Hotel: snow-covered cabins, garages and sheds

After hovering at the church steps for a while, I made a second attempt to get to the frame «Happiness is just around the corner», and it was successful. It looks like, there really are very few tourists in Kharp — or they just don't know about this place. There is no path to the art object lost in the alder bushes. One is supposed to see the panorama of the village and the mountain peaks on the horizon through the metal rectangle, but there was a blizzard coming down from the mountains and the peaks were not visible: only two-story houses, freshly painted khrushchekas and the territory of the colony where Alexei Navalny's life

ended.

I hoped that I would never have another occasion to go back to Kharp, so I wanted to buy a magnet as a souvenir, but there was nowhere to go: the «Northern Lights» train station was a brick sack with a waiting room of six chairs. There was nowhere to buy tickets, let alone magnets.



Mountain ranges on the horizon of Kharp are only visible in good weather. Besides me, only one man was waiting for the train, chatting with the station workers. When the train approached, one of them shouted after him:

— And take this heat with you!□

— What do you mean, heat, ha? — the other one said, outraged, — Take the wind, instead.

Meanwhile, the wind became unbearable, and not only the distant ridges but also the hills surrounding the village were now lost in the blizzard. It seemed that if the man really took the wind with him, Kharp would just hover in the middle of this void.



Not every guest of Kharp will get to the top of the hill to see the panorama of the village through the frame «Happiness is just around the corner» — no path leads here

At the end of my first day in Salekhard, I spontaneously wandered into the «Polaris» Art Residency: the posters promised an exhibition of contemporary art, and the project was supported by Rosmolodezh, so I wondered what kind of art was being showcased with state support beyond the Arctic Circle. I was studying the list of exhibitors posted in the foyer when I heard someone behind me:

— I hope you won't think I'm following you.

My travelling companion, who was on the plane with me, was also here — some of his business meetings got cancelled, and now he was just walking around the city and thinking about what to do. I figured that it would be impossible to set this up on purpose (at the very least, you'd need to know my non-existent plan), so we couldn't find a single reason not to have a beer. The new acquaintance, however, asked for anonymity, but I can say that by virtue of his work, he knew Salekhard and Kharp very well, and the life of the indigenous peoples in particular.

— What are you hoping to find there, in Kharp? — he asked me, among other things. — You know how they talk about the rest of Russia here? They say «on the

mainland.» That is, they have a clear distinction: there is Yamal, and there is the rest of the country, «the mainland». And they perceive the story with Navalny, even though he was serving his sentence here, as part of some game that is unfolding «on the mainland» and that is part of that. But it has nothing to do with them.

At some point, we went out for a smoke, and I asked him:

— How did you know I was going to Kharp? What gave it away?□

— You were taking pictures of the box with the aeroplane lunch, so it was obvious that you were flying here for the first time, and Kharp was just a guess, — he answered.

I guess I did blow my cover when I took a picture of the box. A promotional quiz was printed on the inside of the lid. You had to check reasons to visit Yamal: the extensive list included the northern lights, cloudberry, Luba the mammoth [A fossil female mammoth found in May 2007 by reindeer herder Yuri Hudi in the upper reaches of the Yuribey River on the Yamal Peninsula. It was named «Lyuba» in honour of the reindeer herder's wife], and various other attractions.

— I even came up with a Twitter caption for this photo, —I said, — like «Wrong guess, guys: the reason I'm flying over here is not on this list».

— Yeah, — he sighed, — it's not on the list and it won't be. Or maybe it will. But not for a very long time.