

EU denounces Russia over alleged poisoning of oppositionist Alexei Navalny

By Johannes Stern and Alex Lantier
26 August 2020

On Monday, doctors at Berlin's Charité hospital claimed they had found indications that Alexei Navalny, the head of Russia's pro-NATO liberal opposition, had been poisoned. The Charité said its findings indicated "an intoxication by a substance from the active substance group of cholinesterase inhibitors," although the specific substance is not yet known. Navalny is reportedly being treated with the antidote atropine.

Berlin and the European Union (EU) immediately seized upon the case. German Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD) issued a joint statement declaring: "In view of Mr Navalny's major role in Russia's political opposition, the country's authorities are urgently called upon to fully investigate this act as a matter of urgency – and to do so in a completely transparent way." Demanding that those responsible be "be identified and brought to justice," they added: "We hope that Mr Navalny can make a full recovery. We also send our best wishes to his family, for whom this is a most trying experience."

The EU also demanded an investigation. "The Russian authorities must immediately initiate an independent and transparent investigation," EU foreign affairs representative Josep Borrell demanded in a statement published on Monday evening. Similarly, the French foreign ministry issued a statement yesterday condemning a "criminal act targeting a major figure in Russian political life" and demanding "a rapid and transparent inquiry."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov declared that Moscow has no plans to initiate a criminal investigation of Navalny's illness. "The medical analyses of our doctors and those in Germany are completely in agreement. But their conclusions are different. We do not understand the haste of our German colleagues," Peskov said. He asserted that there are "many other medical possibilities" to explain Navalny's illness; Russian doctors initially diagnosed Navalny as suffering from a metabolic disorder.

What actually happened to Navalny, who fell ill suddenly on a flight from Tomsk to Moscow on August 20, remains unclear.

What is clear, however, is that the drive by Washington, Berlin and other NATO imperialist powers to isolate and secure regime change in Russia, launched with the February 2014 NATO-backed putsch in Kiev, has reached a new and critical stage. An explosive crisis has emerged after the disputed August 9 presidential elections in Belarus. This crisis was complicated, from the point of view of imperialist strategy, by the sudden entry into activity of the working class in Belarus.

In February 2014 in Ukraine, after a Russian-backed government cracked down on pro-EU protests, NATO backed a far-right putsch in Kiev. During this operation, opposition gunmen secretly shot Ukrainian riot police in so-called "sniper massacres," using the ensuing police crackdown to discredit and then topple the regime. This led not only to civil war in Ukraine, but an explosive military standoff between NATO and Russia along Russia's borders in Eastern Europe. NATO troops and military advisors are now posted to all the Baltic republics, Poland, and Ukraine.

This month, when opposition forces in Belarus launched protests against incumbent President Aleksandr Lukashenko's declaration of victory, leading to a brutal police crackdown, strikes erupted in factories and workplaces across Belarus. The upsurge of industrial action by the working class in the former Soviet republic stunned bourgeois forces of all political colors. While the Kremlin is backing Lukashenko, the EU has supported an unelected Coordination Council set up by opposition parties linked to rival candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya.

Moreover, anger at social inequality and the disastrous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which helped drive Belarusian workers into action, extend well beyond Belarus. There is mounting dissatisfaction among both the Russian ruling elite and Russian workers with President Vladimir Putin—reflected, in a highly distorted way, in last month's protests in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk against the Kremlin's removal of regional governor Sergei Furgal, of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR).

The Khabarovsk protests have made clear the growing centrifugal tendencies in the Russian state apparatus, as 18 regions in Russia are set to hold regional elections on September 13.

If Navalny has indeed been poisoned, the timing of this attack strongly suggests it was a political operation. However, it remains unclear who would have carried it out and for what ends. Two basic possibilities, with many related variants, emerge. One is that Navalny was poisoned by elements in the Putin regime, acting with or without the knowledge or support of the president, though it is questionable whether a reckless and obvious act would strengthen the Kremlin regime.

Another possibility is that opposition factions in Russia or their imperialist handlers gave a possibly non-lethal dose of poison to Navalny in another “false flag” attack, aiming to discredit the Russian regime by committing an act they expect would be blamed on the Kremlin.

Such an attack could have the politically-convenient consequence of burnishing Navalny’s at best tattered opposition credentials. Navalny, a viciously anti-immigrant politician, reportedly received US government funds funneled via the National Endowment for Democracy in 2006, before heading to Yale University in America to participate in the “Yale World Fellows” program in 2009. He is currently viewed among broad layers of the Russian population as a tool of NATO.

While the attacker in the alleged poisoning of Navalny has not been identified, leading European politicians and media are nevertheless rushing to loudly accuse the Putin regime.

“Although a strong suspicion already existed, the certainty of the poisoning is shocking and a repulsive policy of the Russian leadership,” said Norbert Röttgen (CDU), chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Bundestag. “The policy of poisoning consists of insidiously eliminating opposition members and sending a clear message to all Russian citizens: Those who oppose democratically live dangerously. Any naivety and trivialization that is repeatedly recommended towards Russia, especially in Germany, is out of place,” Röttgen declared.

The German Greens’ foreign policy spokesman, Omid Noripour, also blamed Russia. “It is now obvious to everyone that this kind of attempted assassination and murder has a system,” he said. Referring to allegations that Moscow poisoned the Skripal family in Salisbury, Britain and shot a former Chechen militia leader in the Tiergarten in Berlin, he added: “The British called the EU Council after the attack in Salisbury, the German government did not do that after the Tiergarten murder. Now it is high time and a good opportunity for this—after all, Germany holds the presidency of the [EU] Council.”

Similarly, in a column titled “What the Navalny Affair reveals of the Putin system,” *Le Monde’s* Moscow correspondent Benoît Vitkine baldly cited a Twitter hashtag #WeKnowWhoIsGuilty, now used by Russian opposition supporters, as evidence that Putin is responsible for Navalny’s illness: “An ambassador of France, the one for human rights, has echoed this call. Behind these words is a simple truth: political violence is inherent to the Putin system.”

In fact, the 30 years since the Stalinist bureaucracy’s geopolitically suicidal 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union have shown that reactionary violence is inherent to the capitalist system. The NATO war drive in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia made possible by this elimination of the main military counterweight to the imperialist powers left a trail of devastation with millions of dead and tens of millions of refugees. Since the Ukraine putsch, there have been mounting military exercises and preparations for a direct NATO attack on Russia, a nuclear-armed power.

The resurgence of the class struggle inside what was previously the territory of the Soviet Union marks a significant new stage in this political crisis. It is virtually self-evident that the NATO powers are keeping Navalny as a tool to intervene in Russian politics in a period of mounting wars and class struggles. Were the political forces around Navalny to obtain more power inside Russia, moreover, they would be bitterly hostile to the working class.

The danger of war, growing social inequality and the disastrous official handling of the COVID-19 pandemic can be resolved on a progressive basis only through the re-emergence of mass working class struggles based on a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program. In Russia, Belarus and across the region, this means building the Trotskyist movement opposed to the capitalist gangster oligarchy that emerged from the Stalinist restoration of capitalism. This would be an integral part of a mass, international movement in the working class against war and the murderous policies adopted by capitalist governments worldwide amid the pandemic.

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