

The case of Alexei Navalny and the imperialist intervention in Russian politics

By Clara Weiss
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The Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who became seriously ill and fell into a coma on August 20, is still being treated at the German university clinic Charité. While the circumstances of his illness and suspected poisoning are still under investigation, his case has become a focal point for the intervention of the imperialist powers, most notably Germany, in Russian politics.

Navalny fell ill amidst an escalating crisis in Belarus, a small country bordering Russia to the west, and the only remaining “buffer” between Russia and NATO-aligned countries in the Baltics, Poland, and Ukraine. Because of both the heightened conflict with NATO and the emergence of mass strikes in the working class, the crisis in Belarus has significantly escalated tensions within the Russian elites and the state apparatus.

The timing of Navalny’s illness, whoever and whatever may be behind it, strongly suggests that it was a political operation. It is by no means excluded that one or another agency of the imperialist powers was responsible. Whatever the case, it is abundantly clear that these powers are determined to use the case to further maximize pressure on the Kremlin and escalate the anti-Russia campaign.

Why do the imperialist powers care about Navalny?

One of the most striking features of the media campaign about Navalny is that not a single newspaper has critically examined or even honestly discussed his politics. Readers are expected to take at face value that no one, except from Putin, could have any interest in poisoning Navalny, and that Navalny represents some kind of principled, democratic opposition to the Putin regime.

The presentation of Navalny as the leader of some kind of democratic popular movement is a conscious fraud.

Navalny is not a popular leader but a creation of imperialism, and representative of some of the most right-wing elements within the Russian oligarchy. Though his popularity has grown somewhat in recent months amidst the Kremlin’s catastrophic handling of the coronavirus pandemic, only 2 percent of the population named Navalny as the politician they trusted the most in a Levada poll from late July.

For over a decade, Navalny and his team have been groomed and trained systematically by the agencies of US imperialism. Both Navalny and his chief-of-staff, Leonid Volkov, participated in the World Fellowship program of the elite Yale University in the US in 2010 and 2019, respectively. The program has trained leading figures of imperialist-backed “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union, including the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Maidan 2013/2014 in Ukraine.

Navalny has long distinguished himself from other figures in Russia’s “liberal opposition” through his determination to integrate the far-right into the anti-Putin opposition. He used to be a member of the organizational council of the Russian March, an annual event organized by the country’s fascist and far-right forces. In 2007, the pro-US party Yabloko kicked him out because of his sympathies with the far-right.

He has denounced people from the Caucasus as “cockroaches” and has stated about immigrants, “Everything [sic!] that bothers us must be carefully removed through deportation.” At the 2011 Russian March, he has agitated in a thinly veiled anti-Semitic manner against oligarchs before a fascist audience, and was seen having a friendly conversation with Dmitry Diomushkin, a notorious neo-Nazi and organizer of the March. In other words, if Navalny was operating in the context of German or American politics, his positions would bring him in line with those of Donald Trump or the neo-fascist Alternative für Deutschland.

While Navalny has refrained from participating in these marches in recent years, he has never apologized for his earlier support for these events, let alone retracted his own statements. In all opposition-led protests against Putin that he helped organize, far-right forces were consciously integrated.

Moreover, Navalny has close ties to sections of the Russian elites and the state apparatus. Among his backers have been Vladimir Ashurkov and Mikhail Fridman, two of the richest men in Russia, as well as the economist Sergei Guriev, a former ally of ex-president Dmitri Medvedev. The Russian *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* has noted that the revelations about corruption that Navalny makes bear the imprint of the secret service FSB, which is notorious for compiling so-called kompromat dossiers with compromising material about its current and potential opponents. The newspaper suggested that many of these revelations were likely based on leaks from the security apparatus.

It is precisely this orientation that has made him attractive to Washington and Berlin. In their operations in eastern Europe, they have traditionally relied heavily on a combination of dissident factions of the oligarchy and state apparatus, on the one hand, and far-right and neo-Nazi elements, on the other.

Navalny and the promotion of regionalist and separatist tendencies in Russia

Another key element of Navalny’s agenda is the promotion of regionalist and separatist tendencies that have festered within the Russian oligarchy ever since the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the 1990s, the violent conflicts between different elements of the rising mafia-oligarchy over the control of raw material resources frequently took the form of conflict between the regional elites and oligarchs in Moscow.

In the early 1990s, both US and Russian ruling circles were openly discussing the possible secession of the Far East. A full-blown separatist movement, which enjoyed the support of US imperialism, developed in the Northern Caucasian republic of Chechnya. The Kremlin responded to it with two brutal wars that claimed the lives of a tenth of the local population to ensure that the North Caucasus remain part of the Russian Federation.

A central component of the Putin presidency has been to strongly subordinate the regional elites to the federal government and state apparatus. However, these tensions have intensified significantly in recent

years, and have been further heightened by the coronavirus pandemic, in which regional authorities were given significant leeway in handling the crisis. With the recent constitutional amendments, the Kremlin has tried to further restrict the authorities of regional and municipal government structures.

In contrast, Navalny has publicly advocated to “let the North Caucasus go.” He also calls for the strengthening of regional autonomy, including the reintroduction of direct elections of regional governors. Since 2016/2017, his campaign staff, which used to be centered almost exclusively on Moscow, has made a conscious push to establish “offices” in the regions. In 2019, Navalny and his staff supported and helped organize demonstrations in Yekaterinburg, a city in the Urals, under regionalist banners together with one of the most notorious proponents of the formation of an independent “Ural Republic.”

This year, Navalny and his staff have supported the ongoing protests in the Russian far eastern city Khabarovsk over the arrest of the region’s governor Sergei Furgal, a member of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). The protests have been dominated by regionalist slogans such as “This is our region” and “Moscow get out.” They have enjoyed the support of local bourgeois layers who feel that their own interests are infringed upon by major state-owned enterprises and the oligarchs in Moscow. The arrest of Furgal was also bitterly denounced by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the head of the far-right LDPR, and a long-time de facto ally of Putin.

The arrest of Furgal and the protests, coming just a few months before regional elections on September 13, have shed a light on just how fraught relations between the Kremlin and substantial sections of the ruling class are. In the German press coverage of Navalny’s illness, in particular, numerous commentaries have pointed out that the Khabarovsk protests have significantly weakened the Putin regime, and that they could provide the starting point for a mass movement against Putin similar to the movement against Lukashenko in Belarus. In reality, unlike in Belarus, which has been shaken by mass strikes, there has been no involvement by sections of the working class in Khabarovsk protests. This, however, is precisely what makes the case of Khabarovsk so appealing to the imperialist powers.

Both the US and Germany have long recognized in the promotion of regionalist and separatist tendencies in Russia a powerful means to further the fracturing of the ruling class, weaken and destabilize the Putin regime, and thus advance their own interests, while at the same time preempting any independent involvement by the working class, and bolstering right-wing forces. The ultimate goal is a regime-change operation for which Navalny, thanks to his ties to the elites and state, is regarded as a useful and reliable figure. At the same time, especially due to his ties to fascist forces, he is seen as capable of dealing, if necessary, with great violence, with social and political opposition in the working class.

The case of Navalny and the resurgence of German imperialism

While Navalny has well-documented ties to Washington, it was clearly Germany that has played the leading role in his case. In its cover story on Navalny this week, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* noted that discussions “in ruling circles in Berlin create the impression that Germany consciously made the case its own.” The magazine wrote that German Chancellor Angela Merkel “personally took up his case” and made his transfer to Germany possible. Merkel is reportedly receiving daily news briefs on his condition. The Charité, Germany’s leading hospital, has requested the assistance of the German army (Bundeswehr) to find out the substance with which Navalny was poisoned.

Navalny was flown out of Russia in a private jet that had been organized by the Berlin-based NGO Cinema for Peace. Its head Jaka Bizilj described the operation as “very expensive.” The NGO, which was founded after 9/11 to allegedly promote “peace” through cinema, is a

thinly veiled imperialist front organization. It is supported by Hillary and Bill Clinton, the former German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, and his former foreign minister, Joschka Fischer; as well as the Ukrainian boxer Vitaly Klitschko, who was installed as mayor of Kiev after the US and German-orchestrated coup in Ukraine in February 2014. The former general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, is the honorary chairman of the foundation.

The German media has been filled with propaganda pieces, denouncing Putin and calling for a much more aggressive stance by Germany toward Russia. The German bourgeoisie is no doubt highly sensitive to the fracturing of the Russian oligarchy and state apparatus due to its extensive economic and political ties to the Russian elites. Berlin may well have decided that the time to act and destabilize the Putin regime was now.

Jürgen Trittin, a leading politician of the German Green Party, suggested in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that the “attack” on Navalny may have been ordered by someone in the Russian state apparatus independent of or even in opposition to Putin, which would mean that Putin is no longer in control of the situation in the country. In either case, Trittin insisted, the case of Navalny meant that Russia could no longer be a “strategic partner” of Germany.

The full significance of the escalation of the anti-Putin campaign in Germany and the stepped-up effort of Berlin to intervene in Russian politics over the Navalny case can only be understood in its broader historical, geopolitical and social context.

Since 2014, when far-right forces toppled the pro-Russian Yanukovich regime in Ukraine with the backing of US and German imperialism, the German ruling class has pushed aggressively for the remilitarization of its foreign policy. This process has been accompanied by the systematic build-up of neo-Nazi forces within the state apparatus and the army, which have perpetrated numerous massacres and assassinations, killing dozens of people.

These processes are now being accelerated by the breakdown of world capitalism and geopolitical relations amid the coronavirus pandemic. Social tensions in Germany itself are at a fever pitch as the ruling class is pushing for the premature reopening of schools and easing of lockdown measures against the opposition of the vast majority of the working population. The aggressive militarist propaganda in the media is not least of all aimed at further bolstering the far right and diverting social tensions outward.

Moreover, tensions with US imperialism have been massively exacerbated in the recent period. With American society now in an unprecedented crisis, there are calls in the German ruling class to seize the opportunity to advance its own interests.

German foreign minister Heiko Mass has recently stated in a programmatic speech that the time had come for Europe to take decisions, saying: “If we don’t do it [now], then we in Europe will become the plaything of third parties.” The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, a leading mouthpiece of the German ruling class which has been central, in particular, to the resurgence of the far right, published a commentary entitled “The World under America’s cudgel.” It called for Germany to oppose the “lawless” “American expansion” under Trump, writing: “To give in [to the US] is not an option.”

The imperialist operations of Germany in Russia stand in a long and bloody tradition. The so-called “Drang nach Osten” (push eastward) was central to Germany’s strategy in two World Wars. The Nazis regarded the destruction of the Soviet Union, a degenerated workers’ state, and the establishment of full control over its vast raw material and labor resources, as the necessary precondition for taking on the US, Germany’s main imperialist rival. As a result of their “war of annihilation” in the East, 27 million people died in the Soviet Union, and many millions more perished in other parts of eastern and southeastern Europe.

In all of these interventions, German imperialism—and later US

imperialism—have traditionally relied on the mobilization of local nationalist and fascist forces. The promotion of Alexei Navalny stands in this tradition.

Workers across Europe and Russia must be warned of these sinister operations and their potentially catastrophic consequences. But any genuine struggle against the dangers facing the working class must be conducted independently from all factions of the capitalist class, including the Putin regime. Torn by inner conflicts, the Putin regime has been scrambling to negotiate with the imperialist powers for years, while promoting nationalism and militarism, and overseeing skyrocketing social inequality and austerity in Russia itself. The only progressive way forward lies in an independent intervention of the working class on the basis of a revolutionary and international program that is aimed at the overthrow of capitalism on a world scale.

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