

Russian authorities put opposition blogger Alexei Navalny on trial

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On April 17, the trial began in Russia of the blogger Alexei Navalny, who is charged with embezzlement. Navalny is one of the best-known critics of President Vladimir Putin. He was a spokesman for the protest movement that accused the Kremlin of falsifying the results of the presidential election in March 2012.

In his capacity as a consultant to the governor of Kirov, Navalny is accused of having embezzled up to €500,000 from the state-owned Kirovles wood company. He is threatened with a prison sentence of up to 10 years, and if convicted could no longer stand in the presidential elections as planned.

The accusations against Navalny appear to be fabrications. Legal experts have repeatedly questioned the indictment. The key witness for the charge, Kirovles director Vyacheslav Opalev, is entangled in contradictions in his statements to the court.

It would not be the first time that the Kremlin has used fabricated legal proceedings and prison terms to deal with political opposition. Along with Navalny, a further 12 leading members of the protest movement currently find themselves in the dock.

However, the campaign being led by the Western media in support of Navalny is deeply dishonest. The blogger does not speak for the broad mass of the Russian population who live in bitter poverty. According to polls, he would only receive 1 percent of the vote in a presidential election.

Navalny represents a section of the Russian ruling elite that is dissatisfied with the division of wealth at the top of society. They accuse Putin and his closest allies of having arbitrary control over the economy, while they strive to develop closer ties with international finance capital. Navalny is no democrat and is a liberal only on economic issues. He defends right-wing political positions and has repeatedly

collaborated with fascists. Navalny was born into a family of the privileged Soviet middle class that was close to the bureaucracy in 1976 near Moscow. Both his parents were party members; his mother was an economics expert, while his father was an officer in the Red Army. His parents built up a company during the period of capitalist restoration in the 1990s—while workers were plunged into poverty and barbaric social conditions.

Alexei bought shares when he was still a student at the elite Moscow State University and took part in the stock market boom of the 1990s. Since 2001, he has worked full-time as a stockbroker after training as a lawyer.

In 1999, Navalny joined the liberal Yabloko party, which had actively supported the restoration of capitalism, and quickly rose into the leadership. He became friends with the daughter of Yegor Gaidar, the leading economic theorist of “shock therapy,” and collaborated with her politically.

In 2005, Navalny took part for the first time in the Russian March, an annual demonstration of neo-Nazis. He was consequently expelled from Yabloko. In an interview at the time, he described the separation between democrats and nationalists as “artificial” and a “pseudo-ideological conflict.”

Navalny repeatedly took part in the neo-Nazi march until 2011, supporting chauvinist slogans such as “Russia for the Russians!” and “Stop feeding the Caucasus!”

He began his anti-corruption campaign in 2007. He bought into large state corporations, including the gas giant Gazprom and the oil company Rosneft, and several state banks. Through his blog, he disclosed information to the public that he had received as a shareholder. The leading Russian business newspaper

Vedomosti subsequently named him “Person of the Year 2009.”

In 2010, Navalny was a scholar at the elite Yale University in the US and took part in its “world fellows’ programme” aimed at “creating a global network of emerging leaders.”

In April 2011, when according to polls, only 4 percent of the Russian population actually knew who Navalny was, the American magazine *The New Yorker* published a 12-page profile on him.

In the autumn of the same year, shortly before the outbreak of the anti-Kremlin protest movement, he once again took part in the Russian March. In the protest movement, which was supported by the Russian liberals, the extreme right and the pseudo-left, Navalny functioned as a link between the liberal wing and the far right.

The *New York Times* published a tribute to Navalny on April 21 of this year, written by former executive editor Bill Keller. Keller hailed Navalny as a “potential political leader,” who was “young (36), thoughtful, politically astute, crowd-pleasing and apparently unafraid.”

Navalny played down the nature of the fascist groups with whom he collaborated, saying they used “a mild dose of nationalist sloganeering.” Keller praised this as a “shrewd” manoeuvre, which had “dismayed some of his liberal friends,” but served to shield him from Putin’s favourite critique of opposition figures as “Western stooges.” Above all, it helped him “broaden his appeal beyond the young, social-media-savvy cubicle workers who are his base.”

The elite in the US, for whom the *New York Times* speaks, clearly view Navalny as a potential ally with whom they can secure a better foothold in Russia. His nationalist phrases are no problem for them. They correctly understand that these are directed against the interests of the Russian working class and not against American imperialism.



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