What does Russian “opposition leader” Alexei Navalny represent?

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After being barred from running as a candidate in the March 2018 Russian presidential elections, the Russian blogger and political activist Alexei Navalny has called for a “voters’ strike” on January 28, 2018. All his former presidential campaign headquarters, set up in over two dozen cities, would now be used to mobilize for this “voters’ strike.” In a video promoting the protest action, Navalny declared that the elections are “illegitimate” and that the presidency resulting from it would also be “illegitimate.”

The campaign that Navalny has launched for the 2018 presidential elections has been massive in scale. Under conditions where literally no party or candidate even pretends to be campaigning, he has set up “campaign headquarters” in dozens of cities, including in Siberia and the Russian Far East. On his blog, he publishes commentaries and well-produced videos on an almost daily basis. Dozens of articles are published to support and promote him in the Western media. There is little question that a massive operation to promote Navalny in Russia and internationally is underway.

Yet there is a stark disjuncture between the overwhelming support that he receives from Western, and especially US, media and his near total lack of popularity in Russia itself. Despite massive media coverage in the West, and in Russian pro-opposition media, a recent poll indicated that only 2 percent of the electorate would vote for him.

There is good reason for this hostility. Navalny is not a democrat or a liberal, but a disgruntled entrepreneur and stockholder with distinct fascist leanings. On many levels, he represents the accumulated political filth that has burst to the surface in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

Navalny was born in 1976. His father was a Red Army officer, and his mother was a party member and economist. He grew up in various military towns, before moving to Moscow in the 1990s for his studies. This decade, traumatic to the vast majority of Russians, saw a shameless bonanza for former Stalinist bureaucrats, Komsomol members and outright criminals, who all tried feverishly to grab as much wealth from the former workers state as possible. Navalny’s family participated in this criminal struggle for wealth and influence of the ex-Stalinist elite to the best of their abilities. In the mid-1990s, his parents built a wicker factory in the southwest of Moscow. Navalny soon switched from law to finance, and went into banking.

Meanwhile, at the other end of society, the very hyperinflation that guaranteed the profits of the criminal few threw tens of millions of people into extreme poverty, and workers would go without wages for months on end. Against the backdrop of this cataclysmic restructuring of society, the young Navalny developed a fascistic, social-Darwinist hatred of the working class. In a later interview, he stated, “I wanted a market economy in the most wicked form—the strongest survive, the rest are simply superfluous (ne nuzhny).”

He started working on the stock market and in a real estate company. But he did not make it. Navalny later recalled: “To market fundamentalists like me, it seemed like they would all become millionaires. Everybody thought that if we were smart, we would soon become rich … but then it suddenly became apparent that the rich are those that are somehow connected to the government.”

We may assume that this recognition was the motivation for him to become engaged in politics. While still working on the stock market, he aligned himself with the liberal pro-market party “Yabloko” (The Apple), which has been headed by various figures, most notably Boris Nemtsov and Garry Kasparov, who have been notorious for their long-standing relations with Washington’s State Department and the CIA.

Navalny’s involvement in the Russian far-right

Early on, Navalny emerged as an aggressive proponent of an alliance between the liberals and the far right within the Russian opposition. He started participating in the fascist “Russian March” in 2005. This event was held annually in the fall in Moscow, and attracted a variety of Monarchist, fascist, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant organizations. In 2007, he was expelled from “Yabloko” because of his sympathies for the far right.

Navalny realized his plans for a “united front” of the far right and “liberals” with the “National Russian Liberation Movement,” or NAROD (The People), that he co-foundedt in 2007 with the National Bolshevik Zakhar Prilepin. In typical fascist fashion, the program of NAROD appealed to both nationalism and the interests of small businesses and property owners.

In one of the videos that NAROD published, Navalny is dressed as a dentist, comparing the extraction of rotten teeth with the deportation of “illegal immigrants.” He cheerfully says: “There is no need to beat anyone. Everything that bothers us must be carefully removed by means of deportation.” The video concludes with the call: “Think about the future—become a nationalist.” In another video, he compared people from the North Caucasus to “cockroaches.” One of Navalny’s main demands at that time was the right of Russians to gun ownership.

Navalny soon joined the organizational council of the “Russian March.” Video footage uploaded by the “Russian March” YouTube channel shows Navalny in a friendly conversation with Dmitry Diomushkin, a notorious neo-Nazi and the main organizer of the “Russian March.” In its description, the video advertises “free” training for “knife battles” in Moscow.

Video footage of the “Russian March” of November 4, 2011 (the day of Russian unity) shows Navalny in front of a poster, “Russia belongs to us,” agitating and shouting at a crowd of monarchists and fascists about corruption. Referring to the corruption trial between the oligarchs Boris Berezovsky, a major donor of the “liberal opposition” and Abramovich, a

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pro-Putin oligarch, in London, Navalny stated: "….they [the oligarchs] are afraid of a London judge. But for some reason, they're not afraid of everyone gathered here. Should they be afraid?" The crowd shouts back: "Yes"—Navalny: "Should they be afraid?"—the crowd: "Yes." Navalny: "This is our country and we must exterminate these thieves who are drinking our blood and chewing our livers. Down with United Russia! Down with the party of crooks and thieves!"

Before concluding, Navalny shouts: "One for all"—the fascist crowd responds: "All for one"—then Navalny shouts again: "One for all"—The fascists respond again: "All for one." Navalny then concludes: "Glory to Russia. Happy Holiday." The crowd repeats after him several times: "Glory to Russia."

Just a few weeks later, Navalny became the figurehead of the anti-Putin opposition movement that emerged in response to the rigged Duma elections of December 2011. The protest movement was dominated by layers of the upper-middle class and focused on the slogans "against the party of crooks and thieves," a phrase earlier coined by Navalny at the "Russian March." In its political composition, it represented the alliance between the far right, the liberals and the pseudo-left, which Navalny had been advocating over the previous years.

While the vast majority of the US media have maintained a deafening silence on this issue, Navalny has never retreated from his support for the far right. Thus, in 2016, he denounced the ban of the "Russian March" by the authorities in his blog, complaining that "in reality, the nationalists are under greater pressure [by the authorities] than the liberals."

Navalny's ties to US imperialism and the Russian elites

It is not despite, but because, of his involvement with both the liberals and the far right that Navalny has become an attractive political figure to both elements within the Kremlin who are planning for the "post-Putin" period, and US imperialism. He is viewed as the perfect candidate to create an alliance between fascists and oligarchs, and sections of the upper-middle class, for a right-wing movement against Putin, which would be aimed at installing a pro-US puppet regime.

In the early 2000s, Navalny developed his contacts with the current and former Yeltsin elite in Moscow through the organization "Da!" (Yes) which he formed with Maria Gaidar, the daughter of Yegor Gaidar, who had been the author of the devastating "shock therapy" through which capitalism was restored in Russia in the early 1990s. It was a club for Moscow's chattering classes, and attracted government officials, bankers and everyone who wanted to be in their position. One of Navalny's earliest supporters was Vladislav Surkov, who is widely considered one of the creators of the Putin cult and is still one of the Kremlin's most influential figures.

According to the British journalist Ben Judah, around 2009-2010, a "team began to form around Navalny" that included Evgenia Albats, a major editor, and Sergei Guriev, one of the best known economists in Russia and a former ally of ex-president Dmitri Medvedev. He started receiving backing from the influential bankers Vladimir Ashurkov and Mikhail Fridman, then both at the Alfa Bank. Ashurkov, who was educated at the elite Wharton School of business at the University of Pennsylvania in the US, subsequently became one of his main political allies, and now co-heads Navalny's "Fund to fight corruption."

In 2010, Navalny participated in the Yale "World Fellowship" program, which has also trained several figures from the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Maidan of 2013/2014. The program is currently headed by Emma Sky, who served as adviser to the US occupation forces in Afghanistan and Iraq for years.

The political and social forces that Navalny represents are similar to those that were brought to power in the far-right, US-backed coup in Kiev in 2014. His "People's Alliance" (later renamed the "Progress Party") expressed support for the Maidan. In January 2014, they declared: "We support and are in solidarity with the striving of the Ukrainian people for freedom and a change of government (smena vlasti) ... We see many similarities in the approaches and methods of the Ukrainian [government under Yanukovich] and the Russian government."

The political program of Navalny is reactionary, through and through. Among other things, he calls for a liquidation of the state-owned Pension Fund, and greater freedom for businesses. In keeping with his far-right views on immigration, his program also proposes the introduction of a visa regime for the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, which currently form the largest pool of working immigrants in Russia. The program says: "*Gastarbeiter* [a derogatory term for working immigrants] may enter the country only with a working visa, to [work for] a concrete employer and at a concrete working place, and only where there is really no way to do without them."

The program calls for an end to the military involvement of Russia in Syria and Ukraine and advocates a "political and economic rapprochement with the rich countries of Europe," arguing that "Russia must become a leading country of Europe and Asia."

However, it is also noticeable that Navalny is trying make a certain appeal to the massive social discontent that has built up in Russia over the past years. The Western sanctions and the enormous economic investments into the war efforts in Ukraine and Syria have resulted in an even greater impoverishment of both the intelligentsia and the working class. Putin's popularity—since 2014 largely based on fear of a war with the United States—has declined, and there has been a significant increase in strikes. But workers and youth must not be fooled by Navalny's phony demand to raise the minimum wage to 25,000 rubles (about $434), and calls for investments into infrastructure that are mere phrase-mongering.

This becomes fairly clear if one looks at his "expert team" which helped him write his political platform for the election campaign. It includes:

• Sergei Aleksashenko, formerly a vice-finance minister during capitalist restoration and the head of the Russian Central Bank between 1995 and 1998. In this capacity, he helped introduce the short-term government discount bills (GKO), which were a central reason for the Russian financial crash of 1998. He himself had participated in massive speculation, and was forced to step down from his position at the Central Bank.

• Elena Masolova, a 33-year old investor and entrepreneur

• Elena Lukyanova, a professor of law at the Moscow Higher School of Economics, who represented the ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky between 2010 and 2014.

• Vladimir Milov, vice-minister of energy in 2002, and formerly a close co-worker of the late, pro-American oppositionist Boris Nemtsov

Wealth inequality in Russia is the highest among all major countries in the world. In 2016, the top 1 percent owned a stunning 89 percent of Russia's total wealth. Only 4 percent of Russia's population of 140 million people own at least $18,000 and count as "middle class." The call in Navalny's program for a redistribution of wealth that benefits more than the top 0.1 percent is, in fact, a call for the redistribution of wealth within the oligarchy and sections of the upper-middle class who view the oligarchs and officials around Putin as the main obstacle to their own enrichment.

Lastly, a central component of Navalny's program is the decentralization of political power in Russia. He demands greater autonomy in political and financial matters for the regions, which have developed in a highly uneven manner since the dissolution of the USSR. While Russia's wealth is concentrated in Moscow, many other regions face conditions similar to those of the poorest countries of Africa and

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south Asia. In the 1990s, many regions demanded greater autonomy, with some moving toward creating their own legislation and armies. It is thus no coincidence that Navalny receives support from regionalist and separatist tendencies. One of his supporters is the journalist Fedor Krasheninnikov, one of the best-known advocates for the break-up of the Russian federation and the creation of an independent “Ural Republic.”

Combined with his encouragement of ethnic Russian nationalism and fascism in a country that has a very large Muslim population and over 100 different nationalities and ethnic groups, Navalny’s program amounts to encouragement of ethnic strife and a territorial breakup of the country.

If Navalny, and his backers in the Russian oligarchy and in Washington have it their way, the results for the working class would be nothing short of catastrophic. His policies, which are encouraged, if not dictated, by Washington, would lead to a total Balkanization of the Russian Federation, and could lead to civil and ethnic wars in comparison to which even the bloody Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s would pale.

The only way forward for the Russian working class lies in a firm opposition to all forms of nationalism, whether propagated by Navalny or Putin. Russian workers must draw the lessons of the nationalist betrayal of the October Revolution by the Stalinist bureaucracy and turn to the international working class for a joint struggle to put an end to capitalism and the nation-state system.

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