

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny hospitalized as crisis in Belarus deepens

Clara Weiss
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The leader of the pro-Western opposition in Russia, Alexei Navalny, was hospitalized in critical condition on Thursday.

Navalny reportedly fell ill while on a plane from Tomsk to Moscow. After an emergency landing, he was brought to a hospital in Omsk. The doctors treating him have so far made no diagnosis, but his supporters and family allege that he was poisoned with a cup of tea in Tomsk. As of this writing, Navalny is in critical but stable condition. He was put on a ventilator and is in a coma. It is not clear whether the coma was a result of his condition or medically induced.

Russian media reports note that several representatives of the FSB as well as the state prosecution are stationed outside his room. His assistant Kira Yarmysh, who was travelling with him, said that he had only consumed a cup of tea at the airport on that day, and stated that she was “convinced” that the tea had been poisoned.

Navalny’s personal doctor and his family have said from the beginning that they want him transferred to a hospital in Europe. The Kremlin has offered to help with the transfer.

Hours after the news of his hospitalization broke, French President Emmanuel Macron offered Navalny both medical help and political asylum. German Chancellor Angela Merkel similarly declared that she was “deeply shaken” by the news. According to the *Spiegel*, a German plane already left Berlin on Thursday night to fly to Russia and transfer Navalny to a German clinic. EU High Representative Josep Borrell demanded on Twitter that “those responsible must be held to account.”

Even though it has not even been confirmed that Navalny was poisoned, Masha Gessen, a leading figure in the anti-Putin campaign in the US, pondered in the

New Yorker, “Why assassinate Navalny now?” She noted that it may have either been that “an eager self-appointed Kremlin avenger struck without being given explicit authority” or that the Kremlin was terrified of the protests in Belarus and was trying to protect itself “by killing the presumptive leader of the uprising to come.”

While portrayed by the Western media as a defender of “democracy” against the Putin regime, in reality Navalny is a right-wing operative who maintains close ties to the US, sections of the Russian elite and the country’s far right. In 2010, Navalny participated in the Yale “World Fellowship” program, which has also trained several figures who played key roles in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 and the pro-Western coup in Kiev in 2014. He has participated numerous times in marches of Russia’s far right.

Navalny is also known to have ties to sections of the oligarchy and the Kremlin and state apparatus. One commentary in the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* noted that “Navalny is not inconvenient to the Kremlin, but to individual figures.” The article pointed out that many of his revelations of corruption, crimes and personal wealth of politicians and officials bore the character of the dossiers that the Russian secret service compiles about its real and potential opponents, suggesting that they may have been leaked to him from within the state apparatus.

Navalny’s hospitalization comes amid an escalating crisis around the protests and mass strikes in Belarus which have shaken the Lukashenko regime. The movement has provoked enormous concerns in the bourgeoisie across Europe and Russia that the strikes might get out of control and spread to other countries. At the same time, the crisis has heightened geopolitical tensions in a region that has become the main staging

ground for the NATO-led war preparations against Russia.

In an extraordinary summit on Wednesday, the EU publicly sided with the opposition against Lukashenko, demanding that his government initiate negotiations with its opponents. However, Lukashenko has rejected multiple offers by the opposition to initiate negotiations. On Thursday, he launched a criminal investigation into the opposition's Coordination Council, accusing it of an "attempt to seize power."

Navalny has prominently supported the opposition in Belarus, focusing most of his coverage and publications in recent weeks on developments in the country. Regardless of what actually led to Navalny's hospitalization, it is set to deepen tensions between the imperialist powers and Russia, and in the political crisis in Russia itself.

The Kremlin has taken an ambiguous and cautious attitude toward developments in Belarus, refusing to offer unconditional support to Lukashenko. Lukashenko's government has long tried to balance between Western imperialism and the Kremlin and has recently moved closer to NATO.

As strikes escalated in Belarus, both Merkel and Macron called Putin to discuss the situation. In a recent piece for the *Atlantic Council*, one of the most belligerent think tanks in Washington vis-à-vis Russia, Anders Aslund urged the EU to step up its involvement in Belarus and seek to "mediate" the situation together with Russia in order to bring the crisis under control.

However, there are clearly growing concerns in the Russian ruling class that NATO and the EU will exploit the crisis in Belarus to further tighten the military and political noose around Russia.

After Wednesday's EU summit, Putin's press secretary Dmitri Peskov denounced the meddling of "foreign powers" in developments in Belarus. The Kremlin has also rejected the attempts by the opposition's Coordination Council to initiate negotiations with Moscow.

Russian press commentaries were divided in their assessment of the Coordination Council. While Russia Today pointed out that the opposition does not seem intent on turning against Russia, Gazeta.Ru has described several members of the Council as "Russophobes" who were seeking a "secession" of Belarus from Russia.

Meanwhile, Lukashenko has escalated his crackdown on the strikes. On Tuesday, he mobilized the military on the country's western borders with the EU and NATO, where several of the biggest strikes have been taking place. Lukashenko has also instructed the forces of the interior ministry to prevent "all unrest" in Minsk and other cities.

Strike leaders and striking workers have been arrested. Dozens of people are still unaccounted for, and there have been widespread reports of the torture and rape of prisoners. The government also seeks to starve strikers into submission by withholding their meager salaries.

There is little doubt that the brutal crackdown by the Lukashenko regime on workers and youth enjoys the backing of the Kremlin. The Russian oligarchy, which emerged out of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and restoration of capitalism, is acutely aware of the danger that the mass strikes can spread to Russia.

Much as in Belarus, the coronavirus pandemic in Russia has brought social tensions to the boiling point. Russia has reported over 942,000 cases, the fourth highest number in the world. Hospitals have been brought to the brink of collapse. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been laid off or are not receiving their salaries.

The Russian oligarchy also relies heavily on Belarusian manufacturing. Over 40 percent of Belarusian exports go to Russia, including machinery, but also a large number of agricultural products and food. Production for the Russian Ministry of Defense has been hit hard by strikes in Belarus, whose factories account for about 15 percent of Russia's military production procurement. According to the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the defense ministry is considering suing the Belarusian companies where the strikes are delaying production, in an attempt to further step up pressure on the Belarusian government to put an end to the strike movement.



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