

Germany, France to sanction Russia over Navalny's alleged poisoning

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Ahead of a scheduled EU summit on October 12, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) published a report alleging that Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a Novichok-type toxin. The cholinesterase inhibitor it named is not formally included on its list of banned substances, but the OPCW claims that its structure resembles other substances it has outlawed.

The OPCW report formed the basis for a statement by the French and German foreign ministers, stating that the Kremlin had not provided a satisfactory response to the attack “on Russian soil, against a Russian opposition figure, using a military nerve agent developed by Russia.” The statement claimed that there “is no other plausible explanation for Mr. Navalny’s poisoning than Russian involvement and responsibility.”

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas threatened: “It is clear that if the events are not cleared up and the necessary information is not provided, targeted and disruptive sanctions against those responsible on the Russian side will be unavoidable. Russia would do well not to let this happen.”

According to the French daily *Le Monde*, the EU will discuss sanctions on Monday against nine senior Russian officials, including members of the presidential administration and security apparatus.

In response to the OPCW report and statements from Berlin and Paris, Russian officials issued angry rebukes. Russia’s envoy to the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin, said: “Russia does not owe anything to anybody. Neither to Germany nor to other countries that categorically and groundlessly accuse Russia of poisoning Alexei Navalny. We do not need to explain ourselves to them and we are not going to.”

The Russian foreign ministry reiterated its calls to get

the test analyses and results produced by the German army lab in Munich. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, “We are surprised that the EU is functioning without a court and investigation. They demand we conduct an investigation, but the very same Germany does not provide us with any facts.” Earlier this week, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Marina Zakharova said there can be “no business as usual” between Berlin, Paris and Moscow unless France and Germany change course on the Navalny case.

Nothing published by the OPCW and the imperialist powers can be taken at face value. The OPCW is notorious for providing pretexts for political and military interventions by the imperialist powers. In 2018, it doctored a report, claiming, despite evidence to the contrary from its own staff members, that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons in the Syrian civil war. Thus providing the pretext for bombings by France, Britain and the US in Syria.

The alleged poisoning of Navalny with Novichok raises a host of unanswered questions. First and foremost is how Navalny survived exposure to a particularly deadly nerve agent, and why no one who came in contact with him showed even mild symptoms. In the 2018 Salisbury incident, when former Russian secret service agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter were allegedly poisoned with Novichok, at least one person died and one became seriously ill from minimal exposure to the poison. Entire buildings had to be evacuated.

In Navalny’s case, however, no one on the plane he took from Tomsk to Moscow reported any symptoms. Nor did any of his staff members—even those who rescued a bottle from his hotel which supposedly contained Novichok, according to the German army lab—suffer any impact.

Leonid Rink, one of the developers of the Novichok agent, told the Russian press that the substances detected by the OPCW were, in fact, not toxic and ineffective as poison.

In a bizarre, two-hour interview with the Russian YouTube blogger Yuri Dud' this week, Navalny, who has now fully recovered, compared his feeling of being poisoned and dying with the impact of the Dementors in the fantasy book Harry Potter. He and his wife could not describe any part of his alleged poisoning without repeated references to novels and movies.

When pressed by Dud' why he thought that Putin personally had ordered his poisoning, Navalny insisted that it was primarily the fact that Novichok was used which allegedly "proved" Putin's direct involvement. In fact, there are many other governments and security agencies capable of producing and deploying Novichok, if Novichok was really used in this case. No evidence has been provided for any kind of Russian involvement, let alone personal responsibility by Putin.

In the same interview, Navalny's wife, Yulia Navalnaya, claimed she had had virtually no idea of the involvement of the German and French governments in Navalny's transfer to Berlin's Charité hospital, stating that the publicity she generated was decisive in making the transfer possible. In fact, it has since been revealed that German Chancellor Angela Merkel personally became involved early on, pressing for Navalny's transfer to Germany. She later also reportedly visited him in the hospital, receiving daily briefings on his condition.

Nowhere has Navalny's alleged poisoning been exploited as aggressively as in Germany. Much of the German political establishment seized upon the case to push for a more aggressive stance by Berlin and the entire EU toward Russia. Navalny gave an interview to *Bild*, calling former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who has close ties to Russia's state-owned Gazprom company, a "lackey of Putin." He called to stop the nearly completed NordStream2 pipeline, which delivers gas from Russia directly to Germany, and for sanctions against members of the Russian ruling elite.

Navalny's case cannot be understood outside the imperialist powers' drive to war amid an unprecedented crisis of capitalism driven by the pandemic, mounting social inequality and bitter geostrategic tensions. The EU's aggressive stance

towards Russia is driven not last of all by growing class tensions inside Europe amid the escalating pandemic. Moreover, US-EU tensions, particularly between Washington and Berlin, have surged in recent years.

It is against this background that the European imperialist powers seek to exploit the growing economic and political weakness of Russia's post-Soviet capitalist oligarchy. Recent months have seen mass protests and strikes against Alexander Lukashenko's regime in Belarus, the only remaining government on Russia's western borders not directly aligned with NATO. The EU, with Germany and France in the lead, has sought to bolster the pro-NATO opposition in Minsk, both to suppress and divert the strikes and further weaken Russia's geopolitical position.

In the Caucasus, war is raging between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a religiously and ethnically loaded conflict threatening to spill over into Russia's North Caucasus. In the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, moreover, the government of Sooronbai Jeenbekov was toppled by opposition parties that decry the former government's close cooperation with Russia as a violation of Kyrgyzstan's national sovereignty.

At the same time, the Putin regime has been undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic, to which the Russian oligarchy, like the ruling class around the world, responded with a de facto policy of "herd immunity." While Russia now faces a resurgence of the pandemic, Moscow is preparing further cuts to health care and social spending and has declared that no lockdowns will be imposed to stop the spread of the virus.

Amidst this growing instability, the imperialist powers seek to bolster the right-wing opposition of Alexei Navalny, who is notorious for his ties to far-right and regionalist forces in Russia, both to advance their geopolitical interests in the former Soviet Union, and to build up right-wing allies which can be relied upon in the violent suppression of working class opposition not just to the Putin regime but the capitalist system as a whole.



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