

CNN, Spiegel double down on anti-Russia campaign over Navalny case

Clara Weiss

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On Monday, CNN and the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, working in conjunction with Bellingcat and the Russian outlet the Insider, published major feature stories on the alleged poisoning of right-wing Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny. The outlets claim to have identified the members of the “FSB elite unit” that supposedly was tasked to kill Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok.

Navalny, the leader of the imperialist-backed liberal opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin, fell ill on August 20 on a flight from the Siberian city of Tomsk to Moscow. The stories in CNN and the *Spiegel* treat the poisoning of Navalny with Novichok at the behest of the head of the Russian state as a fact. In reality, however, to this day, not a shred of evidence has been produced to substantiate the claim that Navalny was poisoned with Novichok, let alone that Putin had anything to do with it.

Evidence of Novichok was only found by a Munich laboratory of the German army (Bundeswehr) after Navalny had been transferred, through the direct involvement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, to the Charité hospital in Berlin. From beginning to end the story of Navalny’s poisoning has been riddled with contradictions, none of which Spiegel or CNN bother to address. The most glaring contradiction of all is that not only did Navalny survive an attack with a poison that is designed to kill almost instantly, but not a single person in Navalny’s immediate surroundings showed even the slightest symptoms of poisoning. In the also highly dubious poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, Britain, one person unrelated to the Skripals died from coming in contact with just a tiny amount of Novichok. Entire buildings had to be evacuated.

Yet not only Navalny but also a water bottle which allegedly contained traces of Novichok were

transported across half of Russia without a single person having even the slightest symptoms of any illness except for Navalny. Navalny later said in a bizarre Russian interview that he could only compare his supposed near-death experience to the effect “of a dementor in Harry Potter.”

The stories by *Spiegel* and CNN are an even more jarring continuation of this dubious case. The *Spiegel* story tries to convince its readers of the “serious” aftereffects of the poisoning with Novichok by quoting Navalny: “I recently went jogging and then I got muscle cramps.” Both CNN and the *Spiegel* suggest that an earlier attempt to “poison” Navalny or his wife may have occurred just before that in Kaliningrad. The evidence?—His wife, Yulia Navalnaya, experienced “sudden exhaustion and disorientation” one afternoon, and had to go to rest at the hotel. Unnamed “experts” told CNN that such “symptoms are consistent with a low dosage of poisoning.” According to the *Spiegel*, these “symptoms” barely lasted into the evening and she felt perfectly fine after a night of sleep.

CNN, *Spiegel*, Insider and Bellingcat claim to have identified the “FSB elite unit” which had allegedly followed Navalny on 30 trips since 2017. A piece published by Bellingcat explained that they had only needed “some creative Googling (or Yandexing) and a few hundred euros worth of cryptocurrency to be fed through an automated payment platform, not much different than Amazon or Lexis Nexis, to acquire telephone records with geolocation data, passenger manifests, and residential data.” In this way, they claim, they were able to obtain on the Russian black data market not just the names but also the addresses, car license plates, telephone numbers and records, birth dates and flight records of the “elite FSB unit” that had been charged with the murder of Russia’s most famous

anti-Putin opposition figure. Even if one were to assume that these men were, in fact, working for the FSB and tasked with following Navalny, no evidence is presented at all to prove that there was any plot to kill him with Novichok, or otherwise, and that they had anything to do with it.

From the attempts to associate muscle cramps during jogging and a “vacation sickness” with the impact of highly poisonous substances to the story of “creative Googling” that uncovered an “elite FSB unit,” this “investigation” stands out above all for its utter disregard for even a minimum of logical coherence and basic journalistic standards.

The involvement of Bellinccat, in particular, speaks volumes about the character of this “investigation.” In 2016, the WSWS exposed the “citizen journalism” collective as a propaganda front for NATO’s provocations and war preparations against Russia. A Bellinccat employee, Christo Grozev, co-authored the *Spiegel* story on Navalny and all the other major features on the case that appeared in the magazine in recent months.

Bellinccat was founded in 2014 by Eliot Higgins, who from 2016 to 2019 was a fellow at the rabidly anti-Russian Atlantic Council. Bellinccat has been key to manufacturing the propaganda around the downing of the MH17 flight over Ukraine in 2014 and countless pieces alleging the use of “chemical weapons” by the Assad regime in Syria. Bellinccat also played a central role in the propaganda around the Skripal case, which formed the pretext for a whole series of anti-Russian sanctions in 2018–19.

This latest feature story on the Navalny case marks yet a further escalation of the anti-Russia campaign. However, unlike in recent months, when the German government and media clearly spearheaded this campaign, the involvement of CNN indicates that the American press is now also determined to exploit the case to further ramp up the anti-Russia propaganda. It comes just shortly after new unsubstantiated hacking allegations by Russia were again widely publicized in the American media.

On Tuesday, the *New York Times* warned that a Biden administration would face “a confrontational Russia” and that Russia would be an even greater “threat” now than it had been under Obama, when Washington instigated bombing of Libya, instigated civil war in

Syria and financed the toppling of a pro-Russian government in Kiev—all aimed to a considerable extent at undermining Russian influence and further encircling the country. Now, the *New York Times* wrote, Russia is challenging US interests “not only in what Moscow calls its near-abroad but also in Western Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Arctic.”

The systematic propping up of Navalny, who is an extremely right-wing figure with ties to fascistic and separatist tendencies within the Russian elites, is aimed not least of all at furthering the already substantial divisions within the crisis-ridden Russian state apparatus and ruling class and thus destabilizing the Putin regime.

Above all, however, the war preparations and provocations against Russia must be understood in the context of a staggering crisis of the capitalist system that is particularly sharp in the US. More than two people are dying from COVID-19 every minute, even as vaccines are becoming available. Food lines are growing across the country, millions have lost their jobs and many more have lost a substantial portion of their income. President Donald Trump still refuses to concede the election to President-elect Joe Biden, has purged the upper echelons of the Pentagon and is staging one war provocation against Iran after another.

The Democrats, for their part, are doing everything in their power to downplay the ongoing efforts at a coup attempt by Trump, while assuring Wall Street that they will continue the policy of handouts to the super rich and the murderous policy of “herd immunity.” The increasingly aggressive anti-Russia and anti-China war propaganda is aimed at preparing the grounds for an escalation of imperialist interventions abroad to divert outwards the enormous building class tensions.



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