

Russia imposes sanctions on German officials as Navalny story assumes farcical character

Clara Weiss

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The story about the alleged poisoning of the leader of the imperialist-backed anti-Putin opposition in Russia, Alexei Navalny, is assuming an ever more openly farcical character.

While the very fact of Navalny's poisoning with Novichok has not been proven to this day, last week, CNN, the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, working in collaboration with Bellingcat, an obscure publication with ties to NATO think tanks, as well as the Russian pro-opposition outlet The Insider, published features alleging that they had personally identified the members of an "elite unit" of the Russian secret service FSB that had supposedly poisoned Navalny with Novichok.

To identify these men, Bellingcat wrote, they only had to do 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." They then compared the material with databases that had been "leaked" to them from anonymous sources in recent years.

Last Thursday, the Russian president Vladimir Putin indicated in a press conference that the FSB had, indeed, been following Navalny, but denied that any involvement in the alleged poisoning of Navalny, stating, "If we had wanted to kill him, we would have finished the job." He called the "investigation" by CNN and *Spiegel* the work of "American secret services."

This Monday, CNN and *Spiegel* published another story entitled, "Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny dupes spy into revealing how he was poisoned." On December 14, the story goes, Navalny, based on the "investigation" of Bellingcat, *Spiegel* and CNN, picked up the phone, hours before the outlets published their "revelations," to call one of the members of the "FSB elite unit", a certain Konstantin Kudriatsev. Using a "very simple software" that, according to Navalny, is used by "phone prankers" to hide his real number, Navalny pretended to be calling on behalf of Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the Russian secret

service FSB and current secretary of the Russian Security Council, which consults directly with President Vladimir Putin. Navalny has released a video recording of his call on his own YouTube channel.

Navalny asked Kudriatsev to provide assessments of all the team members, and to describe in detail what he had done. Kudriatsev explained that the nerve agent had been planted on Navalny's "underpants" a full two days before Navalny went on the notorious flight to Moscow. (Kudriatsev could, in fact, not give a clear answer as to where they put the poison but Navalny, saying vaguely that it was "the trousers" or "underpants" but Navalny, CNN and *Spiegel*, apparently for the sake of a good story, chose to go with the "underpants.")

Navalny also asked whether "any more problems" had to be expected with traces of Novichok on the clothes of Navalny. "No," Kudriatsev assured him, "we went there several times" afterward to "clean up." CNN concluded triumphantly that the phone call had allowed them "to complete the picture of Navalny's poisoning by the Russian state."

As Navalny himself stated in a video introducing the latest "revelations": "this whole poisoning story is better than any Hollywood movie." One might add that most script writers in Hollywood would have given more consideration to basic common sense and logic than those behind this bizarre parody of a spy crime.

If the poison was planted on Navalny's clothes two days earlier, why did he not fall ill earlier? Why did no one fall ill who came in touch with him at the airport, or on the flight if the clothes he wore were poisoned? After all, the alleged Novichok poisoning of the Skripals in Britain required the evacuation of entire buildings. And how could the nerve agent find its way from his underwear to a water bottle which suddenly appeared with traces of Novichok in a laboratory working for the German Bundeswehr weeks later? (Conveniently, CNN dropped the water bottle, which had suddenly appeared in the media narrative in September out of the blue, from its latest reports.)

Why would Kudriatsev, member of an “FSB elite unit,” chat over a regular phone to an unknown man for over 45 minutes, describing in detail a supposedly massive operative failure of the FSB that had taken place almost four months ago and has since become the subject of enormous political tensions between Moscow, and the leading imperialist powers, including Germany, the US and France? And how could a man, who has supposedly followed Navalny and his blog for years, not recognize the latter’s voice over the phone?

As if all of this was not enough, the *Spiegel*—which breathlessly reported on a “vacation sickness” of Navalny’s wife in the summer, which did not even last 24 hours, interpreting it as a possible attempt at Navalny’s life, and ascribed “muscle cramps” Navalny experienced while jogging to the ongoing impact of the nerve agent—now also suggested that “back in 2019,” Navalny was experiencing “similar symptoms” on another flight. But, we are told, they only lasted “15 minutes.”

The Navalny story becomes even more farcical if one reads it alongside others of the anti-Russia campaign. While one attempt on Navalny’s life by the Russian state after another has failed miserably despite an enormous expense of resources, and while FSB officers seem not to mind chatting with strangers about operative secrets over the phone, the American and European public has been told, time and time again, over the past years, that the same Russian state is responsible for monumental hacks that have undermined the “integrity” of the US 2016 election, and almost brought down its cyber security system.

And while CNN, *Spiegel* and Bellingcat, through “creative Googling,” and by using software employed by “phone prankers,” were able to establish the identity and modus operandi of FSB murder squads, the entire national security apparatus of US imperialism with all its ties to German and British intelligence, has been unable, despite years of feverish work and propaganda, to uncover any proof for these massive hacks.

Russia has responded to Monday’s story by imposing sanctions on Tuesday on as yet unnamed German officials who will not be allowed to enter Russia anymore. The sanctions were announced by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in a meeting with representatives from Germany, France and Sweden, and will likely be extended to countries other than Germany. The FSB called the recording published by Navalny a “fraud” and stated that the telephone software used by Navalny was frequently employed by American services.

The feverish quality of the concocted stories about “Navalny’s poisoning” must serve as a deadly serious warning to the working class about the advanced character

of the war preparations against Russia. No lie is too big, and no story too absurd, to not be employed in the service of war propaganda.

Within hours, the latest Navalny story has been picked up not only uncritically by the bourgeois media but also by government officials. In Germany, Franziska Brantner, a leading representative of the Green Party, stated that these revelations indicated that Russia “is making policies in a criminal manner. The appeasement policy of recent years has not worked.” Brantner called for an immediate stop to the construction of the Russian-German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, which has already been sanctioned by the US. Echoing these calls for a tougher stance on Russia, the spokesperson of the Left Party for matters of foreign and defense policy, Matthias Höhn, called the alleged employment of Novichok against Navalny “a violation of international law.”

In the US, the *Washington Post*, owned by Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, published an editorial last week on the Navalny case, entitled “The U.S. can’t keep ignoring Russia’s brazen use of chemical weapons,” calling upon the incoming Biden administration to escalate sanctions against Russia. The objective logic of the endless provocations and war propaganda by US and German imperialism is to prepare the grounds for all-out war with the country with the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world. As the WWSWS noted last week: “The flood of anti-Russian propaganda in the immediate wake of the Electoral College’s vote to confirm Biden as the elected president of the US and with little more than a month till Inauguration Day serves as a warning. If the Democrats succeed in securing a peaceful transfer of power on January 20, it will be on the basis of a program of intensified war abroad and stepped-up attacks on the democratic and social rights of the working class at home.”



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