Navalny arrested in Russia as Biden nominates Victoria Nuland for top State Department position

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On Sunday, the US- and European Union (EU)-backed opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Alexei Navalny, was arrested at a Moscow airport upon his return from Berlin. On Monday, it was announced that he would have to serve a 30-day jail sentence.

Navalny had spent the previous five months in Germany, where he was flown after he had fallen ill on a plane. The flight had been arranged with the direct involvement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Western media, with the German press taking the lead, launched a massive propaganda campaign, claiming that Navalny had been poisoned with Novichok, a deadly nerve agent. The poisoning of Navalny with Novichok was, however, never proven, and the charge was based primarily on the claims of a laboratory affiliated with the German army (Bundeswehr).

Indeed, the media narrative of Navalny's poisoning includes so many contradictions and bizarre episodes—from Novichok traces that were found first on a water bottle and then turned out to have been planted on Navalny's underpants, to the discovery of an elite team of assassins from the Russian secret service FSB through "creative googling"—that it stands out, above all, for its brazen disregard for basic common sense. In the latest installment of the story, Navalny was shown as he was presumably calling one of the FSB agents who was allegedly involved in this plot and immediately admitted everything over the phone.

Like most episodes in this absurd story, it has since largely disappeared from the media coverage, which just speaks of Navalny's "Novichok poisoning" as an established fact.

Navalny's return, which was sure to prompt his arrest, was no doubt a calculated move. After Navalny had announced last week that he would return, Russian authorities promptly declared that he would be arrested as soon as he landed, based on charges of embezzlement dating from 2014. He could now face up to three and a half years in prison. A large team of journalists accompanied Navalny on his flight to cover the story. Navalny has since called on his supporters to take to the streets and protest his arrest.

The *New York Times* editorial board issued a statement Sunday night praising the "extraordinary courage of Alexey Navalny," declaring that he was now an "international hero" and "celebrated political prisoner." The US has since also announced that it will impose further sanctions on the Russian–German gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, a move that enjoys bipartisan support.

The timing of Navalny's return to Russia and his arrest must be seen within the context of growing geopolitical tensions and above all the staggering political crisis in the United States. It comes just days before the inauguration of Joseph Biden on January 20, which has been accompanied by an unprecedented military lockdown of the American capital in anticipation of armed protests. On January 6, a fascist crowd, instigated by the sitting president Donald Trump and backed by powerful sections within the American state and military, stormed the Capitol in an attempt to kill and kidnap members of Congress to bring about the nullification of the election.

The Democratic Party has responded to these developments by trying to cover up the extent of the coup, appealing to Republicans for "unity," and by

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stepping up the anti-Russia campaign and preparations for military interventions abroad.

President-elect Joseph Biden has since nominated several figures to key positions in the American foreign policy and national security apparatus who are associated with an aggressive stance toward Russia. Last week, Biden nominated William Burns, a former ambassador to Russia, to head the Central Intelligence Agency. Burns was heavily involved in, among other things, the war on Libya and the US intervention in Syria, both of which were aimed, to a large extent, at undermining Russian influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

In an even more provocative move, Biden has nominated Victoria Nuland to become Under Secretary for Political Affairs, which would make her the third-ranking US diplomat. More than any other figure in the US foreign policy establishment, Nuland's name is associated with the brazen gangsterism of the 2014 coup in Ukraine, in which the US and Germany funded and backed fascist forces to overthrow the pro-Russian government of Viktor Yanukovich and install a pro-Western regime.

Nuland admitted in 2013 that the US had "invested over $5 billion" in the Ukrainian opposition. In 2014, a recorded phone call with the US ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt, was leaked, in which she stated "F** the EU" and casually discussed the US strategy of working with neo-fascist forces like the Svoboda party. In 2019, Nuland was barred from entering Russia.

The promotion of Alexei Navalny is of a piece with this type of criminal intervention by US imperialism in the former Soviet Union over the past three decades. This policy has led to an ever-growing social and political disaster for the working class.

The media narrative about Navalny as a popular figure, "democratic" politician and even "international hero" (*New York Times*) is utterly false. Groomed by US imperialism for well over a decade now, Navalny has never managed to garner any significant support beyond the narrow layers of Russia's upper middle class and has consistently performed poorly in popularity rankings.

A product of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union and capitalist restoration, Navalny speaks for a faction of the Russian oligarchy that finds itself in a bitter conflict with the Putin regime over the control of material resources and the country's foreign policy. Throughout his political career in the US-backed "liberal" opposition, he has stood out primarily for his insistence on the need to collaborate with the far-right in opposing the Putin regime. He has admitted to being a Russian nationalist, participated in several "Russian Marches" by the Russian neo-fascists and has denounced people from the Caucasus as "cockroaches."

Navalny's protest against Trump's Twitter ban as an "unacceptable act of censorship" last week was not only in line with the position of the German government, but no doubt also expressed real political sympathies with the fascist rantings of the US president. The open support of the Democratic Party and the *New York Times* for such extreme right-wing forces in Russia is a clear warning to all workers, especially in the United States, as to where the Democrats' political and class allegiance lies in the fight against fascism.

Driven by growing class tensions and torn by political crises, the US is now doubling down on its efforts to destabilize the Putin regime, well aware that the global crisis of capitalism has dramatically exacerbated the economic crisis in Russia and conflicts within its ruling class. The Putin regime, for its part, has no response to the growing pressure from imperialism except from austerity and the promotion of nationalism and militarism at home, and pathetic maneuvers between the very imperialist powers that are openly preparing for war.

The objective logic of this dynamic, absent an independent intervention of the working class, is pointing inexorably toward war between nuclear-armed powers. The response to the breakdown of world capitalism, the growing danger of war, and the growth of the far right must be a united movement by workers, including in Russia, Europe and the United States, to overthrow this outmoded social system.

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