

# Russian police crackdown on pro-Navalny protests

Clara Weiss  
24 January 2021

Several tens of thousands of people protested on Saturday in over 100 Russian cities to demand the release of Alexei Navalny, a right-wing opponent of the Putin government. He was detained the previous Sunday after his return from Germany on the grounds that he had violated the terms of a 2014 suspended sentence for money-laundering. Prior to his arrival in Moscow, the Kremlin publicly announced that he would be arrested upon landing in Russia.

Before his return, Navalny spent five months in Germany after falling ill on a flight from Tomsk to Moscow. He was flown to the Charité hospital in Berlin, thanks to the direct involvement of German chancellor Angela Merkel. Based on the findings of a German army laboratory, it was claimed that Navalny had been poisoned by Novichok, a highly deadly nerve agent. Despite the absence of any evidence, Western governments and press have insisted Putin is the culprit.

The largest protest occurred in Moscow. According to the Russian business daily *Kommersant*, over 15,000 people participated. A much larger figure cited by Reuters—40,000—has not been confirmed by other outlets, and even the German news magazine *Spiegel*, which has been heavily pro-Navalny, called it into question. Claims made by Navalny's staff that hundreds of thousands participated across the country have not been reported by other sources.

*Kommersant* noted that despite efforts of Navalny supporters to promote the demonstrations on the popular social media platform TikTok, relatively few youth participated in Moscow. In 2017, Navalny's opposition was able to exploit broader social and political discontent and turn out larger numbers of youth at his protests.

This past Saturday, demonstrators' demands were

confined to anti-corruption slogans, "Putin go away" and for Navalny to be released. Nothing addressed the staggering social crisis in the country or the COVID pandemic, which has infected more than 3.5 million people and killed, based on official estimates, over 65,000.

The police cracked down heavily on the protests. According to Russian NGOs, over 3,300 people were arrested, more than 1,400 of them in Moscow. One of Navalny's closest allies, Leonid Volkov, indicated in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that in many regions those detained were almost exclusively members of Navalny's local staff.

Volkov gloated that sections of the security apparatus, especially within the police, seem to be going over to the side of the opposition. Reports in the Russian press suggest that the Stalinist KPRF, which long has been a crucial prop of the Putin regime, is now divided over Navalny, with some of its leading members backing him.

The alleged poisoning of Navalny by the Kremlin is a dubious case riddled with lies and outright contradictions. To this day, contrary to what the *New York Times* and other outlets tell their readers, it has not been proven that Navalny was poisoned with Novichok, much less that Putin or the Russian secret service had anything to do with his illness.

Just after his return to Russia and arrest, Navalny's YouTube channel published a two-hour video about corruption by the Putin regime. It supposedly exposed the construction of a massive "palace" for Putin with taxpayer money on the shores of the Black Sea. His team also released a list of officials close to Putin that it demands be sanctioned by the European Union. The list includes several of Russia's richest oligarchs, such as Roman Abramovich and Alisher Usmanov.

Navalny's video has been watched over 80 million times as of this writing. It insists that "corruption" and "theft" have marked Putin's path from his time as a KGB (Soviet secret service) officer in East Germany in the 1980s to the head of the Kremlin. It mostly deals with facts and figures that have long been known.

The "anti-corruption" mantra—which is the axis around which Navalny's supposed opposition to Putin orbits—is a hallmark of right-wing, pro-capitalist tendencies. It is easily manipulated and exploited by the imperialist powers, who seek to cloak their own predatory interests behind claims that they care about the democratic rights of whatever people happen to be in the country in which they wish to meddle. The Western press has deliberately kept its readers in the dark about the political orientation and history of, as the *New York Times* declares, this "international hero."

For all his anti-corruption demagogy, Navalny ultimately speaks for the same class interests as Putin. It is not a coincidence that in all of his "exposures" Navalny never once mentions the term "capitalism." Whatever the criminality of Putin's path, it was not unique: the plunder of social wealth amidst the mass impoverishment of the working class was the hallmark of the Stalinist destruction of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the restoration of capitalism. Navalny and the forces for which he speaks were as much a part of this process as Putin and oligarchs like Abramovich.

Navalny's father was a Red Army officer and his mother an economist and Communist Party member. They opened a factory in the 1990s, while Navalny himself went into banking and became an entrepreneur. Expressing the social-Darwinist and even fascistic moods that became dominant within this parasitic layer, Navalny would later state, "I wanted a market economy in the most wicked form—the strongest survive, the rest are simply superfluous."

Navalny's hatred of the working class has found its clearest expression in his political proximity to far-right forces. He has appeared at numerous far-right marches in the past, where he has spoken, much as he does now, about "corruption" and the "crooks and thieves" at the top. In a politically filthy agitational video by the nationalist NAROD group, he compared the deportation of immigrants with the work of a dentist who removes a cavity while preserving the healthy roots of a tooth.

He advocates a right-wing program of free markets, economic austerity, cutting taxes and red tape for corporations, the privatization of semi-state-owned enterprises and the deepening of Russia's bonds with global finance capital.

Navalny speaks for a section of Russia's ruling and upper-middle classes that not only seeks to gain greater access to much of the wealth and resources that are now controlled by Putin and his allies, but also advocate for a foreign policy that is much more closely aligned with the aims of Western imperialism. Navalny has publicly opposed Russia's support for separatists in East Ukraine and has criticized Putin for his ties to the president of China.

The promotion of Navalny is in line with the regime-change operations employed by the US and other imperialist powers elsewhere. The coup in Ukraine in 2014, orchestrated by Washington and Berlin, also relied on far-right forces and the mobilization of sections of the oligarchy. The incoming Biden administration in Washington is stacked with figures who played a central role in this event.

The pro-Navalny frenzy of recent months has to be understood within the context of the crisis triggered by the pandemic. The imperialist powers, above all the US and Germany, have sought to use the anti-Russia campaign to divert growing class tensions outward and advance their war preparations. At the same time, keenly aware of frictions within the Russian ruling class, they seek to build up Navalny in order to destabilize the Putin government and prepare to install a regime that is more closely aligned with their geopolitical interests.



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