

Amnesty International strips Alexei Navalny of “prisoner of conscience” status due to hate speech

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Amnesty International stripped Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny of his status as a “prisoner of conscience” last week because of his history of hate speech. This step exposes the fraudulent character of the frenzied campaign in the bourgeois media, especially the *New York Times* in the US and *Der Spiegel* in Germany, aimed at portraying Navalny as a “democratic” opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has warned for years, far from being in any way “democratic,” Navalny is a crude anti-immigrant chauvinist.

He advocates violence against Russia’s Muslim peoples from the Caucasus and former citizens of the Soviet Union who hail from Central Asia. At the center of Amnesty International’s decision is a series of YouTube videos Navalny produced in the 2000s as part of building the National Russian Liberation Movement or NAROD [PEOPLE], which he co-founded with National Bolshevik Zakhar Prilepin in 2007. The videos bear the unmistakable hallmark of far-right propaganda.

One titled, “NAROD for the Legalization of Guns,” begins with Navalny standing next to the label, “Certified Nationalist.” He perches behind a table with a pistol, a shoe and a fly swatter. Cockroaches and flies, screeching and growling, leap out at the viewer. “Everyone knows we can use a fly swatter against flies and a shoe against cockroaches,” states Navalny. A photo of individuals from the Caucasus seemingly outfitted in military fatigues appears. On it is the inscription, “Homo Sapiens Bezpredelius,” which means “Homo Sapiens Borderless.”

Navalny asks, “But what happens if the cockroaches are too great and the flies too aggressive?” A person dressed in black comes screaming towards him. Navalny shoots the man point-blank. A dead body appears. “In that case, I recommend a pistol,” states the Russian oppositionist. The vile video can be seen on his YouTube page here.

In another clip titled, “Become Nationalists!”, Navalny, dressed as a dentist, tells the viewer, “I frequently see

cavities.” Indicating that sometimes nationalists, going after these cavities, run amok, images then stream across the screen of skinheads attacking people, Nazis giving the Hitler salute and Nazi war criminals hanged at Nuremberg.

But, adds Navalny, “These aren’t real specialists.” “You need to precisely and firmly deport,” he counsels. We then see frightened, presumably Central Asians being rounded up, as a yanked cavity rolls across the screen. Then an airplane appears. Only blockheads think that “nationalism is violence,” tempers Navalny.

“A tooth without a root is a dead tooth. Nationalists are those who do not want the word Russia to strike a blow at the Russian root.” More rotten teeth are pulled as agonizing sounds play alongside. “We have the right to be Russians in Russia, and we are defending this right,” he concludes.

Throughout this dialogue, Navalny uses the word *russkiy* to refer to Russians, which means only ethnically Russian people. There is another word in the language, *rossiskiy*, which denotes all people who are citizens of the Russian Federation, regardless of their specific ethnicity. Navalny is making clear that the country is not for these populations.

These videos have been floating around the internet since the late 2000s. In the lead-up to Amnesty’s decision and afterwards, some press outlets have done some mild hand wringing over what they describe as Navalny’s “nationalism problem.” But they have largely kept quiet about it for over a decade, and the descriptions of these videos in the media vastly understate their filthiness. A 2017 article by *The Guardian*, for instance, characterized the first of the two videos mentioned here as one in which Navalny “speaks out in favour of relaxing gun controls.”

Navalny is unabashed. He defends the videos and his participation in Russia’s annual far-right event, the Russia March, which he helped organize for several years. He refuses to take down the YouTube clips or renounce their politics. The author of the above-mentioned 2017 *Guardian* article described the following exchange with Navalny about

the subject:

“I ask him if he regrets those videos now, and he’s unapologetic. He sees it as a strength that he can speak to both liberals and nationalists. But comparing migrants to cockroaches? ‘That was artistic license,’ he says. So there’s nothing at all from those videos or that period that he regrets? ‘No,’ he says again, firmly.”

Prominent Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen, who spares no breath denouncing Putin for his authoritarian government and violations of human rights on the pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other leading news outlets, published a phony lament in the *New Yorker* on February 15, written as if Navalny’s far-right politics were new to her.

After giving some description of the oppositionist’s filthy outlook, Gessen justified his views, claiming that during the early Putin era, “The only alternative seemed to be broadly ethno-nationalist ideas.” Gessen concludes by noting that many people think Navalny should still win the Nobel Peace Prize, for which he was nominated in late January.

The Kremlin is one of the most fervent exponents of Russian nationalism and anti-immigration chauvinism. By promoting these views, Navalny is not opposing Putin. He is seeking to convince the country’s far right that it can find a home in the so-called “liberal,” free market wing of the Russian bourgeoisie.

There is nothing about Navalny’s program that is progressive, much less democratic. He advocates privatizations and tax cuts. He wants to open up Russia to more foreign investment and give global corporations an equal chance to work the country’s masses to the bone, reining in to some extent the share of Russian profits that accrue to the Putin-dominated state bureaucracy.

His anti-corruption crusade—the sort of thing that always and everywhere is an political empty vessel into which the most rancid politics can be poured—seeks to tap into widespread popular anger over the parasitism of the Russian ruling class, but keep it aimed at the Kremlin and away from capitalism as a whole.

Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation is financed by major figures in big business, including Roman Borisovich (of the insurance giant Rosgosstrakh), Boris Zimin (son of telecommunications oligarch Dmitri Zimin), Alexander Lebedev (former Soviet intelligence chief and later billionaire media mogul) and Vladimir Ashurkov (an executive with the massive banking conglomerate, Alfa Group) to name just a few.

The majority stakeholder in the leading pro-Navalny press—Ekho Moskvi—is Gazprom Media, which is connected to the Russian energy giant Gazprom. None of these forces has a problem with corruption *per se*; they only have a

problem with “corruption” that cuts across their money-making interests and Putin’s foreign policies. They advocate deepening ties with Washington and Berlin.

Navalny’s far-right politics have been no secret to either Amnesty International (AI) or his imperialist backers. One news report about AI’s recent decision stated that the human rights organization only changed Navalny’s status after coming under external pressure. AI denies this charge. Clearly, however, the organization felt that it might lose some credibility if it continued to laud someone who performs racially motivated mock executions on video as a “prisoner of conscience.”

Sections of the ruling class may also be concerned that Navalny’s extreme right-wing nationalist orientation may endanger other foreign policy objectives in the region, particularly on the question of Ukraine.

A February 18 comment put out by a leading Washington think tank, the Atlantic Council, indicates that one of the biggest problems with Navalny is his support for Russia’s seizure of the Crimea and refusal to advocate for the peninsula’s immediate return to Kiev, which is “completely unacceptable” to Western allies in Ukraine.

However, German political scientist Andreas Umland, who has played a major role in justifying the Ukrainian far right and its role in the 2014 coup in Kiev, counsels that one cannot get too bent out of shape because Navalny is useful at the moment for undermining the Putin government. Should his usefulness prove short-lived, he can be dispensed with.

“It will certainly be sensible to adopt a more cautious attitude towards Navalny if he is eventually released from prison and if he then goes on to acquire political power. Today, however, his rise to prominence is principally a destabilizing factor that poses various challenges to Putin’s authoritarian rule, while offering the prospect of a new Russian democratization drive,” writes Umland.



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