

US, EU step up campaign over right-wing Putin critic Navalny

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Amid mounting military tensions in the Black Sea region and a diplomatic crisis between the US and Russia, the EU and the Biden administration have stepped up yet again the campaign over the right-wing anti-Putin oppositionist Alexei Navalny.

Navalny was sentenced to over two years in prison in February after he returned to Russia from Berlin where he had spent several months after allegedly being poisoned in August. Between August and January, the American and German press was filled with ongoing reports about the alleged attempt of Russian President Vladimir Putin to murder him with the nerve agent Novichok. These allegations, presented as fact by the Western media, were, in fact, never proven and have been riddled with contradictions.

Now the US and EU have stepped up the campaign over Navalny again. For the past three weeks, he has been on a hunger strike. His doctors now claim that his blood chemistry is so concerning that they believe that he could “die any moment.”

On Saturday, US President Joe Biden described the treatment of Navalny as “totally, totally unfair” and “totally inappropriate.” The White House said that there would be “consequences” should Navalny die while in detention. On Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki again emphasized, “What happens to Mr. Navalny in the custody of the Russian government is the responsibility of the Russian government. They will be held accountable by the international community.”

According to US Ambassador to Russia John Sullivan, “communication to the Russian government on this issue” would primarily proceed “privately and through diplomatic channels direct to the uppermost levels of the Russian government.”

The *New York Times* also published an editorial on Saturday, demanding that Putin allow Navalny to see his doctors in order to “save his life.”

Senator Bernie Sanders lost no time to line up behind the renewed campaign over Navalny, tweeting, “Make no mistake about what is happening here: activist Aleksei Navalny is being murdered in front of the world by Vladimir Putin for the crime of exposing Putin’s vast corruption. Navalny’s doctors must be allowed to see him immediately.”

In a similar vein, the high representative of the European Union, Josep Borrell, called upon the Kremlin to provide Navalny with the necessary medical treatment. Borrell said the EU was “very concerned” about his condition and that they held Russia “responsible” for it.

On Monday, it was reported that Navalny has now been transferred to a prison hospital but his staff insists that he was only transferred to a different penal colony.

Workers should reject the hypocritical campaign by the imperialist powers over the alleged mistreatment and “murder” of Navalny with the contempt that it deserves. The same politicians who now attack the Kremlin for alleged mistreatment of Navalny bear full responsibility for the year-long torture and illegal detainment of Julian Assange, a journalist and publisher who has exposed historic war crimes of US imperialism in the Middle East. If there is any political prisoner in the world who has been documented to really being tortured and murdered in slow motion by the state, it is Assange, and it is the US government that is primarily responsible.

The reality is that none of these imperialist politicians would care about Navalny if he had not been built up for more than a decade as a pro-capitalist opposition figure, capable of mobilizing layers within the Russian oligarchy, the state and upper middle class against Putin. While the *New York Times* and American and EU politicians present him as a “democratic” oppositionist, Navalny has well-documented connections to the Russian neo-Nazi scene.

He co-organized the notorious annual far-right Russian March for several years in a row and published rabidly

racist propaganda videos on his YouTube channel, denouncing immigrants from the Caucasus as “cockroaches” that had to be “removed” like rotten teeth. He never apologized for or distanced himself from these far-right views and activities. In February, Amnesty International, no doubt facing enormous public pressure, felt compelled to revoke his status as a “prisoner of conscience” because of what they acknowledged was “hate speech.”

The renewed campaign over Navalny comes amidst mounting tensions between NATO and Russia over the conflict in Ukraine in the Black Sea region. Last week, the US recalled the planned deployment of two warships to the Black Sea. A Kremlin representative had earlier warned the US to “stay away from the Black Sea ... for their own good.” However, shortly thereafter, on Thursday, US President Joe Biden announced new sanctions against Russia and the expulsion of 10 Russian diplomats.

The Kremlin has since expelled 10 US diplomats in response. The Czech Republic, using a dubious explosion at an arms factory seven years ago as a pretext, has now also expelled 18 Russian diplomats as “spies,” the Kremlin retaliating by expelling 20 Czech diplomats. On Sunday, the UK announced that it would send two warships to the Black Sea.

Commenting on the rapid deterioration of US-Russia relations, Fyodor Lukyanov, one of the main foreign policy pundits in Russia with close ties to the Kremlin, wrote on Monday that “between Russia and the US there is basically no common agenda left apart from what they call ‘deconflicting’ [Syria, Ukraine] which is something that the military must take care of.” He noted that the back and forth in Washington with regard to Russia, including the proposal by Biden for a bilateral summit, indicated “chaos.” Lukyanov wrote, “we are witnessing the final demise of the relations between Moscow and Washington as they have existed” over the past decades. Moscow’s response, he argued, had to be an ever-stronger orientation toward an alliance with China.

As Russian-US relations have been breaking down rapidly, the Kremlin has been particularly concerned about Berlin’s heavy involvement in the campaign over Navalny. When Navalny fell ill on a plane in August, he was transferred to the Berlin hospital Charité following the direct intervention of Chancellor Angela Merkel. Last week, *Der Spiegel* magazine revealed that several leading German politicians, including Jürgen Trittin (Greens) and Nils Schmid (SPD), had written a letter to Navalny

accusing the Russian government of “targeted torture” and expressing their “complete solidarity” with him.

Der Spiegel also reported that the Russian ambassador to Germany Sergei Nechaev made a formal visit to the German foreign ministry on February 16 to accuse the German government of having assisted Navalny in the production of a two-hour-long video which details corruption allegations against Putin. The video deliberately tapped into mass discontent over social inequality which, 30 years after the destruction of the USSR by the Stalinist bureaucracy, is higher in Russia than in any other major economy in the world. It has been watched by 116 million people.

On Monday, the *Tagesspiegel* published an interview with Alexei Gresko, a member of Navalny’s staff. Acting as if his team had not warned the world almost daily about Navalny’s imminent death from Novichok just months ago, he said, “We previously never dared speak about the possibility of his death. Now we are openly discussing that he might die.” He called upon the West to respond by showing “strength ... There has to be a response with financial consequences: The bank accounts of Putin’s supporters must be frozen. This is the only language that he and those he trusts can understand.”

These appeals make very clear what stands behind the campaign over Navalny: It is aimed at destabilizing the Putin regime by pressuring the oligarchs that still overwhelmingly back Putin, while mobilizing right-wing layers of the middle class behind a rival section of the oligarchy and imperialism. It is a part of a regime-change operation which is aimed at installing a right-wing, pro-Western government. The working class can only advance its own interests by basing its opposition to the oligarchic Putin regime on a socialist basis, completely independent from the machinations of imperialism and sections of the oligarchy.



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