

Amnesty International restores Alexei Navalny's "prisoner of conscience" status

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Amnesty International (AI) announced May 7 that it was restoring its "prisoner of conscience" status to Alexei Navalny. The organization had stripped the imprisoned anti-Putin oppositionist of this title in late February due to his history of engaging in hate speech. Amnesty's reversal has nothing to do with any change in Navalny's outlook. It is entirely a product of the fraudulent efforts by US and European imperialism to present the right-wing politician and bigot as some sort of crusader for "democracy."

Navalny has a long record of right-wing politics. In 2007, he left the opposition party Yabloko, which advocates unfettered free markets and has close ties with the US and joined forces with the National Bolshevik Zakhar Prilepin to found the National Russian Liberation Movement (NAROD). NAROD's manifesto was a classic far-right combination of criticism of elites and appeals for national and ethnic revival.

While offering a few sops to minority populations, NAROD refers throughout to "Russians" by using a term (*russkie*) that refers exclusively to ethnically Russian people, not all of the citizens of the country, which is made up of more than 180 non-Russian groups that constitute nearly 20 percent of the population. For several years, Navalny co-organized the country's "Russia March," an annual demonstration of fascists and neo-Nazis.

In 2007, Navalny posted two truly sick YouTube videos in which he incites violence against the populations of the Caucasus, calling for shooting people from this region and deporting immigrants. Even without knowledge of the Russian language, one can get a sense of the character of these videos by viewing them here and here. Navalny has not only never repudiated these positions, he has refused to take

down the videos and stated that these positions are part of his political record.

Amnesty International insists that its decision to strip Navalny of the "prisoner of conscience" status was meant to be an internal matter and that it now regrets its actions. It apologized to the bigot and gave him a pass on his far-right positions by implying they were little more than historical errors. "It is part of Amnesty's mission to encourage people to positively embrace a human rights vision and to not suggest that they are forever trapped by their past conduct," the organization stated.

The "human rights" of those peoples that Navalny calls to be cleansed from Russia's territory are a problem to be overlooked, a small price to pay, for the "human rights" organization. While elevating the anti-Putin oppositionist, Amnesty International refuses to recognize either Julian Assange or Chelsea Manning, who exposed war crimes by the American state, including the mass killing of civilians in the Middle East, as "prisoners of conscience." Assange has been held captive for over a decade and subject to torture and Manning, who was also locked up for years, has been endlessly tormented and persecuted by the US government.

The pro-Navalny campaign coming from Washington and Europe's major capitals is never-ending. He is endorsed by the leaders of the US, Germany, Great Britain, and France, among others. For years, Navalny has been subject of countless fawning articles in leading press outlets, which use the Putin government's arrests of protesters, and Navalny's own imprisonment and alleged poisoning at the hands of the Kremlin—based on unproven and preposterous claims—to argue that he represents a "democratic" alternative to the Putin regime. While the media has

been forced to occasionally acknowledge Navalny's far-right politics, they largely dismiss it as if the man went to the corner store for a soda pop and somehow wandered into a demonstration of virulent nationalists by accident.

The well-known anti-Putin journalist Masha Gessen, writing in the *New Yorker* on February 15, sought to explain away Navalny's views as little more than the unfortunate outcome of Russia's limited political atmosphere. "In the absence of politics, in the absence of any public conversation, little remained to form political alliances around. Putin was trafficking in nostalgia for the Soviet empire. The only alternative seemed to be broadly ethno-nationalist ideas, which also addressed a sense of humiliation—and these were emerging both on what could be roughly described as the left and vaguely designated as the right," she stated.

Navalny's appeal to the imperialist powers stems from his advocacy of closer relations with the major imperialist powers and his support for full-scale privatization of semi-state-owned industry in Russia, which will open up massive opportunities for exploiting the country's resources and population. Navalny is seen as a useful tool in the campaign to destabilize and even break up the country, which, alongside the prospect of a direct military confrontation with Moscow, has been openly floated as a means to assert domination over the region. There are also geopolitical considerations bound up with the US-led war drive against China.

Navalny's internal support comes from layers of the Russian elite arrayed against President Putin and sections of the wealthy and upper-middle class in major cities who think more riches and influence await them with Putin and the oligarchs around him removed.

To the extent that the oppositionist has any support within the broader layers of the population, of which there is little sign so far, it is because his anti-corruption taps into widespread anger over the grotesque character of the Russian oligarchy, which according to *Forbes* increased its total wealth during the coronavirus pandemic by \$385 billion. Navalny, however, has his backers within this very milieu—in particular, among those affiliated with Alfa Group oligarch Mikhail Fridman. The supposed critic of Russia's elites also once sat on the board of Aeroflot, the country's flagship airline.



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