

# Navalny: Imperialism's right-winger in Moscow

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In March, the feature-length film *Navalny* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary. The movie traces the alleged attempt by the Kremlin in 2020 to assassinate Alexei Navalny, a leading figure in Russia's misnamed "liberal opposition." Directed by Canadian filmmaker Daniel Roher (Once Were Brothers), it has won or been nominated for prizes by the Sundance Film Festival, Critics' Choice, Producers Guild of America and so forth.

*Navalny*, released in 2022, is a facile work of political propaganda. Its phony baloney character stems from the rottenness of the individual it features and the filmmakers' underlying agenda—the demonization of Putin. The documentary's only contribution is to reveal Navalny as a well-to-do and crude dimwit; a right-wing individual willing and eager to do business with anyone.

The documentary opens with Navalny sitting at a table against a darkened background in what appears to be a restaurant. The director, speaking from offscreen, asks Navalny what "message he would leave behind to the Russian people" in the event he is killed. "Oh, come on, Daniel. No. No way!" he replies. "Like, let's make a thriller out of this movie," adding, "In the case I would be killed, let's make a boring movie of memory."

In other words, the film starts with a statement by its hero that he, in essence, has nothing to say. This pretty much sums up the next hour and a half, during which a display of Navalny's personal vacuousness combines with second-rate political thrills to substitute for any critical investigation of the man and what he stands for, much less what occurred in 2020.

In the early years of his political career, Navalny, a lawyer by training, joined the Yabloko party, which is distinguished by its unabashed embrace of free-market policies. After climbing the ranks of that organization and entering Moscow politics at the city level, Navalny started openly promoting Russian nationalism. He participated in the country's annual far-right celebration, known as the Russian March, several times between the mid-2000s and 2012. In 2007 he co-founded the National Russian Liberation Movement, an outpost of anti-immigrant chauvinism.

After spending time at Yale University in 2010, Navalny entered the national spotlight during the political crisis brought on by Russia's 2011 elections, which were widely viewed as fraudulent and provoked mass protests dominated by privileged layers of the urban middle class. Since then, Navalny has styled himself as a political activist and anti-corruption campaigner, running in elections on a "pro-democracy" program. He does not have a wide base of support outside of better-off layers in Russia's major cities, those within the elite with close ties to Washington and NATO. On the basis of various corruption and embezzlement charges, the Kremlin has arrested and

prosecuted Navalny on different occasions, driven by the fear that he, having been made the darling of the West's anti-Russia campaign, could be used to mount a challenge to Putin's monopoly on power as part of a US-backed regime change operation.

Over the course of Roher's documentary, Navalny says very little about politics. Filmed in a beat-up lot with dilapidated buildings in the background, he declares, "Welcome to the Russian ghetto!" and jokes about a man urinating against a wall behind him.

There are a few shots of the 41-year-old Navalny speaking at rallies at which he denounces corruption in the Kremlin. "Putin is a thief!," he yells. At the end of the movie, a blurb reminds the viewer of his exposé of "Putin's palace" posted on YouTube. Finally pressed by his interlocutor to come up with something of more substance about his "message," Navalny spits out a sentence about "human rights" and "freedom of speech," and declares, in his typically shallow style, "We are being oppressed by bad dudes."

"Anti-corruption" is one of the shoddiest of political hands to play. Everyone is against corruption. Across the world one can find "opposition" politicians "incensed" by the devious acts of those in power. As a rule, the aggrieved party and those behind him or her are actually not angry about corruption *per se*, but about the fact that they have been excluded from the opportunities and benefits. Corruption—always in *other* countries—is among Washington's favorite justifications for "regime change."

In Russia, Navalny—a former member of the board of the multi-billion-dollar airline Aeroflot—and his backers are angered by what they view to be the excessively tight hand that the Putin government holds over the country's highly valuable natural and industrial resources. "Tax money," Navalny complains in the documentary, "is supposed to belong to the local communities and, in Russia, everything is decided in Moscow. So, being a president," he explains, "just having this, you know, big pie of my power and I will cut it for the future of Russia." So much for democracy.

In the film, Navalny the empty vessel exists alongside Navalny the right-winger. In fact, his vacuousness makes him perfectly suited to serve as a flunky capable of doing whatever it takes, with and for whomever it takes.

In the documentary the director makes reference to the fact that Navalny has "walked side by side with some pretty nasty nationalists and racists." Roher points to videos Navalny made advocating violence against Chechens and immigrants from Central Asia and their wholesale deportation. Roher poses the question, "Had he moved beyond that?"

The answer is a decisive no. Navalny states that his alliances and positions are correct and necessary, a political strategy for the present

and the future, and a major asset. The director provides Navalny with a platform from which he can advertise himself to those seeking a “liberal” who can work with the far right.

“Were there not a couple of Sieg Heil-ers at that thing?” asks the director, in reference to the ultra-right Russian March.

“Certainly Sieg Heil-ers are a different category that you would not want to associate with or march beside,” Navalny replies. “Well, in the normal world, in the normal, political system, of course, I would never be within the same political party with them. ... But we are creating coalition, broader coalition to fight their [Putin’s] regime,” he adds.

“Just to achieve the situation where everyone can participate in election. A lot of politicians would even be uncomfortable to be associating or being in the same photograph as one of these guys.”

“You’re comfortable with that?” probes Roher.

“I’m OK with that and I consider it’s my political superpower, I can talk to everyone,” replies Navalny.

Forced to bring himself up short because of his subject’s evident intellectual and political bankruptcy, the documentarian focuses the majority of the film on the Kremlin’s alleged poisoning of Navalny in 2020. It is part of the attempt to bamboozle the viewer into thinking he is some sort of genuine anti-Putinist.

On August 20, 2020, Navalny fell ill on a flight to Moscow from Tomsk in Siberia, where he had been filming another one of his “exposés.” Removed from the aircraft and sent to a local medical center, he was eventually transferred to a Berlin hospital. Shortly after his arrival, German investigators announced that Navalny had been poisoned by Novichok, the Kremlin’s “signature” chemical weapon.

The audience is told that this is the handiwork of Putin. Not a single question is raised about the countless inconsistencies in the story concocted by Navalny’s team and the bourgeois media at the time. Not a shred of evidence is presented. The official narrative stands. The inconvenient fact that there are many people or institutions who might wish to kill or sicken Navalny with a Russian-made poison—not the least significant of which is the American state—is not mentioned.

The implausible then combines with the vulgar. Navalny’s right-hand man, Leonid Volkov, declares that when he told the comatose Navalny that Putin tried to kill him with Novichok, Navalny instantly woke up and said, “What the fuck?! That is so stupid!” Was this line made up? Or the whole thing?

Over the next hour plus of the film, there is a lot of laughing, snickering and “WTF”-type talk on the part of Navalny and his entourage, who are unable to say a single intelligent thing about what supposedly happened and largely treat the whole episode as a joke.

Christo Grozev from the organization Bellingcat now enters the narrative. Presenting himself and his group of “investigators” as nothing more than fact finders, he explains how he “proved” that Putin orchestrated Navalny’s killing. According to Grozev, he managed, with little money or difficulty, to buy on the dark web the phone records of individuals he argues were members of an FSB team trailing Navalny.

From there, he, Navalny and Navalny aide Maria Pevchikh set up a ruse. Navalny called the alleged FSB conspirators, pretending to be a higher-up in the Russian security services. After being hung up on a few times, Navalny got one hapless individual, a chemist named Kudryavtsev, to admit the FSB’s involvement and provide details of the assassination attempt.

Throughout the affair, there is much giggling, like a group of 13-year-olds who have toilet-papered their neighbor’s house on

Halloween. They joke about the fact that the guy they set up is a “dead man.”

The viewer is meant to take all of this at face value, join in the merrymaking, and above all, not question any one of the improbabilities and peculiarities that sustain *Navalny*: for example, that Navalny’s wife did not want photographs of him taken when he was admitted to a Russian hospital; the sudden discovery of a Novichok-laced water bottle in Navalny’s hotel room; the fun that the oppositionist seems to have gotten from his brush with death; and, most decisively, the supposedly neutral character of Bellingcat.

Bellingcat is a US and European-funded and orchestrated operation with close ties to NATO. It receives its financing from the National Endowment for Democracy (often referred to as the “second CIA”), the European Council and other “non-profits.” Bellingcat specializes in producing investigations that always confirm the US government’s accusations against Russia or whomever else Washington has in its sights.

*Navalny* is forced to acknowledge the murky character of Bellingcat’s Grozev, but attempts to gloss over it, as if the fact that he could be a US operative is not too important. “The story of this guy who lives in Vienna, but is Bulgarian, but works in Russia, and that he has all of his own money, and he spends it all on investigations in Russian crimes. He just sounded too suspicious. Too good to be true. Too capable. He sounded a bit, you know, made up,” observes Navalny’s aide.

“Are you confident that he is not MI6 or CIA?,” asks the director.

“I’m pretty confident,” she replies. “I wouldn’t say I rule it out, but I’m pretty confident that he’s not.” (!) A rather convenient conclusion.

To wrap up the documentary, we see Navalny returning to Russia. He knows the government is planning to arrest him. He goes regardless, flown home on a private jet packed with media. The expected Hollywood drama unfolds. There are protesters. He is detained and imprisoned. His final deep thought for the viewer: “Don’t give up.”

Initially sentenced to two and a half years, Navalny’s imprisonment has since been extended another nine.

*Navalny* is a film that exists to satisfy the needs of the US State Department, the Western press and those layers of the top 10 percent who love to hate Russia. Washington called and Hollywood delivered.

It is worth comparing the treatment of Navalny to that of Julian Assange. The latter has exposed the crimes of the most powerful governments in the world—from the slaughter of innocents in Iraq to massive state spying operations to the brutalization of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Unable to set foot outside of the Ecuadorian embassy for seven years for fear of arrest, since 2019 Assange has been wasting away in solitary confinement in Britain’s most brutal prison, awaiting extradition to the US. He is a journalist and an oppositionist. He is not a man looking for deals with neo-fascists. He is not a prankster. He is not a brainless tool of imperialists.

And for this, Assange is hated by every wing of the political establishment. Hollywood plays its part by remaining silent.



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