

NATO-backed anti-Putin oppositionist Navalny sentenced to additional 19 years in prison

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7 August 2023

On Friday, a Russian court extended the nine-year prison sentence for Alexei Navalny, the most prominent NATO-backed critic of Russian President Vladimir Putin, by another 19 years. While his earlier sentence had been based on charges of bribery and contempt of court, the latest sentence was based on charges of “extremism”.

Daniel Kholodny, who worked as a technician for Navalny’s YouTube channel, also stood trial alongside Navalny and was sentenced to eight years in prison for organizing an extremist group. Navalny will have to serve the 19-year prison sentence in a maximum-security penal colony, reducing his ability to communicate with the outside world to almost zero. So far, Navalny had been able to continue to post political commentaries on his Telegram channel from prison. The trial proceedings were closed to the public as well as to his family members.

Earlier last week, another court rejected the appeal of the 25-year prison sentence of Vladimir Kara-Murza, who had been sentenced for “treason” and defamation of the Russian armed forces. Like Navalny, Kara-Murza is a central figure in the NATO-backed opposition to the Putin regime and has extensive ties to the ruling elites in Washington.

The sentencing of Navalny and Kholodny and rejection of the appeal for Kara-Murza come under conditions of a profound crisis of the Putin regime and infighting between warring factions of the state apparatus and ruling class. In late June, Evgeny Prigozhin, a billionaire mercenary-leader and long-time ally of Vladimir Putin, staged a coup attempt with an explicit appeal to the openly pro-NATO faction of the Russian oligarchy. Prigozhin and his Wagner troops have since been given carte blanche and appear to have been reintegrated into the regime. Wagner troops are still active in Africa on behalf of Russia and many of the troops are stationed in

Belarus, a close ally of Russia. Prigozhin has been at a recent summit, hosted by the Kremlin with African leaders and diplomats, in St. Petersburg.

While essentially giving Wagner carte blanche, however, the Kremlin has also begun arresting a series of prominent political figures. Among them was Igor Strel’kov, a former leader of the pro-Russian separatists in East Ukraine who has long called upon the Putin regime to impose a general mobilization. The Kremlin has also arrested Boris Kagarlitsky, a well-known leader of the pseudo-left and Stalinist milieu in Russia with long-standing ties to the oligarchy and state apparatus. Like Navalny, Strel’kov and Kagarlitsky were also charged with “extremism”.

The US and the EU were quick to denounce the sentencing of Navalny. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken released a statement, noting “The United States strongly condemns Russia’s conviction of opposition leader Aleksei Navalny on politically motivated charges. The Kremlin cannot silence the truth. Navalny should be released.” The EU also “strongly” condemned the ruling. The WWS has noted in the past the nauseating hypocrisy of these denunciations of the Putin regime by the imperialist powers. US and European imperialism are not only responsible for the bombing of multiple countries over the past decades, resulting in the death and maiming of millions. Washington and Brussels have also brutally persecuted and unlawfully imprisoned the Australian journalist Julian Assange, whose conditions of detention amount to systematic physical and psychological torture.

There is no question that the ultimate target of the attacks on democratic rights, now leveraged most publicly against opponents of Putin within the state and oligarchy, will be the working class. In particular, the charges of “extremism” and “treason” that were used most recently

against Navalny, Kara-Murza, Strel'kov and Kagarlitsky, are defined so broadly that they could easily be applied to genuinely left-wing and socialist opponents of the regime and the war in Ukraine.

However, in order to develop their political opposition to the Putin regime from their independent class standpoint, workers and young people must have a clear understanding of the political forces involved in this escalating infighting within the Russian oligarchy.

Contrary to his depiction in the Western media, Navalny is neither a democratic nor a popular critic of the Putin regime. With his base of supporters limited to privileged layers of the upper middle class, Navalny's political history is marked above all by his association with ultranationalist forces and sections of the ruling elites and state apparatus in both Russia and the US. He belonged to a rapacious and reckless layer of social climbers that tried to benefit from the 1991 destruction of the Soviet Union by the bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism. He became involved in politics after his endeavors in banking and real estate had largely failed. In an early interview, he gave expression to his Social-Darwinistic views, stating, "I wanted a market economy in the most wicked form—the strongest survive, the rest are simply superfluous."

Since 2010-2011, Navalny has been built up systematically by the Western media. At the time, he was a co-organizer of the far-right "Russian Marches", and had released videos denouncing people from the North Caucasus as "cockroaches". Navalny has also repeatedly called for a redrawing of the borders of Russia, without the predominantly Muslim North Caucasus. As the WSWS has documented, Navalny was built up by Washington and Berlin not despite but *because* of his ties to the far right.

Much as in Ukraine, where the descendants of the Nazi collaborators of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists have played a central role in the 2014 regime-change operation and the current war, the US-backed opposition in Russia has centrally involved far-right forces. They form a central component of the imperialist strategy to foment ethnic and national strife as part of the attempt to not only destabilize but also break up the country.

More recently, neo-Nazi forces with ties to the neofascist scene in Germany, as well as the Ukrainian regime and the NATO-backed opposition in Russia, were involved in incursions on Russian territory. Shortly after leading the most significant incursions to date, the neo-Nazi leader of the Russian Volunteer Corps, Denis Nikitin

, was interviewed on Navalny's YouTube channel, with the interviewer being completely uncritical of Nikitin's well-known and extensive ties in Europe's neo-Nazi scene.

In addition to his relations with the far right, Navalny has retained ties to sections of the Russian elites and state apparatus. Among his earliest backers were figures such as the economist Sergei Guriev, a former adviser of ex-president Dmitry Medvedev, and the former banker Vladimir Ashurkov, now a leading figure of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Fund, both of whom have long fled the country.

Navalny, like Kara-Murza or the ex-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, thus speak for sections of the state and oligarchy that see in a complete line-up of Moscow behind geopolitical strategy of the US and in the break-up of the Russian Federation, the best means to advance their own economic interests in the exploitation of the raw material and social resources of the country.

The ever-more draconian prison sentences handed down to prominent representatives of the NATO-backed opposition in the Russian state and oligarchy are indicative of intense conflicts and crises unfolding behind the walls of the Kremlin, as the war in Ukraine is now well into its second year and all previous calculations of the Putin regime to somehow force the imperialist powers to the negotiating table have disastrously backfired.

But whatever their intense conflicts, all factions of the ruling oligarchy ultimately emerged out of the same historical process: The Stalinist reaction against the October Revolution, which included the mass murder of revolutionaries in the 1930s and culminated in the 1991 destruction of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism. The political opposition by the working class to the war and the Putin regime must be based on a strategy of international class struggle and the lessons of the entire history of the struggle against Stalinism by the Trotskyist movement.



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