

Western media anoint Navalny's widow leader of Russian "democratic" opposition

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24 February 2024

Following the death of Russian oppositionist Alexei Navalny last Friday, the US and its allies, with the aid of the Western media, have launched a campaign promoting his wife, Yulya, as the next leader of Russia's "democratic" opposition to the Putin government. In a manner befitting of an aristocrat, the "first lady of the Russian opposition" has been anointed her husband's natural "heir" and is being welcomed at the highest levels of the state.

On Thursday, Navalnaya and her daughter met with American President Joe Biden in San Francisco. The White House, posting photos across social media of the two embracing, applauded "Yulia and Dasha" and the fight "for democracy and human rights."

All week long every major press outlet on both sides of the Atlantic—the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC, CNN, BBC, *Guardian*, Deutsche Welle, *Le Monde*, *El Pais*, *La Repubblica* and so forth—has carried banner headlines about Navalnaya. On Tuesday, she was the top story in the *Times*, dwarfing reports on all major developments around the world, most notably Israel's slaughter of the Palestinians in Gaza, the extradition trial of Julian Assange and the debacle of the US-NATO war in Ukraine.

Within hours of the news of her husband's death, Navalnaya was on stage at the Munich Security Conference, where she had been previously scheduled to speak. Evidently unencumbered by grief or even the fact that, as she acknowledged in her remarks, Navalny's death had yet to be confirmed, the wife of the right-wing oppositionist denounced Putin and called for the destruction of his government—that is, "to defeat this evil, defeat the horrific regime that is now in Russia."

Navalnaya met with the European Union Foreign Affairs Council three days later. In the middle of all this, she found the time to prepare a video statement, which has been splashed across the world press, declaring Putin to be her husband's murderer.

The claim that the Russian president is personally responsible for the oppositionist's death is being seized upon by the US and NATO to deepen its anti-Russian war campaign, which is in crisis because of many months of failures on the battlefield in Ukraine and deep divisions within the American ruling class. Though the cause of Navalny's death has yet to be reported,

US President Joe Biden unveiled a raft of new sanctions against Russia on Tuesday. They were about holding Putin "accountable," he declared.

The adulation of Navalnaya has nothing to do with her significance as a political individual, much less her democratic credentials, of which, like her deceased spouse, she has none. Rather, it is part of the effort to find a palatable replacement for Alexei Navalny, one without a problematic past, a political nobody that the imperialists can make their political somebody.

Navalnaya, who is the daughter of middle-class Muscovites, has a degree in economics and briefly worked in her husband's parents' furniture business. She has not been employed outside the home since 2007 and makes a show of the fact that her primary occupation over the last 20 years has been tending to hearth and home.

Throughout her marriage, she remained out of the limelight, resisting appeals to run for office in her husband's place when he was arrested, and never issuing political statements apart from those related to her husband's persecution and alleged poisoning. Her public persona has largely consisted of maintaining a stern expression in front of cameras and issuing declarations of her hatred of Putin and love for her husband, as well as at one point doing modeling shoots in high-end fashion with her children.

Apart from the fact that she was a member, along with her husband, of the right-wing Yabloko party during the mid-2000s, she has no personal political history. The only thing that is evident is that, to the extent she has any political thoughts of her own, she fully supports the pro-capitalist, right-wing, nationalist positions of her late husband. Perhaps she is even more ferocious. Navalny told Russian YouTuber Yuri Dud in a 2020 interview that in comparison to his wife, "I'm very moderate."

This makes her extremely valuable to the imperialist powers. Even prior to his death, Navalny appears to have outlived his usefulness to Western imperialism. His imprisonment by the Putin government and the shutdown of his Anti-Corruption Foundation limited his influence. The man's social media posts from jail, communicated to the world via his lawyers, failed to gain much traction. He faced a years-long prison sentence.

Furthermore, selling Navalny as an advocate of democracy

always created certain difficulties because of his vehemently anti-immigrant positions and open support of political alliances with the far right. In the mid-2000s Navalny posted a series of rabid, nationalist YouTube videos. One called for immigrants to be crushed like “cockroaches.” Another declared the need to “firmly deport” immigrants and championed the “right to be Russians in Russia.” He also repeatedly played a central role in the country’s annual Russia March, a gathering of nationalists, far-right and neo-fascist elements.

Navalny had always refused to renounce these positions or activities. Amnesty International briefly stripped him of his “prisoner of conscience” status due to his views. In the 2022 documentary made about him, which Hollywood showered with awards, the oppositionist was again questioned about these matters. In reply, he insisted that alliances with the far right were correct, necessary and not something of which he was ashamed.

The imperialist powers were drawn to Navalny not despite but because of these positions. They understood him to be an individual who was unencumbered by principles of any sort, one who could be deployed as a front man the way that Volodymyr Zelensky has been in Ukraine.

The time has now come to move on. His widow, Navalnaya, comes with certain marketing advantages. Having very little political history, there is no need to explain away a problematic past. Various details of her biography are not even publicly available, such as exactly where she worked during her post-university business internship.

The *Washington Post*’s “What to Know About Yulya Navalnaya” reports five “basics”—where she was born, where she got her degree, where she and her husband met and lived, and the fact that her main task for the last 20-plus years has been to tend to her children. The only reference to anything political in her past is her membership in the Yabloko party, which the newspaper falsely describes as a “center-left, progressive-minded political party.”

In short, Navalnaya is an even emptier political vessel than her husband was. As a woman, she comes with the added benefit of satisfying the needs of the gender-obsessed upper middle class. And as the events of this week have made clear, she is eager to be the US’s and NATO’s pliant tool.

While the bourgeois media promotes Navalnaya, the pseudo-left is overflowing with its own admiration for her spouse and working to transform him into some sort of leftist. This will lay the groundwork for their own participation in the campaign in support of his wife.

On Tuesday, *Jacobin* published a commentary on Navalny by Ilya Budraitskis, a long-standing member of the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM). Now a visiting scholar at the University of California-Berkeley, he is a political operator with ties to elite layers within academia, the DSA and the state. He supports and defends the US operations in Ukraine and does human rights imperialism speaking tours, at which he

argues that the US, NATO and the fascists in Kiev are waging a progressive war of liberation. On the occasion of Navalny’s death, the RSM published a fawning statement that hailed the man as a political martyr and populist who, despite his “rightist credentials,” “tended to problematize oligarchic capitalism.”

Budraitskis’ article in *Jacobin* this week, titled “Alexei Navalny Taught Russia’s Opposition How to Mobilize,” continues in this vein. It paints the oppositionist in glowing terms, insists his anti-immigrant positions were a flirtation and tearfully declares it “difficult to come to terms with the thought of Navalny’s death.”

Linking to a rambling statement written by Navalny last August, Budraitskis argues that Navalny came to understand that the source of Putinism lies in the 1990s and the pro-market reforms of that period. The “social anger” that Navalny channeled was “class anger,” states Budraitskis, and the “issue of social justice began to occupy a key place in Navalny’s rhetoric.” He points to Navalny’s efforts to direct votes towards the Russian Communist Party, an unabashed celebrator of Stalin and the Orthodox Church, as an indication of his progressive character.

Navalny’s political program was neither progressive nor rooted in any kind of a mass movement. He, as many oppositionists of the “anti-corruption” variety do, attempted to tap into social discontent over the crooked character of the country’s political and economic system. He claimed that on the basis of cleansing the country of the bureaucrats, social improvements would be realized.

His promises to improve healthcare and education and raise the minimum wage were a thin disguise for the capitalist politician. His central demands were for the further privatization of the economy, the cutting of business taxes, the turnover of the country’s pension fund to the stock market, and the devolution of significant economic power to the regions away from the federal government, the cumulative effects of which would be to vastly increase social and regional inequality.

These policies intended to sweep out one layer of oligarchs and install another—the ones orbiting around Navalny, those most willing to enlist Russia behind American and European imperialism. None of this could be achieved on a democratic foundation.



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