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Thousands protest throughout Russia

By Vladimir Volkov

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Thousands of people participated in anticorruption protests in Russian cities on Sunday, March 26, leading to the arrest of over 1,000 people in Moscow and St. Petersburg and hundreds in other parts of the country.

Demonstrators' slogans included "Russia without Putin," "Impeachment" and "Shame." According to reports, significant layers of youth took part in the protests. In interviews, many protesters pointed to social grievances. *Unia.net* quoted one protester as saying: "I am fed up with all of it. We have already gone through our entire life, and what about the youth? With such salaries, with mortgages. And they [the officials] steal and steal. When will they get rich enough?"

The Russian economy has been hard hit by the Western sanctions that were imposed by the US and the EU as an act of economic warfare following the pro-Western coup in February 2014 in Kiev. There are some 25 million people officially living in poverty, but the actual numbers are much higher. Real incomes have fallen by at least 15 percent over the past two years, while food prices have gone up by 36 percent on average, and utility fees by 28 percent, according to the *Washington Post*.

While many demonstrators expressed opposition to the widespread social inequality that prevails throughout Russia, the far-right and pro-Western program of oppositionist politician Alexei Navalny has nothing to do with the genuine interests of broad layers of the population. Its realization would inevitably lead to a sharp decline in the living standards of the masses and an even greater suppression of their democratic rights. Precisely this occurred in Ukraine after the pro-Western coup in Kiev in February 2014.

Navalny has sought to tap into the massive social discontent among workers, youth and intellectuals with his documentary, which shows the fabulous wealth Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev has amassed, while the overwhelming majority lives in abject poverty. The YouTube video of the film has attracted over 14 million viewers within the past few weeks.

Navalny, however, is a tool in the hands of a section of the Russian oligarchs, who are dissatisfied with the uncontrolled power of Putin's circle, and expresses the interests of better-off layers of the upper middle class. They do not want prosperity, freedom and democracy for all of society, but only a more significant and—in their opinion—“just” part in the profits of the extremely narrow ruling elite and, accordingly, a greater participation in political power. In this they see a means not only to preserve, but also to strengthen the foundations of the post-Soviet capitalist order that has thoroughly discredited itself.

At the same time, Navalny's program corresponds to the interests of influential sections of international, and especially American, imperialism. The ruling elites of the leading Western countries seek to implement a regime-change operation in Russia in order to establish their immediate domination over the natural and human resources of the country, to carve it up into a series of powerless and dependent formations and, eventually, to transform the biggest of the former Soviet republics into a semi-colony.

This deep contradiction between the program of the pro-Western opposition, on the one hand, and the motives of the protest moods in society, on the other, explains the character of the political campaign of Navalny and the means being employed by his team to try to gain mass support.

Navalny has employed extremely vague formulations—in this case, the condemnation of corruption—which leaves the main, core part of their program—the free market—intact and obscured. They try to make use of the fact that the regime fears any public expression of criticism, arguing that this forces them to refrain from elaborating more concrete slogans. But in reality, their silence is beneficial for themselves, inasmuch as they understand that an open discussion of their goals will push significant layers of society away from them.

The corruption revelations of Navalny's Foundation for the Struggle against Corruption (FBK) concern only government officials, never big business. Meanwhile these two are inseparably linked in the same, indissoluble mafia-like system of post-Soviet capitalism. The state bureaucracy, of course, “robs” businesses, but in the final analysis it is in itself a product of the latter, and did not emerge out of nowhere.

Endemic corruption arises out the character of Russian capitalism, which is incapable not only of developing the country, but even of simply keeping intact the remnants (dating from the Soviet past) of basic industrial infrastructure and social conquests.

Navalny's political evolution reflects a turn to the right that is characteristic of the ruling elites of the West and Russia over the past 15 to 20 years.

He began his political activities in the early 2000s in the ranks of the liberal-democratic party Yabloko (Apple). In the period of the "color revolutions" in the post-Soviet space, in which ultranationalists of all hues functioned as the hit squad for pro-Western forces, he turned to far-right Russian nationalists and fascists. He repeatedly took part in their marches, screaming slogans like "Russia for Russians" and "Stop Feeding the Caucasus." For this he was expelled from Yabloko.

In 2010, he attended a special six-month course at Yale University in the US as part of a program which is aimed at preparing "new world leaders and expanding international understanding"—in other words, a program of the CIA and US State Department designed to train future American stooges in various countries of the world.

After his return to Russia, he began his unusually quick and successful career as a blogger, exposing corruption at the highest echelons of power. Already his first loud publication about corruption in the state company "Transneft" in late 2010 revealed his connections to influential circles in the Kremlin without which he would have not been able to get access to the documents in question.

Within a year, in December 2011, when mass protests erupted over alleged rigging of the parliamentary elections, Navalny was parachuted into the ranks of the self-proclaimed leadership of these protests along with activists of the liberal opposition, where he tried to take control.

On May 6, 2012, one day before the presidential inauguration of Putin, Navalny tried to provoke a "Maidan" in the center of Moscow, which became the occasion for the arrest of a number of activists. They were sentenced in the so-called "Bolotnoe case." Navalny himself was soon put on trial on a series of charges, including the embezzlement of funds, and was sentenced to a probational prison term.

This did not prevent him from taking part in the Moscow mayoral elections in the summer of 2013, where he received over 27 percent of vote, which provided a boost to his pretensions to be the main political representative of the "urban creative class."

The pro-Western coup in Kiev in February 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in March that same year sharply changed the political moods in the country. The pro-Western liberal opposition found itself in a state of growing isolation, which manifested itself during the last parliamentary elections in October 2016, in which these forces suffered a devastating defeat and lost their representation in the State Duma (Russian parliament.)

After he declared the beginning of his presidential pre-electoral campaign late last year, Navalny, although his official registration was rejected, sought to draw attention to himself against the background of growing protest moods in the country.

One of the elements of his campaign was the establishment of “headquarters” in many regions of the country, and also the emergence of a documentary film about his investigation into the corrupt machinations of Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev. The commentaries to his film note that it made use of footage of residences that are guarded by the secret services, using unmanned drones. This would have hardly been possible without the support from high-ranking circles of the Kremlin administration.

The corruption prevailing in every sector of Russian economic life is a direct result of the dissolution of the USSR and the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which recklessly plundered the wealth created by the Soviet working class over decades. The working class in Russia can only fight for better living standards and against the danger of war with US imperialism, or the installment of a pro-Western puppet regime, by drawing the necessary lessons from the betrayals of Stalinism and the collapse of the USSR and by turning to a socialist and internationalist program.