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By Clara Weiss
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Imperialist powers step up anti-Russia campaign over Navalny case and Belarus

The imperialist powers, with Germany taking the lead, continue to step up the anti-Russia campaign over the case of Alexei Navalny and the crisis in Belarus.

On Monday, the right-wing oppositionist Alexei Navalny awoke from his coma in the Charité in Berlin. Doctors said he was responsive.

Last week, the German government, based on an investigation in a Bundeswehr laboratory, claimed that it was “beyond any doubt” that Navalny had been poisoned with the Novichok nerve agent. German chancellor Angela Merkel, who has reportedly personally arranged for Navalny’s transfer to Germany, issued an ultimatum to the Kremlin to “answer serious questions” as to who may be behind the alleged poisoning. Her spokesman Steffen Seibert said that, while Berlin had no exact deadline for such a response, “we are not taking about months or until the end of the year.”

The German media has seized upon the case to escalate an aggressive campaign against the Putin regime and Russia. The *Spiegel* ran a story last week entitled, “It is time to hurt the man in the Kremlin.” Bourgeois media outlets are filled with calls for the EU and Germany to step up against Russia.

Increasingly, the campaign over the Navalny case is focusing on the German-Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which is about to be completed. Ever more outlets and politicians are calling for an end to the project, which has long been bitterly opposed by the US but involves major German and French energy companies.

On Saturday, the *New York Times* had published an aggressive opinion piece, calling for a “Navalny Act” by Congress and attacking Germany for its involvement in Nord Stream. The *New York Times* raged, “thanks to Chancellor Angela Merkel’s dogged support for the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline from Russia, Germany has become Putin’s greatest enabler in Europe. Merkel’s position that the European Union should keep separate economic and political accounts with Russia was never justifiable. Now it’s outrageous.”

German foreign minister Heiko Maas did not rule out freezing the project in an interview with the *Bild am Sonntag* on Sunday. On Monday, US president Donald Trump, who has threatened sanctions against European companies involved in the project, reiterated his call upon Germany to stop the project.

While the German government has aggressively demanded “answers” and an “investigation” from the Kremlin, it has, in fact, not provided any evidence for its own claims. Not a single toxicological report about Navalny has been released by Germany. Berlin has also not responded for days to a request by the Russian government for data on his case for further investigation and for legal assistance.

The toxin that the German government claims to have found in Navalny is from the same group of poisons that was allegedly found to have been used to poison the former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter in Salisbury, Britain, in 2018. The case of Navalny is at least as murky as the **Skripal poisoning** which has not been clarified to this day.

Nothing that is said by the media and governments can be taken at face value. One of the many unanswered questions is how Navalny could survive the attack with a nerve agent as strong as Novichok.

It is also unclear why only Navalny fell sick. The Novichok poison is so powerful that it usually has a strong impact on the environment, causing people who are in the immediate surroundings of the poisoned to also fall ill. In the case of the Skripal poisoning, one resident of Salisbury died after coming into contact with a perfume bottle that contained traces of Novichok and there was talk of evacuating and destroying entire buildings that had been contaminated.

However, not a single person that Navalny travelled with fell ill or showed traces of the poison.

Moreover, the Bundeswehr laboratory in Munich reportedly found the “traces” of Novichok on a water bottle from which Navalny allegedly drank after being poisoned. No one before had ever mentioned a water bottle in his possession, and his assistant had

explicitly stressed at the beginning of the case that the only thing he consumed that day was a cup of tea at the Tomsk airport.

Lastly, even if Novichok was used, it does not conclusively point to Russian involvement. While developed by Soviet laboratories, the agent has long been produced internationally, including in Germany. Moscow continues to deny any involvement in the alleged poisoning of Navalny, and the speaker of the Russian Duma (parliament), Vyacheslav Volodin, has denounced the case as a “provocation.”

The campaign over Navalny is closely tied to the crisis in Belarus, where mass protests and strikes against Alexander Lukashenko, who claims to have won the August 9 presidential elections, have lasted for a month now. The EU is strongly supporting the anti-Lukashenko opposition around Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, who is now in exile in Lithuania. Navalny himself had been a prominent supporter of the opposition in Belarus and focused his political activities before his illness on discussing the crisis in the neighboring country.

Following an ever more aggressive intervention by the EU and US in the crisis, the Kremlin switched to openly backing Lukashenko two weeks ago. Since then, the EU has further stepped up its support for the opposition. On Friday, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya spoke at the UN Security Council, demanding that international observers be sent to Belarus. While Tikhanovskaya decried “collaboration with the regime” as signifying “support for violence and a staggering violation of human rights,” her opposition, in fact, still focuses on demanding a dialogue with the regime.

On Sunday, tens of thousands again protested in Minsk and other cities in the “march of unity” that had been called for by the opposition. However, the demonstrations were significantly smaller than the week before. Strikes have reportedly also begun to subside. Several leading oppositionists were arrested and their houses searched.

Alexander Yaroshuk, the head of the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions, which supports the pro-NATO opposition, told the EU parliament that the inauguration of Lukashenko in Minsk could lead to “mass bloodshed.” He called upon the EU to intervene in Belarus, otherwise a tragedy was “possible.”

On Monday, Maria Kolesnikova, a member of the opposition’s Coordination Council, was arrested in broad daylight and has since disappeared. Before her disappearance, Kolesnikova had announced that the opposition would initiate an international

investigation into Lukashenko for endangering the “national security of Belarus” by turning to Russian president Vladimir Putin for help in a domestic crisis.

Another opposition politician, Valery Tsepalo, stated that “we are working with international lawyers in the US and Europe on gathering everything necessary for one or multiple criminal investigations into Lukashenko that can be brought before an international court.”

Speaking to the German *Bild Zeitung* on Monday, the German foreign minister Heiko Maas demanded “clarity about the whereabouts [of Kolesnikova]” and the “immediate release of all political prisoners in Belarus. The ongoing arrests and repressions, including and above all against members of the coordination council, are unacceptable.”

The posturing of the imperialist powers as defenders of “democracy” and opponents of police repression in Belarus is the height of hypocrisy. The German government has overseen violent crackdowns on left-wing protests in its own country in recent years, while funding and building up neo-Nazi networks in the state, police and army.

The EU’s intervention in the crisis in Belarus and bolstering of the opposition is motivated above all by two concerns: driven by growing inter-imperialist antagonisms and class tensions at home, the imperialist powers seek to, first, bring the strike movement by the working class under control, and, second, to advance their own economic and geopolitical interests in Eastern Europe.

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