The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Amnesty International Failed Alexei Navalny

Putin and his entourage will be forever grateful for Amnesty International's decision to strip Navalny of his 'prisoner of conscience status.'

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February 27, 2021



Valery Sharifulin / TASS

At first, it seemed like a bad joke. On Wednesday evening, the journalist Aaron Mate posted on Twitter that Amnesty International (AI) had stripped Alexei Navalny of his status as a prisoner of conscience.

It became more real when RT's Editor Margarita Simonyan put out a triumphant tweet (in Russian), acknowledging that one of her puppet freelancers living in New York was instrumental in convincing AI that "he (Navalny) is a Nazi." The post ended with congratulations to everyone in uniform on the occasion of the Russian Defenders of

Fatherland Day.

It was like the tweet read: "Great job, guys! Congratulations on the success of your mission. Perfect timing!"

Did Putin pardon Navalny, and that prompted AI to reconsider? No.

Was Navalny released from jail by request last week of the European Court of Human Rights? No. In fact, coincidentally, right after the AI decision, Navalny disappeared from the Matroskaya Tishina jail: his lawyers suspect he was transferred to a penal colony, but neither they nor his wife or parents were informed about his whereabouts.

Did AI change its mind and now consider the charges brought up against Navalny by the Moscow kangaroo court to be just and valid? No, not that either. In fact, in a statement issued by the organization on Thursday, AI once again acknowledged that "Navalny has been arbitrarily detained for exercising his right to freedom of expression, and for this reason, we continue to campaign for his immediate release."

Related article: Russian Prisons Chief Confirms Navalny in Penal Colony

They say they are continuing to campaign for his release, but in the process they have reviled a person who was poisoned by the state, survived, woke up from an 18-day coma with no memory or ability to control his arms and legs, pulled himself together, flew back home, was detained, sentenced, put in solitary confinement and now shipped like a parcel post to some Godforsaken labor camp, where the inhuman, unjust and punitive Russian prison system will try to kill him again.

Hell of a job, Amnesty, congratulations! Putin and his entourage are grateful and won't forget the favor.

In the interests of full disclosure: Navalny is a friend of mine. I've known him since 2004 and have witnessed his evolution from just another Yabloko staffer to a leader of the Russian opposition and someone who is now considered around the world to be a politician capable of challenging and maybe even winning against Putin, if Russia ever has free and fair elections.

Back in the early 2000s, it was a confusing time in Russia. Putin was elected to a second term without any real competitors; oil prices were climbing to the sky and raining down windfall profits from gas and oil sales. This made many of my fellow Russians feel that life was getting better, maybe for the first time in decades.

But these economic successes let the Kremlin opt for 'managed' and then 'sovereign' democracy, which meant substituting bureaucratic politics for real democracy.

Political parties that had developed to some extent in the previous decade were either incorporated into the ruling party or changed their face. Communists were no longer the party of the working class, but rather a collection of Stalinists and followers of the Russian Orthodoxy; liberals were in cahoots with the Kremlin; and democrats of the Yabloko stripe were in search of a new message. No one party was eager or capable of dealing with the grievances of its constituencies.

The level of trust among citizens was bottoming out, giving way to the kinds of unity in which trust is based on ethnicity and/or religion.

Related article: Amnesty International Revokes Navalny's 'Prisoner of Conscience' Status

As a result of two bloody wars in Chechnya and lack of political alternatives, Russian nationalism was on the rise. Russian marchers, first inspired by the Kremlin, became one of the most attended public political events, bringing together young people, many of them from humble backgrounds and impoverished neighborhoods, eager to find their voice and place in the world.

Having grown up the son of an army officer in a military compound, Navalny felt the pain and confusion of those young Russians. They were looking for someone to blame for their real or imaginary misfortunes. To be sure, ethnic nationalism is often a defining feature of nations in transition with non-structured politics and unclear ideologies.

Grass-root nationalism alone rarely becomes dangerous, but nationalism appropriated by the state and put on its banners can turn into fascism. Back then, in the first decade of the 21st century, the Kremlin was playing with nationalism, unable to decide whether to capitalize on ethnic or imperial nationalism (along the lines "Make Russia great again") until Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012 and chose the latter.

Navalny saw an opportunity to turn those confused young Russian nationalists into his constituency. After all, as he argued in our endless discussions on this subject in 2004 and 2005, those nationalists — even the most radical of them — lived among us, they're our neighbors, and they weren't going to fly off to the planet Mars.

So either the Kremlin was going to use them in its war against democratically-minded people, or he, Navalny, was going to try to turn them into the future consumers of democratic politics. His logic was clear-cut: to win a fight with the Kremlin and its "United Russia," there had to be a broader umbrella-type movement that would unite people of different backgrounds and views just the way Solidarity in Poland united workers of Gdansk in the 1980s. Among those workers were both anti-Semites and Warsaw intellectuals who included Jews.

I was one Jew who believed that Navalny had to give it a try and find ways to speak to the young Russian nationalists. After all, if he didn't do it, then Kremlin-groomed Goebbels were going to fill the void.

Related article: Russian Pranksters Trick Amnesty Heads in Navalny 'Prisoner of Conscience' Call

Navalny gave it a try. Some of his attempts were very successful. By 2013 leaders of the moderate nationalistic groups did turn into his supporters and gave up using the language of hate and disrespect towards ethnic minorities. In other attempts Navalny played with evil images and adjectives to suit popular taste in one or two video blogposts he produced in 2006— 2007 under the banner of his movement at the time, "People."

It was a mistake, for which Navalny paid dearly then and keeps paying, as the current Amnesty International case shows.

But despite the claims of AI in its public statement (AI did not respond to my request for an interview), Navalny has said he regrets the words he used in the past and has distanced himself from them. During his campaign for Moscow mayor in 2013 he said he regretted what he said both in print interviews — see, for instance, his responses to Novaya Gazeta's questions or in videos, like in his most recent interview with Sergei Guriev.

It is rather strange that when AI researchers "decided to re-examine the case and conducted a thorough review of the evidence base," as they asserted in their statement, they did not approach anyone who might know more about the evidence they sought than some so-called activists residing in the U.S. or Spain.

For those of us who have spent time studying the history of the Cold War and Soviet disinformation campaigns known as “active measure operations,” the whole affair of renouncing Navalny's prisoner-of-conscience status is very familiar. It is very similar to the KGB's smear campaigns against Soviet-era dissidents, the founding of the Anti-Zionist Committee in the U.S.S.R, and the destruction of the reputations of the Russian, Ukrainian, and Georgian nationalists who were sentenced to years of imprisonment in the infamous political zone of Perm 36.

The U.S. publications closely associated with Putin's enablers, i.e., those who promote Putin and his regime in the West, did run a couple of articles denouncing Navalny as a nationalist. They did not get the kind of broad response the authors expected. I heard people exploring the idea of "Navalny as a Jew hater, eager to strip Jews of their wealth" in a Russian room of the new social network, Clubhouse, that I entered by mistake just last week.

But AL’s decision did get the response that Putin supporters longed for. It’s a nice try, Lubyanka. You failed to murder Navalny, so now you’re trying to kill his reputation. A futile attempt, I believe. The gauntlet has been dropped. Stay tuned.

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