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Did a Russian Parliamentarian Just Commit Treason?

PowerPoint given by Russian opposition leader blueprints US-backed violent overthrow of Russian government.

By Eric Draitser
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Land Destroyer

Region: Russia and FSU

An interesting thing happened in Washington recently, and it had nothing to do with Beltway politics, Democrats vs. Republicans, or any of the other standard fare for the middle of the week in mid-January. Rather, a relatively small, little publicized event took place at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a prominent liberal-leaning think tank in Washington.

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The event, "Russia's Opposition in a Time of War and Crisis," featured prominent Russian liberal opposition parliamentarian (member of the Russian Duma) Ilya Ponomarev, a noted critic of Russian President Putin, providing a detailed presentation regarding the current political climate in Russia, and the potential for the ousting or overthrow of the Russian government. Yes, you heard that right. A Russian elected official came to the United States to give a talk about how best to effect regime change in his own country.

At this point, the question is not so much whether what Ponomarev did was improper. The much more pressing issue is whether or not, by making this presentation in Washington precisely at the moment of heightened tensions between the US and Russia, Ponomarev has committed treason. While this may seem a rather extreme characterization, it is in fact quite appropriate.

*Image: Ilya Ponomarev prepared an entire PowerPoint detailing his contempt for Russia and his best advice for its ruination. The entire presentation can be viewed here*What Is Treason and Does It Apply?

If we define treason as "the offense of acting to overthrow one's government or to kill or

harm its sovereign," then Ponomarev's actions seem to tread very close to the threshold for treason. Moreover, the fact that such a presentation was delivered at CSIS – a think tank rife with "strategic planners" and proponents of the use of "soft power" to expand US hegemony – is instructive as it provides a window into both Ponomarev's thinking and, perhaps more importantly, that of the political establishment in the US.

During his presentation, Ponomarev touched on a number of critical issues related to Russia's domestic political situation, trying to illustrate for the attendees that the political reality in Russia, despite the simplicity of the western corporate media narrative, is rather complex. Though he described the Putin-led government as "Bonapartist," he noted that "Putin is Russia's only reliably working institution." While the veracity of that statement is debatable, it does seem interesting that an elected Russian lawmaker would go to a foreign country under the auspices of wanting to help his country move forward, and then proceed to advocate the overthrow of the "only reliable institution." Would this not be a thinly veiled attempt to advocate for destabilization, putsch, or something similar?

The most significant portion of Ponomarev's presentation centered on a slide titled "Conditions for the Change of Power in Russia," which laid out essentially a roadmap or blueprint for regime change in Russia. Ponomarev's slide outlined what he believes to be the essential elements for successful overthrow of the democratically elected government. These include:

1. Organized street protest (versus spontaneous one)
2. Appealing vision of the future presented to the majority of Russians
3. Leader, acceptable for all protesters and the elites
4. Access to some financial resources
5. Part of the elites should support the revolution
6. Trigger event

Examining these points, it is clear that Ponomarev is not merely "informing" the assembled policymakers, journalists, and guests about what should happen, but rather is making a case for what must bemade to happen. This is no educational exercise, but a thoughtfully crafted appeal to the political establishment of the US to support Ponomarev and his faction both financially and politically.

Of course the prescription above is nothing new to keen political observers who have followed the development of the crisis in Ukraine, and who have knowledge of how "soft power" works, and the concept of the "color revolution." What Ponomarev is describing has

happened more than a few times before. What is particularly troubling this time is that a sitting parliamentarian, himself a beneficiary of the democratic electoral process, is openly advocating an anti-democratic, unconstitutional overthrow of his own government.

And Ponomarev is perfectly aware of this fact. Indeed, he included in the slide entitled "Conditions for the change of power in Russia" the following points:

- Unlikely – elections
- Likely – revolution (non-violent or violent)
- Compromise with the current elites increases probability of non-violent changes, but decreases the probability of successful reforms in the future

Here, Ponomarev is openly acknowledging a number of critical points. First, that regime change is unlikely to come through elections. This is a blatant admission that not only is Putin democratically elected and wildly popular, but that the opposition will never have anything close to enough popular support to defeat him. In other words, Ponomarev is tacitly saying that Putin must be overthrown precisely because the Russian people support him, and will likely continue to do so. Imagine: a democratically elected politician from a country supposedly run by an "authoritarian dictator" comes to the US – allegedly the world's great champion of democracy – to advocate an anti-democratic regime change scenario. The hypocrisy is beyond words.

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Second, and this is crucial to the question of treason, is the fact that Ponomarev is advocating "non-violent or violent revolution" in collaboration with a foreign power. Here the propagandists and assorted mouthpieces for the Empire might argue that CSIS is a private institution that is not affiliated with the US Government. One would have to painfully naïve about the nature of power in the US and how it functions to believe such a line of argument.

CSIS, with its long association with individuals such as Zbigniew Brzezinski who come from the uppermost echelons of power, is one of a small number of hugely influential think tanks that directly impact US foreign policy. CSIS, along with the Rand Corporation, Council on Foreign Relations, and a handful of other groups, are a useful barometer for measuring the pulse of the US establishment, and for individuals such as Ponomarev to get close to the levers of US power.

Therefore, it could be argued that Ponomarev is openly collaborating with a foreign government – in this case through the nominal intermediary of CSIS – to bring about the overthrow of his own government. I would refer readers back to the above-referenced definition of treason.

Third, and perhaps most telling about Ponomarev, is the fact that he openly warns against any form of compromise with the government, or the elites with influence in the government. Such a preemptively hostile, and inherently adversarial, relationship with the government precludes any possibility for dialogue or even negotiation. Considering the fact that, at best, Ponomarev and the liberal opposition represent a relatively small proportion of

the Russian people (primarily the western-oriented business, finance, and media community, and the young liberals they can mobilize on the streets), the net effect of what he is advocating is that a small, foreign-backed minority with deep pockets seize control of the government in a quite possibly violent putsch. Ukraine anyone? Treason anyone?

While such open treason might come as a shock to many outside Russia, those who follow the country closely are all too aware of the insidious role of the United States in fomenting unrest and bankrolling the liberal opposition. It is an open secret in Russia that many, if not most, of the opposition liberals are either directly or indirectly collaborating with the US against their own country.

Liberal Opposition or Agents of a Foreign Power?

It would be an extreme oversimplification, and not entirely honest, to characterize all Russian liberals as foreign agents. Some are simply socially liberal people who see in the West a political, economic, social and cultural template for their own society. Needless to say, such a view is a small minority in Russia where traditional values and social/cultural conservatism have been on the rise since the end of the Soviet Union, and especially since Putin came to power.

However, when one examines key figures and institutions of the liberal establishment in Russia – both in politics and civil society – it becomes clear that some of the most influential are in fact collaborating with foreign powers (especially the US) to undermine the Russian government.

Boris Nemtsov is not only one of the leading liberal opposition figures in Russia, he is also a notoriously corrupt and oligarch-friendly politician who, in recent years, has fashioned for himself the public persona of an anti-corruption, anti-oligarch crusader. Of course, he doesn't care to mention his notorious, and politically and financially lucrative, relationship with disgraced Russian oligarch Khodorkovsky. Nor does he advertise his deep commitment to aiding the US further its own agenda, as evidenced by his appearance at the now infamous 2012 gathering at the US Embassy of liberal leaders with then newly appointed Ambassador, and self-described "expert" in regime change, Michael McFaul.

Similarly, Nemtsov's ally Vladimir Ryzhkov, according to various accounts, "formed a Committee…in 2003 to 'draw' funds of the imprisoned Khodorkovsky along with soliciting funds from fugitive oligarchs such as Boris Berezovsky and western foundations such as the Soros Foundation. The stated aim of the effort was to rally 'democratic' forces against Putin." The anti-corruption campaigner seemed to have little qualms with being financed by the most corrupt forces in the country.

Gary Kasparov, the outspoken opposition figure, former chess champion and darling of the US neocon establishment, has his own questions to answer. As F. William Engdahl has written:

> In April 2007, Kasparov admitted he was a board member of the National Security Advisory Council of [the] Center for Security Policy, a "non-profit, non-

> partisan national security organization that specializes in identifying policies, actions, and resource needs that are vital to American security." Inside Russia Kasparov is more infamous for his earlier financial ties to Leonid Nevzlin, former Yukos vice-president and partner of Michael Khodorokvsky. Nevzlin fled to Israel on being charged in Russia on charges of murder and hiring contract killers to eliminate "objectionable people" while Yukos vice-president.

Can one really doubt the true intentions of a Russian "activist" and "leader" who happily sits on the board of a US think tank that focuses on "American security" (coded language for US foreign policy objectives)? Rather than being interested in progress in Russia, Kasparov is motivated only by his desire to gain power and prestige.

Beyond just the individuals, a number of influential "civil society" organizations deeply tied to the US establishment figure prominently in the liberal opposition. These organizations (Strategy 31, the Moscow-Helsinki Group, Levada Center, GOLOS, and many others) are either directly or indirectly funded by the United States through its myriad soft power organs, the most infamous among them being the National Endowment for Democracy. That these organizations knowingly take money from the US Government, and then present themselves as objective, disinterested civil society organizations is the height of cynicism and hypocrisy. What does one call such an organization if not an "agent of a foreign power"? I would again refer readers to the above-cited definition of "treason."

Whether or not Ponomarev's presentation fits the legal definition of treason would be for lawyers and legal scholars to decide. What is clear however is that Ponomarev, and indeed the vast bulk of the Russian liberal establishment, is a de facto appendage of US soft power in Russia. They act not in the interests of the Russian people, but of themselves and their patrons in the West. As such, it is up to the people of Russia to address this sort of treacherous behavior in their elected (and unelected) officials. And it is up to those of us around the world – those who refuse to go along with western imperialism in its many forms – to expose these individuals and organizations wherever they rear their ugly heads.

Eric Draitser is an independent geopolitical analyst based in New York City, he is the founder of StopImperialism.org and OP-ed columnist for RT and frequent contributor to "New Eastern Outlook."

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