

The Handlers of “Regime Change” Against Vladimir Putin? Russia’s Upcoming Presidential Elections

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After Wayne Madsen’s comprehensive catalog of [imperialist interventions](#), executed without the slightest hint of subtlety, to undermine and “change” displeasing regimes in every corner of the world, going back decades, the topic seemed all but exhausted. But that turned out not to be correct. A very important piece of that mosaic needs to be added. As this is being written, the provocatively and misnamed and foreign sponsored Free Russia Forum is gearing up to leave its mark on Russia’s forthcoming presidential election.

As alert readers are probably guessing by now, contrary to its deceptive billing the Free Russia Forum is anything but an “independent” discussion group. It is, rather, a political project, a creature one could say, of the State Department. It was created in 2014 and meets twice a year in the Lithuanian capital, just across from the Russian border, to serve as a tool for interference in Russia’s internal affairs.

But good guys do not interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign countries, just as gentlemen do not read each other’s mail, right? Yeah, right.

The [Vilnius gatherings](#) (which have been going on for several years) are a biennial convention of the most militant specimens of Russia’s “non-system” opposition, under the chairmanship of the former chess champion Garry Kasparov. Officially, [participants include](#) “representatives of think tanks, academia, writers, politicians, civil society activists, philosophers and artists, for thoughts-provoking and off-the-record discussions on Russia”. That, however, is just the façade.

It turns out that the political common denominator of the Forum’s sponsors and managers is that the offensive struggle for the demise of Putin’s regime should be conducted by all available means and not necessarily considering the opinion of Russia’s citizens. Over the years the participants’ elitist consensus has been that engaging in the political education of the dull populace is pointless. According to these political mandarins with a deeply patronizing attachment to the welfare of the Russian people, the masses are too “demoralized” to be capable of absorbing the “right information” which they need to make correct decisions. According to their glum assessment (which may not be incorrect) in Russia even the battle for internet supremacy has been lost, notwithstanding the initial optimistic expectations on that front.

It should be noted that, anticipating possible criticisms, Forum chairman Garry Kasparov has claimed that “regime change” in Russia should not excite any fear of the country’s disintegration. However, addressing participants at the last Forum held in December 2017, Kasparov also noted nonchalantly that the population “must pay a price” for its support for Putin. Nobody knows when, he said, but the regime will fall, although – as he pointed out

revealingly – for that to occur foreign pressure will be required. There is no other methodology, he frankly admitted, because as things stand the pro-Western opposition is incapable of winning elections at the presidential or any other level. No sooner did Kasparov appeal for a boycott of Russia's March 18 2018 elections than the financial and economic sanctions against the Russian Federation were intensified, as if by some magic feat of coordination. At the December 2017 Forum meeting in Vilnius Kasparov suggested that even the North Korean ballistic missiles were launched specifically at the behest of Vladimir Putin. His sponsors must have been well pleased.

A few words are in order about the handlers. It is indicative that the rhetoric of the December 2017 Forum took a decidedly more radical turn after Kasparov's closed-door meeting with officials at Lithuania's foreign ministry. According to "informed sources," such a turn was coordinated by Kasparov with his NATO "colleagues."

Free Russia Forum's chief handler is Howard Solomon, US deputy ambassador in Lithuania. A Russian-speaking expert he served as chief of the political section at the US embassy in Moscow. Part of his duties was to maintain contact with leaders of the Russian opposition. After the unsuccessful anti-Putin "orange revolution" attempt on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow in 2012, the Russian government undertook measures to limit contacts between domestic opposition figures and foreign officials, and with Western diplomats in particular. Under the circumstances it was seen fit to transfer Solomon to Lithuania, where he set up shop to continue his anti-Putin activities. Observant readers will note a pattern here. In the late 1990s the Soros and Western intelligence supported Otpor movement in Serbia was receiving logistical support from neighboring Hungary, under the watchful eye and management of US ambassador William Montgomery. It is also noteworthy that soon after Solomon's transfer to new "diplomatic" duties in Vilnius, the first Free Russia Forum meeting took place in Lithuania's capital, in March of 2016.

In addition to the manager-in-chief Howard Solomon, the Forum is also endowed with an "art director" in the person of Jason Smart (just how well he lives up to his surname, we will see if he manages to knock out Putin). The relatively youthful Smart is presented in social networks as a "[political consultant currently working in the countries of the former Soviet Union](#)." In fact, his narrow focus of expertise is what could frankly be called "character assassination." Smart is at present stationed in Kiev, where he oversees the local "NGO" called For a Free Ukraine. It is generally assumed that he exerts a key influence on the Forum's agenda. That deduction is supported by the fact that his ideas are given detailed consideration in the Forum's panel discussions and that later they regularly pop up in various resolutions voted by the Russian opposition.

Unfortunately for them, quite a few opposition intellectuals who were initially co-opted by the Forum to serve as its window dressing took its formal commitments at face value, assuming naïvely that its mission was to conduct unstructured debates about the problems Russia is facing, including genuine issues from the fields of domestic policy, socio-economic development, and foreign affairs. They were soon disabused of their misconception. After four consecutive annual Forum meetings no serious analysis or political action program with specific recommendations has emerged. Perhaps because no such thing was ever contemplated by the promoters of Free Russia Forum's real agenda.

Instead, event participants, some of whom could boast solid reputations, seem to have been recruited for the sole purpose of camouflaging the organization's subversive purpose and

were drawn into discussing issues laid down by Mr. Smart. According to that “character assassination specialist,” [personally targeted sanctions](#) are a particularly effective instrument of pressure against Putin. Just intensify them and fine-tune them a bit more, so goes the Smart rationale, and the sanctioned targets will do NATO’s job for it and get rid of Putin. Just another reason why “anti-regime dissidents” are encouraged to coordinate closely with their Western handlers to make the sanctions more severe and effective.

For the most part, Vilnius Forum participants share Smart’s view that collecting compromising information about Putin’s circle and specifically targeting vulnerable and influential individuals on the so-called “Putin list” is a smart strategy and key component of the final solution of their regime change problem.

In principle, that list is open-ended and consists of twelve categories of high officials of the Russian Federation. In theory, the list can continue to be expanded and could ultimately include hundreds of officials and their families.

Incidentally, some non-Russians have also ended up on that ominous list of Putin fans, including Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad and, curiously, also Ukrainian journalist Anatoli Shariy, EU parliamentarian from Latvia Tatiana Zhdanok, former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, renowned film-maker Oliver Stone, German journalist Alexander Rahr, US Russia expert Dmitri Simes, and even the patriarch of American foreign policy, Henry Kissinger himself.

The Forum’s sponsors have performed a clever shift of emphasis. The ostensible topic of “Free Russia” was swiftly reconfigured to refer to the overthrow of the Russian government, with a parallel and not so subtle program of Russia’s disintegration, Kasparov’s sly denials on this score notwithstanding. President Putin is slated by the Forum to be indicted and (as reflected in off-the-record conversations) preferably physically removed. Hence it is no wonder, in light of the organization’s genuine, subversive agenda, that Free Russia Forum participants have never expressed the least interest in formulating sustainable economic, social, cultural, or other policies that they envision for the benefit of the country whose future is supposedly the subject of their grave concern.

Instead, at its December 2017 meeting Messrs Solomon’s and Smart’s brainchild, following the script handed down from above, adopted a resolution calling on the international community to boycott the 2018 World Cup soccer championship due to take place in Russia. Incidentally, a call was also issued for the boycott of Russia’s presidential elections slated to take place in March 2018.

Against this “policy” backdrop, formerly Russian and currently Ukrainian journalist Ayder Muzhdabaev expressed surprise, and some bitterness, that Russia’s liberal media have largely ignored the Forum and its sessions. His assessment was that Russia’s liberal journalists and their audience are living in a “virtual reality.” While probably correct as far as it goes, with regard to the specific question Muzhdabaev raises that is a highly debatable conclusion. A more likely explanation is that foreign puppeteers have botched the job, turning their toy into an overly servile and rigidly structured component of their political arsenal. Its agenda has turned out to be intellectually dilettantish and insufficiently attractive even to the most avidly pro-Western element of the Russian opposition. Solomon and Smart would therefore do well to go back to the drawing board and re-do their Russian homework, starting with a Russia 101 course to get a better handle on the mentality of their target population and the real, as opposed to the virtual, concerns and needs even of those

Russians who do not necessarily agree in every respect with their current government.

Giving a platform to Kasparov's comrade-in-arms Sergey Davidis, who insisted that under the new dispensation Russia's enormously popular and influential television hosts Dmitri Kiselev and Vladimir Soloviov should be put on trial, or to discredited politician Ilya Ponomaryov, who advocates returning Crimea and the dismemberment of the Russian Federation, does little to enhance the image of this gathering and the motley crew of which it is composed.

President Putin has little to fear from a hare-brained scheme such as the Free Russian Forum. But its immediate handlers Solomon and Smart, as well as their superiors – if they are smart – ought to seriously consider what might lie in store should such an inadequate set of individuals as they have apparently assembled by some fortuitous circumstances actually manage to seize the helm of a nuclear-armed superpower such as Russia.

Setting aside the important issue of interference in other countries' internal affairs and its permissibility under international legal standards, one of the major front-line organizations tasked with preparing the ground for regime change in Russia is clearly incapable of undertaking any effective or responsible action. Since it was set up four years ago, instead of following its [putative mission](#) of "the formation of a smart alternative to Putin's regime," in the hands of its arrogant but incompetent handlers the Forum has degenerated into a pathetic sounding-board for foreign agendas, experimentally elaborated by NATO bureaucrats and associated color revolution operatives. That is where the State Department is wasting its funds and organizational resources.

Finally, the last and perhaps most important questions: how is the implementation of dilettantish yet in-your-face abrasive projects such as this likely to be reflected in relations between two superpowers, Russia and the United States? Does it facilitate mutual trust and the creation of a constructive atmosphere conducive to finding solutions for global problems?

These questions are not just rhetorical.

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