

A color revolution in the making: Vladimir Kara-Murza and Keith Gessen at Columbia University

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On Wednesday, October 17, Vladimir Kara-Murza, a leading Russian liberal oppositionist, was interviewed by Keith Gessen, editor of the *n+1* magazine, in an event hosted by Columbia University's Harriman Institute for the Study of Eurasia, Russia and Eastern Europe. The event was a stark testimony to the advanced preparations for a US-backed "color revolution" in Russia, i.e., an imperialist-orchestrated and funded movement of a section of the oligarchy and upper middle class to topple the Putin regime, similar to those that have taken place in Ukraine and Georgia.

Vladimir Kara-Murza is one of the many shadowy figures of Russian politics who, while little known to most people inside or outside Russia, are playing a key role in directing and supporting the US anti-Russia policy and the course of the Russian pro-US liberal opposition. The son of Vladimir Kara-Murza, Sr., who was a major figure in the oligarch-controlled Russian media under Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Jr. worked for many years as the right-hand man of Boris Nemtsov, one of Yeltsin's key allies in the 1990s and a right-wing political opponent of Putin, who was assassinated in 2015 under murky circumstances.

Along with Nemtsov, Kara-Murza was an early backer of the US congressional passage of the Magnitsky Act in 2012, which targets Russian oligarchs and officials who support the Putin regime and are accused of corruption and human rights abuses. He has lobbied for the adoption of similar legislation by governments throughout the world. Through this work, Kara-Murza also became close to the late John McCain, one of Washington's foremost supporters of "color revolutions" throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union. In August, Kara-Murza served as a pallbearer at McCain's funeral, along with former Vice President Joe Biden and the actor Warren Beatty.

Since 2014, Kara-Murza has worked for the Open Russia Foundation, which was founded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who rose to become one of the most powerful and richest oligarchs of Russia during the 1990s and was imprisoned by Putin in 2003.

In short, Kara-Murza has been at the center of the operations for a color-revolution-type movement in Russia for years. And this is precisely what he was invited to speak on with the self-styled leftist and Russia expert Keith Gessen, founding editor of the *n+1* magazine, one of the most popular magazines among pseudo-left circles. (Gessen also teaches at Columbia University's Journalism School and is the brother of Masha Gessen, who has been heavily involved in the anti-Putin media propaganda for many years.)

The event started with Keith Gessen asking Kara-Murza about the assassination of Boris Nemtsov which the latter, of course, attributed to the Kremlin. For most of the discussion, however, Kara-Murza detailed his involvement in the preparations for a color revolution in Russia.

Kara-Murza insisted that "the history of Russia teaches us that big political changes in our country can start quickly and unexpectedly." He referred to both the 1905 Revolution and the February Revolution of 1917, which, as Kara-Murza pointed out, even took Lenin by surprise, and then the collapse of the USSR "in three days" in 1991. "This is how things happen in Russia", he insisted, and "the problem with this is that nobody is prepared. We [at the Open Russia Foundation] see it as our mission to begin those preparations for future change now. We cannot afford to not be ready again. Most of the things we do inside of Russia is targeted at preparing for this future transition."

The Open Russia Foundation, he continued, had 25 regional branches and a series of working groups which were already elaborating plans for political reforms and constitutional changes for the post-Putin period. Furthermore, they were focusing on "work with the new generation, the people who will be in charge of Russia" through training and education programs. Lastly, they were doing "international" work, which he himself was in charge of, which included "outreach" directed, again, at preparing the "future transition."

When later asked by an audience member how he saw the future of Russia in the next few decades, he declared that this change would come not within the next few decades, but within the next few years.

When he was asked from the audience whether the latest pension reform, which is opposed by over 90 percent of the population, could trigger the kind of "sudden change" he was expecting, Kara-Murza said: "It could but it doesn't have to. There is always the argument that it's [going to be] something of a socio-economic nature. Actually, if we look at the two decades of Putin, the peak of the protests was in December 2011 when the middle class was booming. It was about dignity, it had nothing do to with social issues. ... The trigger will not be necessarily economic."

He continued, "The only really shaky point [for Putin] was when so many people felt insulted that the government was wiping its feet over them. I think it's going to be something like that. A color revolution of dignity," like the events in Ukraine in 2014. In other words, what Kara-Murza and the Open Russia Foundation are working on is the promotion of a right-wing middle-class movement similar to the Maidan in Ukraine, which would provide the basis for a coup to topple the current government.

The key figures and mechanisms for such a "color revolution" were also addressed at some length. Keith Gessen asked how Kara-Murza viewed the campaign of the blogger Alexei Navalny, who, as the WWS has written, is a far-right, pro-US figure who cloaks his right-wing program behind murky phrases about corruption. Just how fraudulent and politically calculated this focus is became clear in the discussion when Keith Gessen asked whether Navalny's focus on corruption as the center

of his political platform was “a winning platform.” Kara-Murza responded: “Yes, it is. Corruption is such a widely understandable issue. It’s an issue that everybody is aware of.”

In the discussion, a graduate student from Harriman asked whether the Open Russia Foundation had a “particular road map” for what to do when the “sudden event” Kara-Murza expected actually occurred. Kara-Murza replied: “If there were a model, it would be something like the Polish roundtable [of 1989]. The way we want a transition to happen in Russia is peaceful and smooth. We don’t want a violent revolution. ...Russia has had enough revolutions. The problem is that the people who are in power today are doing everything for a revolution to occur.”

Then, he went into the figures who would be included in such a roundtable. “Of course, Boris Nemtsov would have been at the roundtable”, but, he assured his audience, there were many others. The figures he named were: Yevgeni Roizman, the mayor of Yekaterinburg, who is a notorious far-right-winger, with deep ties to the local mafia. In Russia, he became known above all through his alleged “drug” relief program, which has involved heavy physical abuse of drug addicts.

He also named Galina Shirshina, a member of the liberal opposition party Yabloko (which Nemtsov led until his assassination) as well as Lev Shlosberg, a local politician in Pskov who is also a leading member of “Yabloko.” Finally, Kara-Murza named Dmitri Gudkov, who is heading the opposition “Party of Changes” with Ksenia Sobchak, the daughter of Putin’s mentor Anatoly Sobchak, who ran as a presidential candidate this year.

“Navalny and Khodorkovsky would obviously also be at the roundtable”, Kara-Murza added. When Gessen asked “What about the Communists?” Kara-Murza said that Sergei Udaltsov, the leader of the Stalinist and National Bolshevik “Left Front”, may also hope for a seat at the roundtable. “We have very different views, but we have a good personal relationship. He’s a decent human being, politically and on a human level.”

Then, he added, “there are also many nationalists who are not controlled by the Kremlin” and who could join the roundtable. Throughout the event, Kara-Murza repeated that he and his allies were the true patriots and Russian nationalists, as opposed to Putin and the oligarchs and officials around him. “I just don’t want to bore everyone with a long list of names,” he said, as he concluded his enumeration of prospective of roundtable participants.

Like all Russian liberal oppositionists, Kara-Murza makes a hue and cry about rigged elections under Putin. Yet at no point did he even mention the possibility of an election before or after such a “roundtable,” the participants of which have most evidently already been discussed and set.

There could hardly be a more open statement about the complicity of the so called opposition forces in Russian in a premeditated, US-backed plot to overthrow the Putin regime and install another, more pro-US, right-wing government in its place.

Kara-Murza speaks for a section of the oligarchy which not only seeks to gain control over the social and economic wealth of Russia, but also fears that a continuation of the Putin regime will threaten not only Russia’s geopolitical position, but also social revolution. They see their main goal in making sure that a reshuffling within the oligarchy and upper middle class takes place, to assure both a reorientation of Russian foreign policy more directly in line with the interests of imperialism, and the ongoing suppression of the working class.

The complete indifference toward the implications of these policies for the masses of working people in Russia was at full display when Kara-Murza defended the process of capitalist restoration and the 1990s as time when Russia was actually make headway on the world stage: Russia was included in the G8 and finally internationally recognized, Kara-Murza stressed.

He contemptuously dismissed any criticism of the 1990s by referring to

this decade as the “supposedly horrible 90s.” The fact that the Russian economy experienced the worst collapse recorded in modern history for peacetime; that life expectancy plummeted, that hundreds of thousands committed suicide and were driven into substance abuse and that workers were going without pay for months and years, all of this is evidently of no concern to him.

Underlining the recklessness of the whole operation, the question of the potential consequences of a “color revolution” was not even raised. But anyone who looks at the past three decades of US foreign policy knows where this type of intervention of leads: civil war, ethnic strife, dictatorial regimes, and decades of economic, social and economic crisis. In the case of Russia, a “color revolution” would most likely mean the violent break-up of the Russian Federation—many opposition leaders in fact argue for different borders of Russia. It would, moreover, raise the very immediate danger of a nuclear catastrophe: what if a section of the military resorts to the vast nuclear arsenal of Russia to defend its interests? And what will the US military and NATO do if a color revolution underway in Russia suddenly threatens to go astray? Will they intervene directly militarily?

The involvement of Keith Gessen in this dubious event is revealing. At no point did he raise something akin to a critical question. His role was nothing but to ask polite questions and provide Kara-Murza with a platform. A self-styled leftist, Gessen has translated and published the writings of Kirill Medvedev, a leading figure in the Russian Socialist Movement (RSM), a Pabloite formation in Russia. This year, he published a novel “A Terrible Country” in which he, yet again, promotes the Russian pseudo-left. In 2014, the RSM fully backed the far-right coup in Kiev. In Russia itself, the RSM has long shifted toward full support for Alexei Navalny’s right-wing “anti-corruption campaign,” ignoring or dismissing his history of support for Russian fascism and racism. The role of Gessen in this event is emblematic of the role of these forces as handmaidens US and European imperialism.

It was befitting for Columbia University’s Harriman Institute to host this event: the first interdisciplinary Russia institute to be formed after the beginning of the Cold War, it has historically been associated with US imperialist plotting against first the Soviet Union and then Russia. To this day, the Harriman Institute, which is a non-profit, functions primarily as a think tank as well as an educational and recruiting center for Washington’s foreign policy establishment and the CIA.

For much of its existence, the Harriman Institute was dominated by the figure and work of Zbigniew Brzezinski who, for over half a century, played a central role in elaborating the world strategy and justifying the war crimes of US imperialism. One of Brzezinski’s political trademarks was his advocacy for fostering political opposition and insurrections in the Soviet Union, to undermine the regime and thus fight what he saw as one of the US’s main competitors for the control of Eurasia. The “color revolution” strategy of US imperialism since 1991 stands in precisely this tradition. Now as then, far-right forces within the elites and fake left tendencies are the props of imperialism “on the ground.”

Events like the one at Columbia reveal much about the state of world politics. “Color revolutions” which will impact the lives of hundreds of millions and threaten civil and all-out nuclear war, are being discussed and plotted behind the exclusive doors of an Ivy League institution with an audience of some 50 people, most of whom are graduate students and professors who, one may assume, either already are on the payroll of the CIA and the State Department or seeking to get there.

The Putin regime offers no alternative to these imperialist machinations. Like the sections of the oligarchy that Kara-Murza speaks for, Putin and his cronies have emerged out of and enriched themselves on the basis of the destruction of the Soviet Union which was carried by the Stalinist bureaucracy hand-in-gloves with imperialism. It considers not imperialism, but the Russian working class to be its main enemy, and, hence, responds to every imperialist provocation is a response of desperate

attempts to find a deal with imperialism, largely behind closed doors, and the promotion of nationalism and militarism at home.

This sinister event is a warning to the international working class about the advanced preparations for the next step in the efforts of US imperialism to topple the Putin regime and bring the resources of Russia under its direct control: it is high time for workers both in the US and in Russia to intervene in politics on an independent basis to put an end to these dangerous conspiracies of imperialism through the struggle for socialism.



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