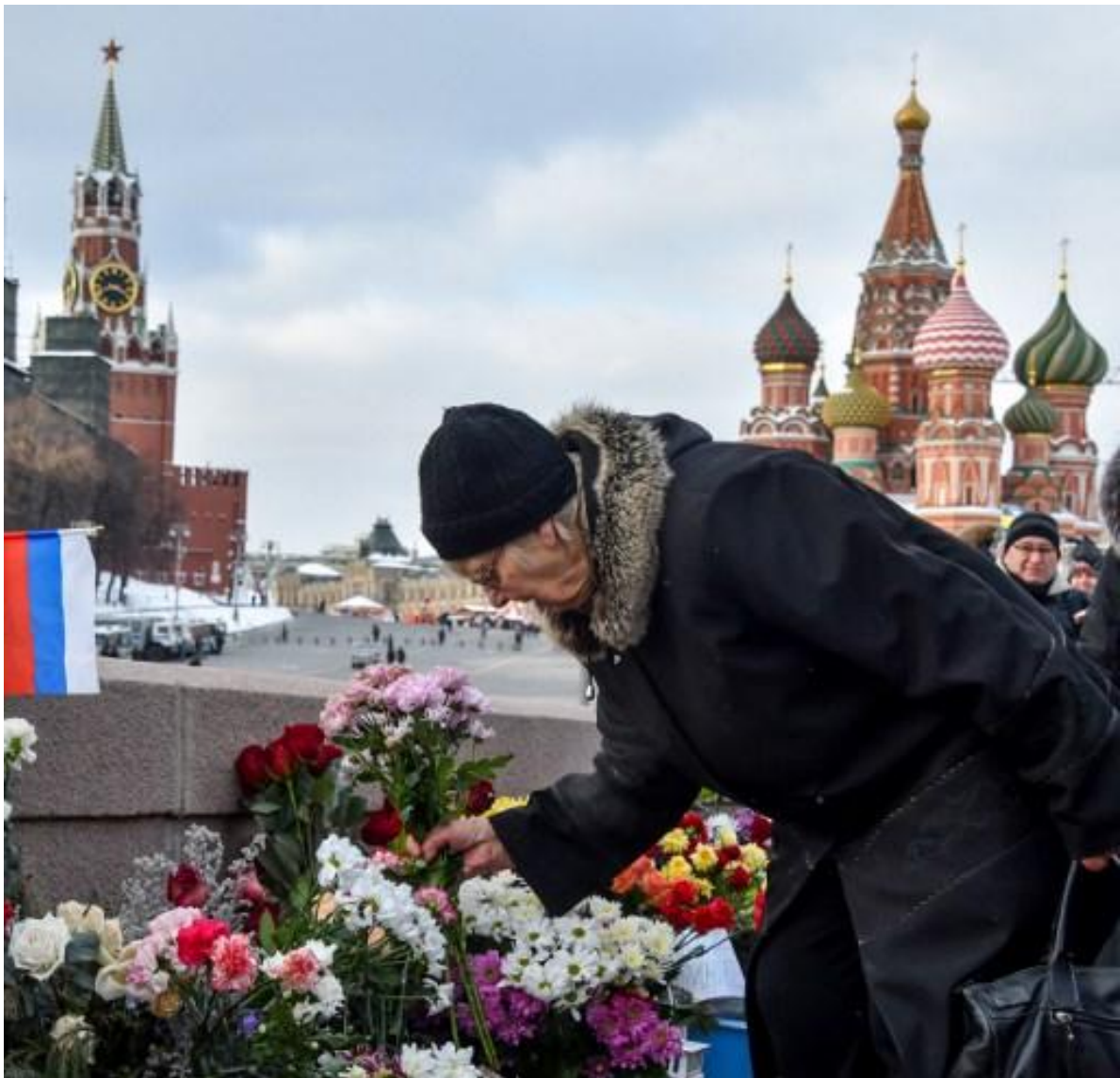


Kateryna Smagliy: Goodbye to the Kremlin Institute

By [Kateryna Smagliy](#). Published Feb. 28, 2018. Updated Feb. 28 2018 at 12:01 am



A woman lays flowers in central Moscow on February 25, 2018 at the site where late opposition leader Boris Nemtsov was fatally shot on a bridge near the Kremlin. The 55-year-old former first deputy prime minister under Boris Yeltsin was shot in the back several times just before midnight on February 27, 2015 as he walked across a bridge a stone's throw from the Kremlin walls. / AFP PHOTO / Vasily MAXIMOV
Photo by AFP

Feb. 28 is my last day as director of the Kennan Institute Kyiv Office, a position I held since December 2015 and won in tough competition with other reputable scholars.

Two weeks ago, my former boss Matthew Rojansky, the Director of the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C., abruptly dismissed me, offering no specific reason for such a decision.

Just as it happens, I am bidding goodbye during the most tragic days in Ukraine's history. Four years ago, thousands of Ukrainians fought on the streets of Kyiv for their freedom and dignity. The sacrifice of the Heavenly Hundred is a vivid reminder of what Ukrainians are up against – corruption, injustice and disrespect to human rights. Do not underestimate our power of resistance and the spirit of dignity, Mr. Rojansky.

This story is my farewell to you and the pitiful legacy you are leaving behind.

The Kennan Institute opened its offices in Moscow and Kyiv in the mid-1990s to develop the ever growing networks of the new generation of Ukrainian and Russian scholars.

But in 2014, only six months after taking the office as the first and only Kennan Institute's director with no doctorate or a monograph under his belt, Rojansky made a radical step and closed the Moscow office.

Protests have followed and letters were sent to U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. They even reached the New York Times and lamented that this decision was “inappropriate, ill-timed and extremely harmful to the long-term prospects of U.S.-Russian relations.”

At the background of the doom and gloom picture in Moscow, the perspectives for the office in Kyiv, in Rojansky's own words, "were bright." Speaking at the Kennan Institute's Alumni Conference in Berlin only three months ago, [he praised me](#) for doing a "fantastic work building up the visibility and impact of the Kennan Institute and its alumni in Ukraine."

Indeed, over the last three years, our team ran the extra mile bringing the work of Kennan scholars to the fore. We were united by academic and civic projects in support of Ukraine's reform process. With the Foreign Ministry of Ukraine, we organized three forums of cultural diplomacy and were about to hold a large-scale forum to celebrate the 2018 European Union Heritage Year in Ukraine.

We also helped displaced universities in Donbas and organized five leadership schools for 120 internally displaced students.

Hundreds of public lectures, conferences, book presentations and policy debates were held in Kyiv and Washington to bring the most balanced and accurate account on Ukraine's developments to the world.

Yet on Feb. 15, the day after I spoke on "Boris Nemtsov and Russian politics" with two ardent critics of the Kremlin – Vladimir Kara-Murza and David J. Kramer – Rojansky handed me the letter of dismissal, saying the institute was going "into a different direction."

For no specific reason, he also disallowed me to take part in the Kennan Institute's Advisory Council meeting, thus putting a block to an open and democratic discussion of his current strategy.

So, what the Institute's "new direction" is and does it have one at all?

Two years ago, when Ukraine was struggling hard to offset the Russian aggression and losing thousands of its soldiers on the battlefields in Donbas, Rojansky [joined the team](#) led by executive director of Kissinger Associates, Thomas Graham, to work behind closed doors and discourage Ukraine's political leadership from joining NATO.

The same year the Kennan Institute and Wilson Center gave special awards for promoting the U.S.-Russia ties to Russian businessman [Petr Aven](#) (now on the "Kremlin" sanctions list) and [Susan Carmel Lehrman](#), who personally received the Order of Friendship from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Occasionally, the Kennan Institute's links to Kremlin associates put the institute into trouble, as it was the case when the founder of the Russia Today TV channel, Mikhail Lesin – the mastermind behind Russia's major vehicle of disinformation during the U.S. presidential elections – was found dead at his hotel room under mysterious circumstances only day after the Aven-Lehrman gala.

Today, at a time when the U.S. government tightens its grip on Putin's associates, the Kennan Institute offers them a rather warm welcome, while its website is radiating optimism about the future of the U.S.-Russia ties.

Just weeks ago the message of ["joint interests promotion"](#) was voiced by the institute's guest Yuri Shafranik, the former energy minister and board chairman of the Union of Oil and Gas Producers of Russia.

The debate on the U.S.-Russia cooperation in the sphere of healthcare reform was cited as yet another ["example of engagement that really worked."](#)

But if you tried looking for any mention of any Kennan Institute's serious debates on Russia's role in the Donbas and Crimea, you will be deeply disappointed: there is not a single serious discussion on subjects that matter. When in December last year Kennan Ukrainian alumni proposed to host a presentation by several Crimean Tatar activists who spent time in Russia as political prisoners, the leadership politely declined this suggestion.

Instead of chewing over the most critical issues of Russia's threats to European and global security, Rojansky actively promotes the idea of the U.S.-Russia dialogue at the [Dartmouth Conference](#).

Long dead after the end of the Cold War, the "conference" was suddenly revived by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, only months after Russia launched the war in Donbas. Rojansky serves as conference's executive secretary on the American side. Surprisingly, the seemingly reputable academic conference, which does not even have a website, is co-led by Yuri Shafranik and [Gissa Guchetl](#), who are known to have oil business interests in Russian and Syria. The institute regularly hosts visiting Russian "analysts" at the so-called "salons," offering them cozy opportunities to discuss the caveats of U.S.-Russia partnership in a more private setting.

The institute also manifested its pro-Russian position when it supported "For Unity!" concert, featuring Mariinsky Theatre conductor Valeriy Gergiev and pianist Denis Matsuev. Both stood behind Putin's illegal annexation of Crimea.

Newsweek lambasted the concert organizers and Ukrainian and Russian diaspora groups held rallies in front of the National Cathedral in Washington.

The Ukrainian-American activist [Alexa Chopivsky](#) was arrested for giving out leaflets at the concert site. The Embassy of Ukraine regretted that American nonprofit organizations created a “platform for Russian propaganda and manipulation of the U.S. public opinion” about Russia’s violation of the international law.

The network of Ukrainian Kennan alumni could not stay aside and sent an [open letter](#) to Rojansky in protest of his uncovered flirtation with the Kremlin. The institute apologized for what it called a “mistake,” but soon started a “second act” of this saga by sidelining me as Kennan Kyiv director at every corner. Suddenly I could not organize joint events with international think tanks, hold conferences on the subject of national memory or even present my own writings on Boris Nemtsov, the Kremlin critic assassinated on Feb. 27, 2015, in Washington, D.C.

In the final acts of his “Kyiv containment” policy, Rojansky finally opted for dismissal and handled it in the most disrespectful, nontransparent and despicable manner. To sweeten the sordid aftertaste of his disgraceful gesture, the Kennan Institute decided to announce the new grant program for its alumni in Ukraine on the same day of my dismissal, thinking that a small grant of \$1,000 will buy the Ukrainian alumni network’s loyalty.

But does dignity have a price, Rojansky?

Under Rojansky’s leadership, the Kennan Institute, once the most reputable and respectable American academic center, is being downgraded to the role of the Kremlin Institute and the instrument of Russia’s hybrid war in the very heart of Washington, D.C.

The truth will prevail. [Lilia Shevtsova once pointed out](#) that “that one can get an impression that the Kennan Institute is the department of the

Russian presidential administration and Rojansky himself is getting a salary in the Kremlin's accounting office.”

It is high time the U.S. government put your actions under scrutiny, analyze your sources of funding and realize that it does not take to look across the ocean to identify the names of the hybrid war agents. Some of them are right behind the corner and can be easily located at Washington's Federal Triangle.