

# Letter From the Editors: Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 2016

## To the Brink: From the Return of Checkpoint Charlie, to the Point of No Return in Russian-US Relations

In an article dedicated to the current sad state of Russian-US relations, Dmitry Yevstafyev [outlines four layers](#) that comprise a healthy bilateral relationship: political contacts, diplomatic communication, interaction within the format of global institutions and, finally, unofficial contacts between former political “heavyweights” (think Robert McNamara and Yevgeny Primakov). Right now, all four links in the chain are broken. And while Yevstafyev blames “Twitter diplomacy” for ruining the age-old art of expert negotiators hammering out solutions away from the prying eyes of social media, it seems the author most laments the overall loss of our ability to communicate. Even in the 1970s, cold war confrontation proceeded along clearly established ground rules. The current situation is more reminiscent of the 1950s, “when Soviet and US tanks faced off near Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, and various scenarios for delivering preventive nuclear strikes were discussed.”

In fact, with the threat of nuclear war looming larger than ever, the UN First Committee has approved a measure to [ban nuclear weapons](#). But it doesn't look like the owners of the world's two largest nuclear arsenals are about to step back from the brink. Addressing a lack of trust between Russia and the US, Russian Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev laid the blame squarely at Washington's door: “We cannot help but wonder what sort of categories Washington thinks in by placing Russia on a par with ISIS and the Ebola virus in its National Security Strategy.”

Yet according to Aleksandr Golts, Moscow is hardly interested in coming to terms with Washington on nuclear weapons, since its nuclear arsenal remains the Kremlin's main foreign policy tool. Whether it's designing next-generation nuclear subs or leaking the allegedly “secret” Status-6 nuclear weapon (as it did last year), Moscow is leaning heavily on one of the few tools left at its disposal. And just in case anyone thinks this is a bluff, Vladimir Putin has been hard at work dismantling “his earlier reputation as a rational man by constantly hinting that if push comes to shove, he is prepared to ‘press the button.’” Of course, using nuclear weapons to achieve superpower status instead lands Russia in the same camp as North Korea's Kim Jong Un. But, as Golts warns, “When Kim Jong Un blackmails his neighbors with a few [nuclear] warheads, the result could be a regional catastrophe. Moscow's nuclear blackmail could destroy the entire planet.”

Could it be that Russian leaders are finally starting to come to their senses? First, during [last week's meeting](#) of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Putin clearly struck a conciliatory tone, stating that Russia has no intention of attacking anyone. Then, Federation Council speaker Valentina Matviyenko said that if controversial new antiterrorism legislation and the Law on Foreign Agents are being perceived so negatively by the public, then “for us, the government, that is a serious shortcoming.” Are these signs of a thaw? Hardly, believes political analyst [Nikolai Petrov](#). “Instead of offering something positive, you first scare people with a bigger negative. . . . Then you dial back the negative, which makes them happy – not because you gave them anything, but because you took away less,” he explains.

One big negative in the CIS this week is the Ukrainian public's reaction to the [asset declarations filed by Ukrainian officials](#). While the average Ukrainian is struggling to pay for groceries and other basic items, the powers that be are rolling in unprecedented luxury. Some of the items declared include: a church; a “ticket to space” worth \$1.5 billion; as well as “collections of paintings, carpets, diamonds, antiques, yachts and airplanes, dozens of apartments and hundreds of hectares of land.” The public's patience is clearly wearing thin, and “bitter sarcasm among the public could turn to aggression,” warns political expert Andrei Zolotaryov. So that ticket to space might come in handy after all.

Xenia Grushetsky,  
Managing Editor

## THE CURRENT DIGEST OF THE RUSSIAN PRESS

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