Letter From the Editors: Nov. 14-20, 2016

A Week of Bewilderment, Befuddlement, Bemusement.

Nothing can be taken for granted these days, it seems. Not after Brexit and Trump. The world is still processing – reeling over – Donald's unexpected victory in the US presidential election. Experts are nervously contemplating the consequences of what appears to be a nascent era of populist backlash against establishment political figures, attitudes and institutions – and perhaps even more broadly, modernity. Whatever new era might be dawning, it will certainly be one of political and general uncertainty.

Russia is not immune to surprising developments, it turns out. The biggest head-scratcher to come out of Russia this week was the middle-of-the-night arrest of Russian Economic Development Minister Aleksei Ulyukayev, who was allegedly caught accepting a bribe from Rosneft for giving a "positive assessment that allowed Rosneft to purchase a controlling stake in Bashneft." There are many eyebrow-raising elements to the case, writes Yulia Latynina. For example, the "bribe" allegedly occurred long after the deal to purchase the Bashneft stake was finalized; the wealthy cabinet minister was supposedly demanding the relatively paltry sum of $2 million in a multibillion-dollar deal; and Putin apparently was aware of the impending sting operation long before it happened, while Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, Ulyukayev's boss, only learned of the impending arrest the day before. The list of baffling aspects of the arrest goes on. Although not calling the charges patently false or a provocation (as Ulyukayev claims they are), many commentators nevertheless call the arrest politically significant, if not politically motivated.

Andrei Kolesnikov says the arrest sends a wake-up call to the elite ahead of the 2018 presidential election. The Stalinesque arrest of a top government official is sure to inspire the "loyalty of fear," as Eva Hartog and Mikhail Fishman put it. The arrest also bolsters Putin's image as a corruption crusader, and reeling in a big fish before the 2018 election cycle will definitely score him some points with voters, even though such a high-level corruption scandal will tarnish Russia's reputation in general. Tatyana Stanovaya writes that Putin's electoral platforms are always nothing more than slogans (such as fighting corruption) that serve to boost ratings but don't become part of an overall strategy. With Putin, everything is ad hoc. So could Ulyukayev's arrest be a shoot-from-the-hip solution to a political issue?

The other sensational story to come out of Russia this week is that the Russian Supreme Court overturned the sentence of avowed Putin oppositionist and one-time Moscow mayoral candidate Aleksei Navalny in a 2013 embezzlement case. The decision enables him to run for elected office again. The unexpected decision was cause for celebration and suspicion. Some suspect that the Kremlin may actually need its bitter foe to run for president, to give Putin a credible opponent in the election. Others suggest that the Kremlin might be seeking to co-opt him.

The fact is that Putin is entering what is presumably his last presidential election cycle. This has the Russian elite on edge and preparing for Russia without Putin. What awaits the elite amid the surging tide of populism and antiestablishment sentiment? Should Putin himself be worried about the upcoming election? After all, you can't get much more establishment than the current Russian regime, right? But perhaps Putin doesn't have much reason to be afraid. As Yury Saprykin writes somewhat facetiously, Putin turned out to be ahead of the political curve. Trump essentially used the same spin techniques to win the US election that Putin has been using for years in Russia: unsubstantiated statements, fake news and provocative clickbait. Restoring lost "greatness" is in vogue these days, and Putin is becoming something of a cult figure in the eyes of America's alt-right and Europe's far-right. Hopefully past greatness doesn't mean the 1930s for Russia and more late-night arrests.

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