

Letter From the Editors: Nov. 21-27, 2016

The View From the Kremlin – Living the Dream in a Post-Truth World

In what could be called the Year of Backlash (with all the previous references to Brexit and Trump), 2016 continues to shock and amaze. On the heels of the surprising arrest of economic development minister Aleksei Ulyukayev [last week](#), Russian commentators rushed to wrap their collective brains around the [Igor Sechin Phenomenon](#). For better or worse, it looks like Putin's ally from his days at St. Petersburg City Hall is upping the ante politically. But as Andrei Kolesnikov points out, Sechin is not a political figure – at least officially. He is merely the CEO of a state-owned corporation. However, he is rumored to have strong ties with law enforcement, and as we saw last week, he isn't shy about using them.

According to Yevgenia Albats, Rosneft is now officially taking on the powers of law-enforcement agencies: "What we are witnessing is not the merging of the state and business. . . but rather the merging of a repressive agency with the wealthiest state-owned corporation," she writes. Is this the emergence of a corporate state in Russia, something that Benito Mussolini once ominously described as, "All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state"?

Vladimir Pastukhov takes Albats' sentiments a step further. Yes, Sechin is currently ruthlessly asserting himself on the political arena, going after the so-called liberal establishment (as embodied by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and former finance minister Aleksei Kudrin). But by showing that he is in a way bigger than Putin, Sechin could be setting himself up for a very big fall: "Sechin's over-the-top pushiness could at some point force Putin to take response measures. And in that case, there will be no shortage of people willing to cut [Sechin] down to size."

Perhaps Sechin can only hope that Putin is too distracted with trying to figure out how to play his cards right in the Middle East to worry about interclan power struggles. With Donald Trump to take over the White House in January 2017, [Moscow's Middle East strategy](#) is in disarray: While Trump vowed to make fighting terrorism his top priority, he also promised to take a tougher line with Iran – Moscow's ally in Syria, writes Mikhail Troitsky. And one condition for normalizing relations with Russia could require Moscow to jump on the bandwagon and get tough with Tehran. What's more, in order to move toward reconciliation, Russia would have to fundamentally alter its view of the US. For the past several years, Russian propaganda has successfully convinced the domestic audience that America is a geopolitical foe hell-bent on destroying Russia. So is it possible to shift gears and instead portray the US as a "positive force in international relations"? With a presidential election in Russia on the horizon, that would mean "abandoning an important lever of influence on voters," says Troitsky.

The view isn't all bad from the Kremlin this week: Elections in Bulgaria and Moldova were a pleasant surprise, [writes Gevorg Mirzayan](#). Both countries elected politicians who campaigned on improving ties with Russia: Bulgaria's Rumen Radev does not position himself as either pro-European or pro-Russian, but rather an independent candidate. Moldova's Igor Dodon, for his part, campaigned on a heavily pro-Russian platform, also proposing outlawing "unionism" (the movement to unite Moldova and Romania).

Not to be outdone, European Parliament deputies rushed to stem the effects of Russian propaganda by [adopting a controversial resolution](#) that effectively lumps Russia together with ISIS and Al Qaeda, writes Aleksandr Mineyev. The resolution aims to fight propaganda that "undermines and erodes the European narrative based on democratic values, human rights and the rule of law." But is the EU's measure too little, too late, given that the Oxford Dictionary named "post-truth" the word of the year for 2016?

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