

Letter From the Editors: Nov. 28-Dec. 11, 2016

Hail to the Chief: Putin a Good Face on It

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin has been the star of the Russian press these last two weeks. The reasons may seem obvious: He just delivered his annual [Message to the Federal Assembly](#); and shortly before that, he approved a new [Foreign Policy Concept](#) and [Information Security Doctrine](#) for his country.

But that was just the beginning. A few days after his annual address, Putin traveled to Chelyabinsk, where he made the following resounding statement to a group of factory workers: “I want to successfully [wind up my career](#).” He also divulged his dream of traveling around the world and seeing sights other than airports and meeting rooms. These brief remarks set the Russian media on fire: Is Putin going to retire? Will he even run in the 2018 election? Does he have his eye on a successor? Experts interviewed by Ola Cichowlas and Mikhail Fishman for the [Moscow Times](#) say that Putin himself is ambivalent; in the words of an anonymous Kremlin insider: “He wants to stay and he wants to go.” Political analyst Tatyana Stanovaya surmises that he is indeed planning an exit, but predicts he will serve out a full fourth term. [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#), in an interview with The New Times, does not venture to prophesy when Russia’s sole president of this millennium will leave office; he only says that the departure is inevitable, and that it’s incumbent on the opposition to counter any infighting among the elite, and to allow Putin to leave peacefully.

As for the global picture, Russian commentators have been focusing on recent trends in European politics – and their prevailing opinion seems to be that the [new generation of Western leaders is friendly](#) to Putin. They cite French presidential primary victory of François Fillon, who wants to end anti-Russian sanctions; the rise of Austrian right-wing politician Norbert Hofer, who also decries the sanctions; not to mention the recent victories of pro-Russian presidents in Bulgaria and Moldova. What’s more, European Commission head Jean-Claude Juncker said (as quoted by SCF journalist Peter Korzun) that he “would like to have discussions on a level footing with Russia.” Even commentator Andrei Kolesnikov, whom we can generally depend upon to cut his president down to size, acknowledges: “Now, [Putin] is a global leader in his own right. And this image has been bought by the West: Putin is successfully peddling fear in the West and threats domestically. And now he is king of the hill.” Of course, Kolesnikov adds with a dash of sarcasm, if Western countries (including the US, under the [presidency of Donald Trump](#)) become Russia’s friends, how will Putin keep up the “besieged fortress” mentality that has so effectively mobilized domestic support?

Besides this hypothetical worry, the only thing raining on Putin’s victory parade lately is [Turkey](#). After months of largely friendly cooperation with Moscow in Syria, Turkish President Erdogan came out with an unexpected official statement (as quoted by RIA Novosti): “We are there to restore justice and end the cruel reign of tyrant [Bashar] Assad, who is carrying out a policy of state terrorism in the country.” This remark, coupled with a series of attacks on Turkish forces in Syria by unidentified jets, seemed to land Putin (a staunch Assad supporter) in an awkward position. Granted, as Viktor Nadein-Rayevsky explains in an RBC article, Turkey cannot afford to alienate Russia, since Europe is growing increasingly opposed to [Ankara’s accession to the EU](#). The Russian media jumped in to give their president extra support by covering a pair of phone conversations between Putin and Erdogan shortly after the air attacks. The headline to Vladimir Mukhin’s article on this topic in Nezavisimaya gazeta reads: “Putin Saves Damascus and Ankara from Large-Scale War.” So even in this troubled area, Vladimir Vladimirovich has come out smelling like a rose.

Laurence Bogoslaw,
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