Kremlin Unleashes Massive Government Reshuffle; Security Agencies Step Up Clan War; Donald Trump – Is He a Putin Agent or Unwitting Kremlin Toady?

Things got a little topsy-turvy in Russian government and security circles this week as the Kremlin launched another round of sweeping personnel changes. The reshuffle saw many “old guard” governors and officials sacked and replaced with younger, mid-level bureaucrats. RBC suggests that Putin is giving his administration a face-lift ahead of the 2018 presidential election. The president is getting rid of ineffective administrators, but since in many cases they have deep-seated ties to him, and because the unwritten rule is that loyalists get an “honorary retirement,” the result is indeed very much a game of musical chairs, with cushy jobs for the officials who have fallen out of favor. The upshot is that more governors are former security officials. Mikhail Komin writes that these “general governors” will rule with an iron fist: “Their appointment means that the time of consolidation through negotiation is over; it is now time for consolidation through intimidation.” The new policy, Komin says, will be one of managed chaos, designed to instill fear and anxiety among the elite in order to keep them in line. The ultimate goal is to purge politically unreliable officials from all levels of government.

A similar “purge” is taking the form of an “anticorruption campaign” in the security agencies. This week, the FSB arrested numerous Russian Investigative Committee employees on corruption charges, and the Federal Customs Service chief was arrested on bribery charges. The splashy arrests were part of what some observers consider an interclan war among Russia’s many security agencies. What makes the latest spate of arrests unique is that they are playing out in front of TV cameras. The flustered FCS head was shown with shoe boxes full of cash in a scene deliberately intended to publicly humiliate him.

This clan war is Russia’s version of “checks and balances,” writes Yekaterina Shulman. Not only does it preclude a Turkey-style coup, but it minimizes the need for Putin to issue explicit orders: “What we think of as the Kremlin is surrounded by bureaucratic clans of varying degrees of proximity [to the president], and each one is trying to guess what the big bosses are thinking and act accordingly.” In other words, much of the flurry of bureaucratic and law-enforcement activity in Russia is driven by mid-level officials’ perceptions of Putin’s agenda. They are trying to climb the ranks and curry favor with the big man himself by doing what they perceive to be his bidding.

US media outlets this week are having a field day suggesting that this is just what US Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is doing – willingly or unwittingly. They are coming up with all sorts of evidence connecting Trump to the Russian president – even going so far as labeling him “Putin’s puppet” – on account of his supposed business ties with Russia, his pro-Russian policy proposals and the Russian contacts of some of his aides. A recent breach of the Democratic National Committee e-mail servers has also been billed as the work of Russian hackers, working to discredit the Democrats and tilt the election in Trump’s favor. Does this mean Russia and Trump are working together? A preposterous notion, says Vladimir Frolov. There is no way Trump was in on the e-mail hack, because he would not be privy to a top-secret Russian intelligence mission. Does this mean the Kremlin is rooting for Trump? Not necessarily. According to the analyst, the Kremlin is giving Trump good press coverage simply because he says positive things about Putin, and his agenda would directly and indirectly help Russia. But Moscow also realizes Trump is a wild card who could trigger global instability. So there you have it: He isn’t Russia’s “trump” card – we think. Something tells me this conspiracy theory won’t die quickly.

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