

# Letter From the Editors: March 27-April 2, 2017

**Irate Putin Remonstrates; Europe's Embattled Far Right Commiserates; Fed Up Russian, Belarussian Citizenry Demonstrates.**

Putin is sick and tired of being portrayed in the West as a bad boy and accused of foul play in last year's US presidential election. He made that abundantly clear at the March 30 Arctic Forum, where he called the endless accusations against Russia groundless and expressed hope that Russian-US relations would normalize as soon as possible.

Columnist Dmitry Minin says it is US Democrats who are pushing the Russian election interference allegations with a McCarthy-like vengeance, but ultimately to their own detriment. And, he says, the Republicans had better not succumb to the "myth of Russians' almost intrinsic hostility to Americans or the unrelenting threat to America's security supposedly emanating from Moscow," if they know what is good for them.

But the Russian witch hunt in US press and political circles shows no signs of abating, and Trump himself is showing more ambivalence – to put it mildly – toward the Putin regime. Be that as it may, Putin is still very much the darling of some European conservatives who are rallying behind him and what he stands for, ahead of forthcoming European national leadership elections. Many right-wing party leaders think Putin is getting too much of a bad rap from their leftist colleagues. NG writes: "Apparently, he is the embodiment of a strong leader who protects his country's interests, opposes illegal immigration, supports traditional values and morals, and finally, fights liberalism."

At the Arctic Forum, CNBC journalist Geoff Cutmore pressed Putin on Russia's human rights record – in particular, the detention of demonstrators. In response, Putin harped about Western double standards. Russia has quite a bit of experience dealing with protests. In fact, the weekend before the Arctic Forum, thousands of people took to the streets all across Russia to protest official corruption. The rallies seem to have caught the attention of Russian authorities. Several ranking Russian politicians proposed opening a corruption investigation into Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the main object of protesters' wrath.

The Russian authorities were seemingly nonplussed by the unauthorized rallies and chose to respond somewhat mildly, writes Tatyana Stanovaya: "In the past, the Kremlin referred to protesters as the fifth column and US State Department agents; now, all of a sudden, it has started calling them proactive citizens with whom the government should engage in dialogue." The upcoming Russian presidential election may be prompting the authorities to tread lightly and take a softer approach to protests, but this is only a tactical maneuver and a PR stunt, Stanovaya warns.

On the same weekend as the anticorruption protests in Russia, authorities in Belarus were confronting nationwide antigovernment protests of their own, and the official response there was much less ambiguous. After weeks of rising tension in over a number of unpopular government decisions, the Belarussian authorities finally came down hard on protesters who were planning to use the annual Freedom Day celebration to protest their current lack of freedoms. The police response was quick and massive. The rally organizers were arrested days ahead of the rally, and downtown Minsk was cordoned off so that protesters could not gather at the rally location and march down Independence Prospect as they had planned. And activists at the Vyasna human rights center were temporarily detained so that they could not witness the detentions of protesters in downtown Minsk.

Columnist Irina Khalip writes that Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenko is at the end of his rope, and predicts Belarussian citizens are going to keep on protesting. Lukashenko, who had become somewhat less of a pariah to the West of late, might soon be redonning (or pulling down tighter) the hat of a dictator – but perhaps no longer as the last one in Europe. Depends on who you might ask.

Matthew Larson,  
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