

# Letter From the Editors: May 1-14, 2017

## [The Art of the Possible: Can Russia, Turkey, Iran and America Play Nice in the Peacemaking Game?](#)

In this Digest's first feature, military analyst Andrei Akulov exclaims with jubilation: "What seemed to be unbelievable has finally happened! A pipe dream has come true! For the first time in six years since the Syrian conflict began, light is visible at the end of the tunnel. . . . On May 4, Russia, Turkey, and Iran signed a memorandum calling for the establishment of safe zones in Syria during peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan." These zones are located in Idlib and Homs Provinces, the Damascus suburb of East Ghouta, and the southern part of the country. They will be patrolled by military forces of the three guarantor states and others; and checkpoints around them will be guarded by rebel soldiers and government troops.

Akulov's reaction may seem a tad hyperbolic: After all, the Syrian settlement process has seen several ceasefire plans, including one brokered in the same city, Astana, in January. But there are indeed significant differences this time around. For one, representatives from both the Syrian government and opposition groups were closely involved in negotiations. What's more, for the first time, an American official was present: Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Stuart Jones.

Although Washington officially endorsed the plan before, during and after its preparation, it still raised questions in some quarters. For example, several days after the memorandum was signed, Defense Secretary James Mattis fired off a series of questions at a press gathering in Copenhagen: "Who is going to be ensuring [that the zones] are safe? Who is signing up for it? Who is specifically to be kept out of them?"

Yevgeny Shestakov surmises that the Trump administration is nervous about being left out of the game. His sources report that the Syria plan was a key part of the agenda when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov: The Russian diplomat told his American counterpart about provisions that are not spelled out in the Astana memorandum.

Vladimir Frolov portrays Lavrov's trip to Washington – which also included a meeting with Donald Trump – as part of a series of impressive-looking Russian diplomatic encounters. For example, on the other side of the Atlantic, Vladimir Putin recently received visits from Angela Merkel and Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Sochi; and he is soon to host Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian National Authority head Mahmoud Abbas in Moscow.

After that may come Putin's first face-to-face meeting with Trump at the G-20 summit in Italy. Frolov points out that Moscow has a fine line to walk between pleasing Putin's electorate and weathering some rough winds from the West. These include Germany's toughened line on the Ukraine conflict, widespread accusations of domestic human rights violations, and the US's criticism of Russia's policies toward the Taliban, nuclear arms and more. To this list we should Emmanuel Macron's recent victory in the French presidential election: The persistent negative coverage of the young populist in the Kremlin-supported press, coupled with a credible report of Russian hackers trying to interfere with Macron's campaign, have not made Putin any new friends in Paris.

Can Putin wrest some kind of victory from his upcoming meeting with Trump, while still giving the US leader some "tweetable deliverables" for his own constituents? Frolov predicts that Trump's idea of "a 'big deal' may be replaced by agreements on certain topics where Moscow could, without much damage to itself, abandon its propaganda narrative and discreetly shift its position toward cooperation with the US." An overly optimistic possibility? Well, as Otto von Bismarck famously said, "Politics is the art of the possible." After the notable level of multilateral cooperation in Astana this week, anything seems possible.

Laurence Bogoslaw,  
Copy Editor

## **THE CURRENT DIGEST** OF THE RUSSIAN PRESS

*A Publication of East View Information Services  
Founded in 1949 – Published Weekly  
Leo Gruliow, Founder*

*Managing Editor: Xenia Grushetsky  
Senior Editor: Olga Litvinova (Consulting)  
Copy Editor: Laurence Bogoslaw  
Copy Editor: Matthew Larson  
Publishing Coordinator: Ana K. Niedermaier*

### **Current 2017 prices (subject to change without notice):**

*Institutions:*  
Print \$2,620 Online \$2,540 Print+Online \$2,830

*Individual - US:*  
Print \$210 Online \$205 Print+Online \$245

*Individual - non-US:*  
Print \$290 Online \$205 Print+Online \$325

**The Current Digest of the Russian Press** was founded by the American Council of Learned Societies and the Social Science Research Council in 1949, under the name of The Current Digest of the Soviet Press. The journal has been published weekly since that time.

The Digest's mission is to provide the reader with a broad picture of the news presented to the Russian public, be it domestic, international or related to other post-Soviet states.

**Copying or use of these materials in creating other works without the express written permission of East View Information Services is prohibited.**

*Business Office:* East View Information Services, Inc., 10601 Wayzata Blvd, Minnetonka, MN 55305-1515 USA. Phone: (952) 252-1201, (800) 477-1005. Fax: (952) 252-1202, (800) 800-3839. E-mail: periodicals@eastview.com.

**The Current Digest of the Russian Press** is published weekly, except biweekly first two weeks January and last two weeks December, for \$2,620 per year by East View Information Services, Inc., 10601 Wayzata Blvd, Minnetonka, MN 55305. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Current Digest of the Russian Press, c/o East View Information Services, Inc., 10601 Wayzata Blvd, Minnetonka, MN 55305.

ISSN 2159-3612 (print) ISSN 2159-3639 (online)

**Periodicals postage paid at Hopkins, MN, and at additional mailing offices.**

[www.eastviewpress.com](http://www.eastviewpress.com)