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A Grudge Against the World

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Prominent patriot and State Duma Deputy Andrei Isayev and his aide were kicked off a plane last week for drunken shenanigans. But because the incident occurred on Russian territory, the authorities took no punitive action other than forcing Isayev to give up his symbolic post as United Russia deputy secretary.

However, when Russian diplomat to The Hague, Dmitry Borodin, got equally drunk, he landed in a Dutch jail. It all started when Borodin's drunken wife smashed four cars just outside their home in the Netherlands. When police arrived on the scene, neighbors raised concerns about

the couple's treatment of their children. Investigating further, the police encountered the disheveled and drunken Borodin. He raised such a ruckus that his young children appeared, causing the police officers to become concerned for the minors' safety.

Because this incident occurred on Dutch soil and not onboard a domestic Aeroflot flight, President Vladimir Putin personally demanded "apologies and punishment of those responsible."

The psychological motive behind Moscow's behavior is clear: the Netherlands has sued Russia for arresting Greenpeace activists, including two Dutch nationals, and Kremlin officials do not being on the defensive. They prefer to cast themselves as victims of unjust persecution. Such behavior is characteristic of a hysterical housewife who forgot to turn off the iron and accidentally set fire to the apartment. When her husband comes home she yells, "You jerk, can't you iron your own shirts?! This is all because of you!"

It is this attitude that I find most upsetting in the legumes-carrots-sour cream wars that Russia perpetually carries on with the outside world.

Moscow is either locked in a gas war with Kiev, bickering with Minsk over sour cream, finding fault with Norwegian salmon or raising red flags over imports of U.S. chicken. Not even a full month had passed since Russia banned Ukrainian imports before a similar spat erupted with Lithuania.

The underlying causes behind these altercations are frustratingly similar. Putin is not so much trying to resurrect the Soviet Union as he is trying to give his friends control over the industries and economies of neighboring countries. When he is frustrated in these attempts, he becomes deeply offended.

For example, the feud between Putin and Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych boils down to the fact that Kremlin cronies seriously expected to be able to buy up choice Ukrainian businesses after Yanukovych came to power, but instead, Yanukovych began selling everything to his own friends.

As for Lithuania, the Kremlin is irritated over that country's lawsuit against Gazprom. If Vilnius wins, Gazprom risks having to relinquish control over the Lithuanian gas transportation system and pay millions of dollars in compensation for inflated rates.

That lawsuit is a good example of the rule that if Putin's foreign policy is based on enriching his closest friends at the expense of others — calling it the "restoration of Russia's influence" — the results will inevitably backfire on him. Not only will their pockets go empty, but Russia's influence will collapse. Such wars over sour cream and chicken legs are not only immoral, they are ineffective.

There is no better way to lose all influence over a neighbor than to repeatedly behave in an unpredictable, rude and petty manner. And there is no better way to prove that it does not pay to buy gas from Gazprom than to show the world what happens to a client that challenges its monopolistic excesses.

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