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Weekly Wrap: Leopards, Bribes and Underpants

By Unfair Observer

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So it looks like there will soon be a war over football. Soon after FIFA boss Sepp Blatter — whom Putin praised like a firstborn son — stepped down amid corruption allegations, putting the 2018 World Cup in Russia at risk, the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine launched a new offensive.

At the very least, this will distract everyone from ongoing investigations into FIFA; at worst, if Russia does lose the hosting rights, expect a full-scale war with the EU (but not the U.S., they can fight back).

Stay tuned for this in the coming weeks. Meanwhile in Russia, a wild hunt for all sorts of things is sweeping the land.

The Witch Hunt

The EU and Russia are locked in a sanctions row again. The Russian envoy to the EU Vladimir

Chizhov and his delegation were banned from the European Parliament because Moscow banned dozens of Eurobureaucrats from Russia.

The same Eurobureaucrats had earlier banned dozens of Russian bureaucrats from entering Europe. Sanctions against sanctions against sanctions — very postmodern.

But the angst is as fresh as ever: Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova — blessed with all the tact and diplomacy of a suburban teenager's bulldog — has accused Europe of a "witch-hunt" against Russian diplomats, possibly (her words, not mine) to be followed by burnings at the stake in Brussels.

Just as Zakharova was castigating the evil Europeans, a bunch of angry crowbar- and power tool-wielding Chechens destroyed the office of an anti-torture group in Grozny.

Rights defenders fled through a window, while police made themselves scarce.

Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov said the activists "provoked" the attack. But doubts linger, given how busy he and his minions have been lately, vilifying other rights activists who reported on him allegedly taxing the entire population of Chechnya to support his lavish lifestyle.

So you see, it's not double standards because some witches are witchier than others. Apparently.

Or maybe the Foreign Ministry just doesn't know what's happening inside Russia's borders — no time for that when stakes are at stake.

The Underpants Decree

President Vladimir Putin issued a decree that bans top officials from accepting gifts. Pens, medals and flowers are exempted; the rest must be handed over to the Kremlin.

Officials may then buy out their present, and if they don't, the Kremlin administration gets to keep it. Interestingly, that's not the first decree of this kind: last year, Putin banned officials from accepting gifts worth more than 3,000 rubles ($100 then, $50 now).

The pens leave an interesting loophole — nicer stationery can cost up to $1 million, potentially creating a new informal currency for bribes. But, of course, Putin only wanted to save potential bribe-givers time, sparing them from the futile effort of trying to buy off Russia's squeaky-clean civil servants.

But more puzzling is the fact that the decree was needed at all.

If you are a squeaky-clean state servant and someone offers you a lump sum, or an expensive pen, or a herd of goats — do you really need your president to tell you not to take it?

Should it not be as obvious as the need to shower once a day or put on underpants in the morning? And does that mean we can expect shower and underpants decrees soon?

Or maybe there is corruption in Russia, and now that Putin has issued a decree, it will stop.

Wild Thing

Meanwhile in Moscow, two young leopards were caught in the street. Yes, in Moscow. Yes, leopards. The felines were living in an apartment, but, being young cats, felt like exploring and dashed for the door.

"I opened my car, and the leopard jumped right in," said a witness, describing the harrowing experience (she ran away).

The cats were eventually disabled by a tasty chicken. Police are looking into what the hell happened.

Russia bans a lot of things. Twerking can get you sent to prison, and so can the "share" button on your social networks; death metal is banned, questions about history are anathema, and don't get me started on the evils of rights activism.

But you know what? It is all useless as long as people keep leopards in their apartments.

All those caveman conservatives looking for stuff to ban should just resign after this news, and possibly get a leopard — because no matter how hard they try, life in Russia remains too vibrant, unpredictable and plain crazy to be contained by the paper chains that the bureaucrats are putting on it.

I could say more, but I've got to go feed my leopards.

Unfair Observer is the pen name of a Russian journalist that The Moscow Times has invited to observe the most brain-dead weekly developments in Russia.

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