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Duma Recess Won't Stop Russia's Absurdity (Op-Ed)

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Humorists sarcastically noted that the State Duma's summer recess would put a pause in the adoption of strange, mostly prohibitive laws. But they missed the fact that there are others equally devoid of common sense and who have not gone on summer break.

That pause of uncertainty in Russian politics actually began back in spring when the conflict in Ukraine went on hold. The authorities' conflicting statements leave the impression that they are torn between mobilizing for war and international isolation and the fragile hope that they can at least partially return to business as usual with the West in the foreseeable future.

True, neither course will free leaders from having to extricate the economy from the current crisis. But how is that possible? It seems as if they are all looking for some sort of coveted envelope with the words "Open in case of emergency" written on it and containing a fail-safe rescue plan — but that the envelope was either lost or else stolen by traitors.

Of course, this pause cannot last long. For example, a recent meeting of the Security Council

made recommendations that might soon become reality. At that session, President Vladimir Putin said that the Western sanctions will remain in place a long time and that Moscow must develop large-scale countermeasures. Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev went so far as to say that the sanctions were intended to achieve regime change in Russia.

Of course, such measures must be more serious than simply creating unfavorable conditions for the Finns to purchase Russian timber in response to that country's refusal to grant a visa to Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin. At the same time, the "Naryshkin incident" clearly shows that the confrontation between the West and Russia is reaching new heights and that common sense is becoming increasingly scarce.

For starters, the fact that the West has applied personal sanctions against Naryshkin does not legally obligate the Finns to deny him a visa to attend the anniversary session of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. That would be like refusing a delegation from Iran, a country under U.S. sanctions, from attending a session of the United Nations.

In fact, if I am not mistaken, Naryshkin already visited France while the subject of Western sanctions. Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergei Ivanov also headed a Russian delegation to a memorial service at Auschwitz in Poland. But apparently now opponents of the Kremlin in the West have given the signal to step up the pressure on Moscow because the previous approach did not produce the desired results.

That is in line with rumors that Western leaders have given the Kremlin, and Putin personally, yet another "final" ultimatum that it is time to end the Novorossia venture and pull out of Ukraine. Pro-Russian militias left Shirokino some days ago, an area that the so-called "Normandy Four" group of countries had agreed back in May should become a demilitarized zone.

On the other hand, there are rumors suggesting the exact opposite, that the situation in eastern and southern Ukraine will soon heat up again. Moscow's former dialogue with NATO and the United States has now deteriorated into a gradually intensifying squabble, one that threatens to strain nerves even further as Washington deploys heavy military equipment in Eastern Europe and mulls the possibility of deploying nuclear missiles in Europe as well.

Each belligerent decision or statement triggers more in retaliation and a deepening of the general atmosphere of absurdity. And it is in this context that some have claimed — in jest or in earnest, it is difficult to say — that Finland was granted its independence by an "illegal government." This is a reference to the fact that when Vladimir Ilyich Lenin granted Finland independence on Dec. 6, 1917, the Bolshevik government was not yet officially recognized by any other country.

And apparently lacking more pressing matters that might deserve their attention, State Duma deputies have submitted an inquiry to the Prosecutor General's Office concerning the legality of the Baltic states' withdrawal from the Soviet Union. The Russian parliament has also ruled that former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev acted illegally in transferring Crimea to Ukraine in 1954.

Former head of the Russian delegation to PACE and current senator Konstantin Kosachev and his colleagues have been compiling a list of potentially "undesirable organizations" —

also referred to as a "patriotic stop-list."

This is not directed against nongovernmental organizations that are already regulated through the roof, and that lawmakers might now forbid from receiving any foreign financing whatsoever. Instead, because this "stop-list" will not carry any legal force, it is probably meant to publicly persecute the people it names.

At the same time, and for some reason coming as a surprise to many in this country, a "second front" has opened with Yukos shareholders laying claim to $50 billion from the Russian government. The constant threat of seizing Russian assets abroad could prove more effective at achieving the country's economic isolation than the openly declared sanctions.

Moscow might respond by seizing foreign assets in Russia, and so on. But however "logical," if not also impetuous, such a move would be, it will hardly stop the escalating cycle of recriminations.

It is time to give up on the idea that the West, using purely political means, can settle the Yukos affair in tandem with the conflict in Ukraine. Many processes set in motion by the confrontational atmosphere between Russia and the West have apparently acquired an independent momentum and are now irreversible.

Nikolai Patrushev is probably right in suggesting that the West has set its sights on "getting rid of" the Moscow regime. However, the West is not planning to operate through a few paltry NGOs that the Kremlin is tirelessly harassing. The West can pursue the same approach that led to the end of the Soviet Union — by letting the ruling regime stagger and collapse under the weight of its own problems. And those problems are likely to intensify.

It seems the most effective solution lies in reforms to the economy and public institutions — primarily the judicial system. But because the people at the helm are more focused on security issues, they will continue to cast the problem in terms they are comfortable with: as security and political issues.

In this situation, it is no wonder that leaders sometimes take actions seemingly devoid of common sense. Such are the times.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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