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Russia's Graceless Goodbye to America's First Black President

As the Kremlin turns eagerly to the Trump era, Russian pundits shower the outgoing Obama administration in racist mockery.

By Kevin Rothrock

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Kremlin Press Service

As he has done so many times throughout his 16 years in power, Vladimir Putin surprised the world on Friday when he decided not to respond symmetrically to the Obama administration's latest sanctions against Russia for alleged interference in the U.S. presidential election.

"We regard the recent unfriendly steps taken by the outgoing U.S. administration as provocative and aimed at further weakening the Russia-U.S. relationship," President Putin said in a statement today, announcing that the Kremlin will not expel any American diplomats in retaliation.

“It is regrettable that the Obama administration is ending its term in this manner,” Putin said. “Nevertheless, I offer my New Year greetings to President Obama and his family.”

Putin even invited the children of U.S. diplomats in Russia to attend the Kremlin’s holiday parties — free of charge.

Related article: Putin Rejects Retaliatory Sanctions in Cheeky 'New Year' Statement

On Twitter, the first reactions from many American journalists and policy experts have characterized Moscow’s response as “master trolling” and “an investment in the Trump administration.”

Whatever you think of Putin’s apparent magnanimity, however, there’s no debate that prominent figures in Russian society have been far less restrained than Putin in their comments this week about Barack Obama, whose reputation in Russia has plummeted dramatically over the last several years — especially since the Kremlin started looking forward to Donald Trump in the White House.

On Friday, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev tweeted about how “sad“ it is that the Obama administration, which began with an effort to rebuild ties with Moscow, has succumbed to “anti-Russian death throes.”

Hours after the White House announced the new sanctions on Thursday, the often colorful official Twitter account belonging to Russia’s embassy in Great Britain shared a photo of a duckling with the word “LAME” superimposed, declaring, “As everybody including the American people, [we] will be glad to see the last of this hapless administration.”

Embed:

> President Obama expels 35 ⊠⊠ diplomats in Cold War deja vu. As everybody, incl ⊠⊠ people, will be glad to see the last of this hapless Adm. pic.twitter.com/mleqA16H8D
>
> — Russian Embassy, UK (@RussianEmbassy) December 29, 2016

Outside the government, prominent Russians have done more than just belittle President Obama, sometimes hurling brazenly racist insults at America’s first black president.

Just last weekend, Dmitry Kiselyov, the Kremlin’s so-called “chief propagandist,” poked fun at the color of Barack Obama’s skin, airing a segment titled “The Unlucky Streak,” or literally “The Black Term,” broadcasting a portrait of a surly-looking Obama turning from a podium.

In November, the same television show aired and later deleted another racist joke about the president. In the original broadcast, Kiselyov described Obama’s Nov. 10 meeting with President-elect Donald Trump at the White House, saying, “Obama is cheeky these days, if

not unceremonious. It started last week, when Trump paid his first visit to the White House. [...] There, Trump behaved like an English lord, while Obama was throwing his arms about as if he was in the jungle," the anchor said.

Related article: Russian Propaganda Edits Out Racist Comment About Obama

Kiselyov later claimed he never intended to mock Obama's race, but other pundits in Russia have showed no such inhibitions, following the White House's decision on Thursday to eject dozens of Russian diplomats and their families.

On Friday, the pro-Kremlin tabloid Life published an article by radio host and columnist Mikhail Sakhnazarov, titled "Slamming the Door on the Year of the Monkey," where he declared, "I hope I never again have to write about the weakest president in the history of the United States."

Russian tabloids aren't alone when they make jokes about Obama and the Chinese zodiac. Maria Katasonova, a right-wing youth leader and an aide in the State Duma, tweeted, "The Year of the Monkey is coming to an end. The monkey is angry and has a final shit."

Writing in his blog on Thursday, Russian journalist Maxim Sokolov mused similarly about the supposed failings of dark-skinned officials. "After the feats of this lame duck," he wrote, "I've been thinking about which of the high-ranking black politicians proved to be any good. The only one I could remember was Liza Condomovna [Condoleezza Rice]. Yeah, she was the enemy, but as an enemy she was strong and dignified. All the others, unfortunately, have fallen into the same category that we would have called 'natskadr' [token non-whites] in the U.S.S.R."

Others have embraced racist terms even more openly. Russian writer and blogger Eduard Bagirov, who once helped beat up a GQ columnist in the street, tweeted on Thursday, "I think in this life we won't again see a negro in the U.S. presidency. The offended, insecure nigger — it's just unpleasant. For everybody."

When Twitter users responded to Bagirov's tweet, calling him a "fascist scumbag," he answered with a small lecture on Russian vocabulary, ignoring the fact that he explicitly used the word "nigger," not just the more common Russian word "negro" (which is generally considered less offensive and archaic than it has become in America):

Embed:

> Тот факт, что в США запрещено слово негр, не отменяет того, что последние 8 лет там рулил негр. Обычный негр. Негр. Негр, б****. Негр. Негр.
>
> — Эдуард Багиров (@EduardBagirov) December 30, 2016

“That the word ‘negro’ is forbidden in the U.S. doesn’t change the fact that a negro has ruled that country for the past eight years. A typical negro. A negro. A negro, shit. A negro. A negro.”

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