The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

'Let God Judge Obama'

Russia's top diplomat still can't shut up about America's ex-president

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March 30, 2017



AP Photo / Alexander Zemlianichenko

From Syria to Ukraine to a hotly contested intrusion in America, 2016 saw Russia's foreign policy dominate world news headlines.

With Donald Trump now firmly in place at the Oval Office, experts and politicians across the globe are speculating about what the White House can expect over the next year from the Kremlin's ever assertive world view.

One man with answers is Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In an eight-page interview to America's National Interest magazine on Wednesday, Lavrov looked forward and backward in time, discussing Russia's plans on the world stage and rehashing some of Moscow's favorite damning accusations against former President Barack Obama.

The Moscow Times highlights some of the choicest remarks on Syria, alleged election meddling, and Russia's rumored "new Cold War."

'The New Cold War'

Vladimir Putin has long spoken of his wish to build new ties with U.S. President Donald Trump, and Lavrov was also quick to downplay speculation about a "Second Cold War" breaking out between the two world powers.

“Ideologically, we’re not different; we’re not apart,” Lavrov said. “Yes, there are nuances in how the countries in the West and Russia and its neighbors are run. But all in all the basis is democracy.”

Aside from elections and a market economy, Lavrov also emphasized that common threats make it impossible for the Cold War to return.

“We have much clearer common threats, like terrorism, like chaos in the Middle East, like the threat of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction,” he said. “This was never the case during the Cold War days.”

Election Meddling

With elections in France and Germany rapidly approaching, Lavrov also dismissed allegations that the Kremlin meddles in politics abroad.

“There is no proof that Russia was in any way involved either in the United States, or in Germany, or in France, or in the United Kingdom,” he said,
also dismissing the concerns
of Swedish officials, who recently announced that they also fear Kremlin interference. “[It's] childish, frankly speaking,” Lavrov said. “You either put some facts on the table or you try to avoid any statements that embarrass you.”

The diplomat did admit that the Kremlin could be seen as “meddling” in Crimea and Ukraine. “Yes, I’m sure you can say it about Ukraine, you can say it about Crimea,” he said. “But for this you have really to get into the substance of what transpired there.”

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When attention turned to the annexed Crimean peninsula, Russia's top diplomat jumped at the chance to give the Kremlin's own unique view of the situation.

“[Ukrainian political party the Right Sector] said that Russians have nothing to do in Crimea, because Russians would never honor the heroes of Ukraine, like Bandera and Shukhevych, who were collaborating with Nazis,” he said.

“These kinds of statements led people in eastern Ukraine to say, ‘Guys, you did something unconstitutional [during the Maidan Revolution], and we don’t believe this is good for us, so leave us alone, and let us understand what is going on in Kiev, but we don’t

want any of your new ideas to be imposed on us.'

"'We want to use our language. We want to celebrate our holidays, and honor our heroes.' These eastern republics never attacked anyone. The government announced the antiterrorist campaign in the east, and they moved the regular army and the so-called voluntary battalions in the east of Ukraine."

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"Sorry for getting into all these details," Lavrov said, "but people tend to forget, because they're being brainwashed every day with very simple phrases like 'Russia is the aggressor in Ukraine,' 'the annexation of Crimea,' and so on and so forth. Instead of tiring out your tongues, people should go there. Those who go to Crimea — and see for themselves how the people there are living — understand that all these hysterical voices about violations of human rights and discrimination against Crimean Tatars are a lie."

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On the Minsk Agreements

Lavrov also complained about a lack of progress in implementing the Minsk Agreements, laying blame directly on Kiev.

"I believe the Ukrainian government and President Poroshenko personally want [the agreement] dead. They want it dead in a way that would allow them to blame Russia and the people in the east of Ukraine.

"The fact is that every day [Poroshenko] is in contact with President Vladimir Putin. They talk over the phone sometimes. My impression is that he tries to be constructive, to find ways to come back to the Minsk implementation. But the next day he comes back to Kiev or goes abroad, and publicly says things that are absolutely aggressive and totally unfair.

" *"[The Obama administration] was obsessed with its exceptionality, with its leadership."*"

On Post-Soviet Influence

Lavrov's opinion about Russian influence over the modern-day nations that make up the former USSR was markedly less clear.

He criticized former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for suggesting that Russia wished to "re-Sovietize the former Soviet space," while accusing the United States of harboring "the

obvious desire to take over this geopolitical space around Russia without even caring what Moscow might think."

"This was the reason for the crisis in Ukraine," he said, "when the United States and European Union bluntly told the Ukrainians: either you are with us, or you are with Russia against us. And the very fragile Ukrainian state couldn't sustain this kind of pressure."

According to Lavrov, Barack Obama's policy in Ukraine boiled down to a "superiority complex."

"[The Obama administration] was obsessed with its exceptionality, with its leadership," he said.

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On Syria

Disappointingly, Russia's foreign minister gave few hints about the Kremlin's future policy in Syria. He was also reluctant to talk about Russia's plans for the reconquered city of Aleppo. Instead, Lavrov credited Russia with pushing the United States to fight back against the Islamic State (a terrorist organization banned in Russia), and took some pleasure highlighting the Obama administration's failures in the region.

"One year into the creation of this coalition, it was very sporadically using the air force to hit some IS positions. They never touched the caravans that were smuggling oil from Syria to Turkey and, in general, they were not really very active. But when we started working there, the U.S.-led coalition became much more active," he said. "I don't want to analyze the reason for this," he added mysteriously.

" *"Obama was motivated by the desire to have some revenge on Russia ... But let God judge him."*"

Lavrov also praised his old negotiating partner, former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, for reaching a military cooperation deal with Moscow, and then promptly blamed President Obama for scrapping the agreement.

"Obama was motivated by the desire to have some revenge against Russia, for whatever reason and for whatever situation, rather than to capitalize on the deal reached between John Kerry and us, to make the war against terror much more efficient in Syria," Lavrov said. "But let God judge him."

The diplomat confirmed that the Russian Army's general staff chief has already met twice with his U.S counterpart, but refused to give more details.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/03/30/lavrov-the-highlights-a57587