



Russia Policy Monitor 2608

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SURKOV'S NEW BIG IDEA...

Few people have been more influential in the development and consolidation of Vladimir Putin's grip on power than Vladislav Surkov. Since 2000, the former businessman has played an outsized role in helping Russia's president formulate his vision of the world – and of Russia's neo-imperial destiny. Surkov has helped to advance this vision through a succession of high-profile roles, including that of deputy chief of the Russian Presidential Administration (a position he held from 1999 to 2011) and of Deputy Prime Minister (from 2011 to 2013). Over the past decade, Surkov has receded from public view, serving as a personal advisor to Putin until reportedly falling out of favor over the past couple of years. Now, the man once known as the "gray cardinal" of the Kremlin has resurfaced with a new political concept – one that is sure to be at odds with official Russian governmental thinking.

In a late-September article for the website Actual Comments, Surkov advocated the establishment of a new strategic paradigm: that of the "Great North." "Once upon a time, the concept of 'global North' was actually synonymous with 'West' and due to obvious duplication did not take root," he has written. "Now the contours of the Great North, although barely visible, appear and have a completely different meaning." In Surkov's vision, it consists of Russia, the United States, and Europe, "which form a common sociocultural space" and a "northern geopolitical cluster." Such a convergence, Surkov admits, is hard to imagine at present. However, he posits, its logic is compelling, and eventual "integration" can be counted on. Moreover, according to Surkov, this new grouping will elevate Russia's status, making it a "soldier of the global triumvirate." (Actual Comments, September 27, 2023)

...AND THE KREMLIN RESPONSE

Predictably, Surkov's new global theory has failed to find favor in the Kremlin, where opposition to the United States and Europe is now seen as an intrinsic part of the country's foreign policy trajectory. So much so, in fact, that it was announced in mid-October that Moscow police had opened an investigation into Surkov's treatise, to check its compliance with Russian legislation. In response to a request from unnamed parties to check Surkov's article on the "Birth of the North" for compliance with the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation, authorities are now investigating it "for the presence or absence of a crime." (Itar-TASS, October 17, 2023)

RUSSIAN HACKERS TARGET THE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

The email accounts of more than 600,000 U.S. federal employees were targeted earlier this year by a Russian-speaking criminal group, a new Freedom of Information Act request has revealed. According to a report from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), the group, known as CLoP, targeted employees at the U.S. Justice and Defense departments in particular. The breach reportedly occurred through vulnerabilities in the file-transfer system MOVEit, allowing the hackers to access a wide range of sensitive information. OPM has categorized this hack as a "major incident," with the most impacted individuals being Pentagon employees, including those from the Air Force, Army, Army Corps of Engineers, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Staff. (The Kyiv Independent, October 31, 2023)

BACK TO THE RED ARMY

Ongoing difficulties in its war against neighboring Ukraine are forcing Russia to abandon a key part of President Vladimir Putin's military reforms. Nearly two decades ago, Russian military planners replaced the country's antiquated Soviet-era military divisions, of approximately 10,000 men apiece, with smaller battalion-size units of between 500 and 1,000 personnel. The switch was intended to bring Russia's military in line with Western armies and make it competitive on the modern battlefield. But the past year-and-a-half of war has seen the Russian armed forces perform poorly against Ukrainian units, prompting a shift back to Soviet-era large-scale divisions. "Mobility is being sacrificed in exchange for resilience," Olesya Tkacheva of the Brussels School of Governance recently told an online event organized by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. (Business Insider, October 10, 2023)

HAMAS COURTS THE KREMLIN

In the wake of its horrific October 7th attack on Israel, Palestinian terror group Hamas is seeking international support for its "resistance" amid Israel's retaliatory offensive. A delegation from Hamas, including senior Hamas representative Mousa Abu Marzouk, visited Moscow in late October to meet with Russian officials. Among the topics reportedly discussed was the release of hostages by the group, which captured more than 200 people – including Russian citizens – during its brutal offensive, dubbed "Al Aqsa Flood."

But Moscow is seen as more than a mediator by the Palestinian militia. It is viewed as a key backer. In the wake of the delegation's visit, Hamas released a statement praising Russian President Vladimir Putin for his efforts to stop "the crimes of Israel that are supported by the West." (Reuters, October 26, 2023)