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Heading west, heading east: Impressions from Warsaw and Moscow¹

During a fortnight divided between Warsaw and Moscow, from where we have just returned, my wife and I were struck by the similarities and contrasts between the two cities. Anna is Polish, and we spent three years together in Warsaw during the communist era, returning many times since then for weeks and sometimes months. Both of us have also visited Moscow many times over the past few decades.

Both countries have legislative elections later this year that promise to be interesting, but will hardly be game changers. While there have been losers from the economic transformation in each capital, both are enjoying a relative prosperity that is quite striking after the privations of communist times. After decades of empty roads, traffic is roaring, with considerable collateral damage and terrifying effects for those, like us, who – while they still remember sardine class in public transport – once found crossing a road not too stressful. Shopping, once a time-consuming and frustrating battle against the odds, has become relatively straightforward. The abusive and contemptuous attitudes of salespeople and service personnel have

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largely disappeared. The aggressive and unhelpful attitudes that were once almost universal in public places have been replaced by courtesy, even cordiality.

Marxism–Leninism is probably beyond resuscitation in either country, though in Russia there are dismaying signs of nostalgia for Stalin. Freed at last from the inhibitions of official communist ideology, nationalism is running hot in both countries, which makes the recent tentative *rapprochement* between them all the more fragile. Religion has also been freed from those constraints, leading to a sharp rise in the visibility of Orthodoxy in Russia, though in Poland, paradoxically, there's been a noticeable decline in the Catholic Church's moral authority.

But, for all the superficial similarities, and despite the tactical warming of bilateral ties, these are two countries that, in political and civilisational terms, are headed in diametrically opposite directions. And each is trying to draw the countries that lie between them along with it. After centuries in which Russian domination was superimposed over an earlier Polish sway in much of the territory between them, a competition between Moscow and Warsaw for cultural influence in the region is on again. Warsaw tries not to be too blatant about its efforts to tug its Eastern neighbourhood towards Europe, but Moscow of course sees what's going on and deeply resents it.

For those like Anna and me, whose sympathies are Polish but who have very good Russian friends and a great love of Russian language and culture, the mutual hostility and suspicion are painful. At the interpersonal level, Russians and Poles have much in common. To my Anglo-Saxon perceptions, both are extraordinarily warm and hospitable. They are courageous and resilient, and have a strong streak of human kindness. In particular, their respective intelligentsias (in the Eastern European sense of the word) remain deeply impressive in their intellectual seriousness and civic courage.

But, despite the tentative signs of reconciliation between the two nations at the popular, intelligentsia and governmental levels since 1990, their developmental trajectories seem set to diverge further. The elections in Poland on 9 October will almost certainly see Premier Donald Tusk's centre-right Civic Platform win its third successive election victory. Its main adversary is the right-wing nationalist and

anticommunist Law and Justice Party of Jarosław Kaczyński, the surviving twin of ex-president Lech Kaczyński, who was killed with 95 other members of the Polish elite in a plane crash near the western Russian city of Smolensk in April last year.

Tusk has sought better relations with Russia, but he is even more intent on strengthening Poland's standing within the European Union and doing what he can to bring Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and even Georgia and Armenia towards European integration. If by some strange chance Jarosław Kaczyński and his party have a sudden resurgence in the polls sufficient to win government, relations between Warsaw and Moscow will take a nosedive.

Poland, which holds the presidency of the European Union for the second half of this year, has largely shed its old streak of Euroscepticism. The peasants have been won over by generous cohesion fund payouts and, despite its doubts about the secularism and sexual liberationism of Western Europe, the Church has now largely accepted the EU choice. Even Law and Justice has mellowed in its attitudes towards Brussels and its German neighbours. As Poles become more aware of the huge financial benefits of EU membership and increasingly see gaining greater influence within EU corridors of power as their primary objective, the earlier strong ties with the United States have weakened.

In Russia, meanwhile, developments in recent weeks have made it even plainer that Vladimir Putin's autocratic system is being reaffirmed domestically; and a string of characteristically aggressive statements and manoeuvres suggests a return to the assertive anti-Westernism of the later years of Putin's presidency (2000–08). During our visit, there was a press 'leak' citing government sources to the effect that Putin had made up his mind to take the presidency back from Dmitry Medvedev. As Medvedev and his followers have been responsible for most of the more liberal domestic and foreign policy pronouncements of the last three years, his departure from the presidency would be seen by most Western chanceries as a bad sign.

But, for many observers of Russian politics inside and outside Russia, the tandem political game during the period in which US–Russian relations were 'reset' has come to be seen as a bad joke anyway. Medvedev has been unable to convert virtually any of his more

resounding reformist declarations into reality. During our time in Moscow, Mikhail Khodorkovsky's business partner and fellow prisoner Platon Lebedev had his appeal for early parole contemptuously dismissed by an obscure provincial court near Arkhangelsk in northern Russia. This was despite Medvedev's having repeatedly indicated publicly that the key member of that duo, Khodorkovsky, represented 'no threat' to Russia.

An attempt to reopen the investigation into the death of Sergey Magnitsky, a lawyer working for the Western firm Hermitage Capital Management, was also recently brushed aside by the Russian Interior Ministry. Magnitsky was jailed and allegedly murdered in custody for investigating corruption by Russian officialdom affecting his Western employers. Pleas from Medvedev's presidential Human Rights Council for a thorough investigation and repeated representations by Western governments had no evident impact. While another arm of the Russian Government is reportedly opening its own enquiry into the Magnitsky case, official reactions so far (including promotions and awards for some of the officials involved) are not encouraging.

In response to pressure from the US Congress, the State Department has announced that it has placed individual sanctions on a lengthy list of the officials identified as connected with Magnitsky's mistreatment. Washington's move seems to have been an attempt to forestall legislative action in the matter by Congress, which might have endangered the 'reset'. Moscow's rubber-stamp Duma, in a move richly redolent of Soviet times, responded to the bill in Congress by threatening to legislate for counteraction against US officials.

The key figure in Hermitage Capital is William Browder, an American businessman resident in Britain, who is ironically the grandson of a former leader of the US Communist Party. For many years, he was a very big and determined investor in Russia and a strong supporter of Mr Putin. Increasingly outraged by the corruption and bureaucratic obstruction that he encountered in his business dealings, Browder attempted to expose those involved. This seems to have sealed Magnitsky's fate.

The Lebedev and Magnitsky cases typify some of the growing strains in the US–Russian relationship, which have intensified in the last few months, as Medvedev's always forlorn bid for real influence has

come up against Putin's overt re-emergence as the paramount leader. With the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for 4 December 2011 and 4 March 2012 respectively, this trend could strengthen. Though Moscow often tries to pursue better relations with European countries while enjoying Cold War-style stoushes with the United States, the Lebedev and Magnitsky cases also typify the kinds of issues that will ultimately stultify the Russian relationship with Europe, including Poland.

When we arrived in Warsaw, the main event on the Russian–Polish agenda was still the Smolensk air disaster of April 2010. The investigation of the crash by the Russian-led Intergovernmental Aviation Committee had abruptly reported last January that the blame lay entirely on the Polish side. After lengthy delays, as of late July the parallel investigation headed by Poland's Interior Minister, Jerzy Miller, was about to report its findings. The report was a hot potato both domestically and bilaterally.

Conspiracy theories have repeatedly been generated by the Law and Justice camp, which has suggested in effect that the crash was a 'second Katyn'. (The late President Kaczyński and his party had been travelling to Russia to attend a commemoration of the massacres of some 22,000 Polish officers by Stalin's NKVD secret police at Katyn Forest and other sites in 1940.) In other words, it has been darkly hinted, Moscow had in some way deliberately caused the deaths of Poland's president and many of his closest colleagues in the crash, with the complicity – never clearly explained – of Poland's government. During our visit, we encountered the latest of these conspiracy theories, which asserted that the plane had somehow been mysteriously disabled before it hit the ground – and that this proved it was all a *zamach*, an assassination operation.

The Miller report, which was finally released on 29 July, found no basis for such lurid theories. Not surprisingly, though, it did come up with plenty of evidence of sloppiness by Russian as well as Polish officials. The main emphasis was on Polish errors – and indeed its publication led swiftly to the resignation of the Polish Defence Minister, with the prospect of other high-level casualties to follow. But the Miller report's partial exoneration of the Russian side was sufficient for the Russian-controlled committee to issue an immediate rebuttal of those parts of the report that suggested any degree of Russian culpability.

The Russian committee was no doubt antagonised by the interminable and hostile discussion of the case in parts of the Polish media and among the political elite. After initially cooperating with the Poles, it had become increasingly evasive, and then brought down and is now resolutely defending a one-sided finding. This is typical of what is wrong with judicial and quasi-judicial enquiries of all sorts in Russia, which are often all too clearly subject to 'justice by telephone' (that is, political direction). Conversely, the fact that the Miller inquiry came up with what seems like a reasonably balanced assessment – an assessment that, despite intense domestic pressure, criticises Poland's role – is more in keeping with an open democracy and the rule of law. In a way, the two enquiries epitomise where the two countries currently seem headed.

As on all our visits since Poland's transition to democracy, we found Warsaw looking slightly more orderly, prosperous, contented and mainstream European than on the previous visit. Not everyone has benefited, but most people have, and Poland's strong economic progress continues, with over 4 per cent growth expected this year. Like Australia, it was one of the few Western countries to stay out of negative-growth territory during the global financial crisis. It has also had the good sense not to fast-track its mandatory entry into the eurozone. And while neither its public finances nor the present government's approach to debt are impeccable, it seems unlikely to join the growing list of EU countries directly affected by the euro debt crisis.

One of Poland's many achievements is the decline of the petty corruption that used to mark many everyday transactions. One small subset of these involved travellers, especially foreigners, at Warsaw's airport. Once known simply as Okęcie, it has now been ponderously renamed the Fryderyk Chopin Airport. It's much bigger and slicker, and the swarms of illegal or amateur taxi drivers that used to surround the airport looking for huge mark-ups have gone.

But their spirit still lingers. We took a taxi from a company recommended by our family. Although the car seemed roadworthy and the driver was pleasant and courteous, he took us on a circuitous route into another zone, which allowed him to double his fare. But it was a small enough surcharge to pay for the pleasure of staggering,

jetlagged, straight into a waiting taxi whose doors closed properly and that then ran smoothly and swiftly through the dense traffic. And while the meter was rigged, at least it had one.

There was a time when this and most other human needs had to be satisfied 'on the left-hand side' – corruptly and often expensively. In communist Poland, petty corruption was almost universal; though it was maddening, in a way it was what made life bearable and innumerable difficulties soluble. As Poles used to say: 'In Poland any problem can be fixed (*U nas nie ma nic nie do załatwienia*).'

Shopping is now a delight for any visitor who recalls the communist era. Goods are no longer rationed by queues. The network of commercial outlets for all goods and services seems adequate, where once they were as undersupplied as the goods and services themselves. The absence of an obscene excess of choice between brands is a bonus. And the rude contempt with which one was greeted at the end of the wait in the queue is also long since gone.

We stayed with family in the outer suburb of Miedzeszyn, a sleepy village during the later communist era (though, curiously, the site of a regime installation where former leader Władysław Gomułka and his wife were held in detention – separately – during Gomułka's disgrace in the 1950s) with a few urban dwellings dotted among the fields and woods and a small group of modest semi-detached units. Once a relative luxury by Communist standards, the semi-detacheds have been increasingly outclassed by huge, often fortified villas, with 'beware of the dog' signs. Gone are the picturesque, rustic wooden houses nestling among the pine trees. Gone, too, are the last of the prewar signs on the small concrete commercial premises, which have now been joined by larger, slicker competitors.

The new public politeness is well established in Miedzeszyn. In one shop I spotted a tag on the tunic of the young woman at the cash register that read, 'How can I help?' Once or twice I did things in the shop that were obviously not part of the received order, but without any anger or moral disapproval the proper method was smilingly pointed out to me. And on leaving came the phrase, 'Thank you and please come again (*Dziękujemy bardzo i uprzejmie zapraszamy jeszcze raz*)' – a little cloying, perhaps, like 'Have a good day', but a vast improvement on what used to take place.

Miedzeszyn traffic also reflects the broader transformation. Sealed roads have replaced the potholes that had endured for decades. And the once sporadic traffic is now intense on the main roads running through the suburb. Even on the side streets, one must be more vigilant. There are pedestrian crossings, but woe betide the visitor who takes them at face value. The same was true elsewhere in Warsaw, of course. And similar principles apply in Moscow, though we felt that the murderous exuberance with which the post-communist Russian nouveaux riches used to drive through pedestrian crossings may have diminished slightly.

Road fatalities in Poland currently stand at 14.7 per 100,000 people per year, and 28 per 100,000 cars. Russian fatalities are 25.2 per 100,000 people. I could find no figure for Russian fatalities per 100,000 cars, but the Polish statistics suggest that – given the roughly equivalent levels of motorisation in the two countries – the Russian figure for 100,000 cars is probably over 50. The equivalent figures for Australia, for comparison, are 5.2 per 100,000 people and 6 per 100,000 cars.

In the past, vital links in the public transport system in Poland, like in many other communist countries, were the small kiosks selling newspapers, toiletries, small toys and tickets for the chance to fight your way on and off the bus. They kept long hours, and, in a shopper's hell, they were a great boon. This time, looking for a popular newspaper one day, I went to four kiosks before I could get served. The first three had helpful signs displayed in the window that brought memories flooding back: 'Kiosk not open, try the one nearby' (there wasn't one); 'Temporarily closed' (but with no indication of when it might open); and 'Pause – receiving goods' (the proprietor could be seen through the glass walls doing something about four feet away, but after five minutes I realised that the pause might be a long one).

Public transport in Poland, always good if one was young and strong, now seems simply wonderful. The buses and trams are seldom crowded, private buses are offering better and quicker services, there is an urban train service and the beginnings of a metro, and it is all still relatively cheap and reliable. The reason for the new comfort is, of course, the fact that many passengers have bought cars. Traffic on the roads is much heavier, and *korki* (jams) are not infrequent. Tokyo it isn't, but why so many prefer their cars when public transport is such a good option is a mystery.

Warsaw's historic main drag, which extends for several kilometres from Wilanów Palace to the scrupulously restored Old and New Towns (both date back to medieval times) and Royal Palace, still looks splendid. Commercialisation is held in check and for the most part is well matched to the premises. Why some visitors call Warsaw ugly is another mystery, though it obviously wouldn't win in a competition with Cracow or Prague. The visual amenity tends to fall away quickly the further you get from the historic centre, though more striking new buildings are multiplying among the Stalinist stodge.

The people on the streets look mainstream European, with many stylish young women (as there always were, even when I first visited in the 1960s), and rather less stylish though well-to-do everybody else. Drunks and beggars seem less in evidence, which might reflect favourable underlying social trends. Poland has always been a hard-drinking country, but the statistics (always difficult in this area) seem to have improved after the Solidarity revolution of 1980 and to have held steady since.

Flower shops – flowers were once an absolute and indispensable staple for anyone visiting anyone at almost any hour – are harder to find. Another striking and ubiquitous feature of communist Poland, the gentlemen (of all ages) kissing the hands of ladies (of all ages) on greeting and parting, seems to be in decline. The polite third-person mode of address also seems to be ceding ground to the familiar second-person singular. Worshipper numbers are down and the numerous churches are now usually locked to casual visitors during ordinary hours. With communism gone, some of its most cherished social objectives seem at last to be coming within reach.

Our Polish friends and relatives had varying views about Polish politics, but we noticed a certain weariness of the topic. The endless febrile discussion of the Smolensk tragedy had exhausted the patience of many. There was also a widespread scepticism about the radical right-wing politics of the Law and Justice Party, which in government had set about radically transforming Poland's democratic institutions on the grounds that they were still dominated by a sinister establishment composed of former communists and 'collaborators'. Even Lech Wałęsa and other prominent Solidarity figures were contentiously characterised in this way by Law and Justice-controlled institutions.

The polls suggest that, as a result of their experience of Law and Justice rule in 2005–07, many Polish voters see Law and Justice as a slightly scary, even subversive party. Without necessarily feeling great enthusiasm for Civic Platform, which seems headed for a further four years in government after the October elections, they want to cast a negative vote *against* Law and Justice. Our contacts often fell into that category

Our superficial observations of Moscow at street level were similar to those of Warsaw. Much of our daily movement was in a relevantly affluent area on the architecturally charming and charmingly named Ostozhenka Street (a pre-communist name, now restored, deriving from the word for haystack), and this may have coloured our impressions. Among the many nineteenth-century buildings on the street was a recently renovated house with a classical façade where the novelist Ivan Turgenev once lived, and which is now the Turgenev Museum. A few doors further down was another mansion with a plaque on the front wall indicating that it had once been inhabited by another distinguished figure from Russian history, Kim Philby.

Near the Philby residence one already warm morning we were disturbed to see a young, well-dressed man lying in the grass by the side of the road, apparently unconscious. People were hurrying past him without paying any attention. When we lived in Warsaw we often rang the ambulance service to advise them of drunks lying in snow and in danger of freezing to death (a very common cause of death in Moscow). In summer we felt less alarmed, but there was something about the young man's appearance that worried us. We went into a pharmacy a few yards away to draw it to their attention. The chemist looked very uninterested. Like Poland, but more so, Russia has a severe alcohol problem. In recent decades it has also acquired a terrible and multi-faceted substance abuse problem, including a sinister designer drug known as *krokodil*. Pharmacists – and Russians generally – have probably become grimly blasé about it all.

Alcohol statistics are always a bit dubious but, by any standards, Russia is up there with the heaviest drinkers: by one estimate 15.7 litres of pure alcohol equivalent per capita per annum (compared to Poland's 13.25 litres). Both those estimates allow for substantial amounts of illegal booze (Russian *samogon* and Polish *bimber* are both basic words in the respective vocabularies), but that is an especially

fraught area. According to the Public Affairs Chamber of the Russian parliament, alcohol was responsible in one way or another for 500,000 deaths in Russia in 2009. Successive leaders have tried to tackle this demographic and social scourge, including the sober Putin, who sets an excellent example in this respect. But success has been elusive.

The Putin years have seen a big increase in prosperity that has primarily been fuelled by high energy prices, but with major expansion of agricultural production and consumer goods and services. Studies have shown that income differentials in Russia are high, but living standards overall have improved greatly, and poverty is much less apparent on the streets of inner Moscow than was once the case. Shopping has improved in much the same way as in Poland, and the atmosphere of mutual hostility between consumers and shop employees seems to have largely disappeared. There are more shops and service outlets and the queues are much smaller. In fact, the queues I saw didn't compare with those in typical large Australian supermarkets.

But we saw or heard about both major and minor signs of traditional Russian disorder. In one shop, for example, I noticed bottles of once fresh milk on ordinary non-refrigerated shelves, though the temperature during our stay did not fall below 20 degrees at night and 30 degrees in the middle of the day. At the same time, there were radio warnings to Moscow residents to be wary of consuming dairy products brought from shops as refrigeration in the city's transport and supply networks was said to be unable to cope with the exceptional summer heat.

Russia was still righteously maintaining its extended bans on all fruit and vegetable imports from European countries (especially those like Poland, which it wanted to punish politically), because of the much earlier German E.coli scare, which hadn't occurred in the countries still under sanction in the first place. Moscow has imposed innumerable trade boycotts on its neighbours in recent years, ostensibly on phyto-sanitary grounds, though often in fact for visibly political reasons.

We were in Moscow in the immediate aftermath of the sinking of the pleasure cruiser *Bulgaria*, in which over 100 people died, including many children; Moscow continues to be a world leader in disasters of this kind. Plane crashes are also still quite common, though a senior

Western businessman friend who travels a lot by air assured us that Aeroflot is no longer the 'Aeroflop' of legend and now has a good safety record, compared to some of its newer and smaller competitors.

Moscow's public transport is also good, in a way that is similar to Warsaw's. The Metro was much less crowded than it used to be (even allowing for the summer holiday season) but traffic on the roads is much denser and the *probki* (jams) more challenging than in Warsaw. The Metro has a much better reputation than Aeroflot, and deservedly so. But to record a trivial example of a more general problem in Russian life, at one point, for no reason, a computerised turnstile at the entrance to a Metro station identified me as an interloper with an invalid ticket (I was innocent) and sent a metal bar thudding down on my knee. An attendant, manifestly unsurprised by this turn of events, told me in a kindly second-person singular simply to bypass the turnstiles via the space he was guarding.

Medvedev has endorsed a plan for Moscow's further development in which, to relieve congestion, much of Moscow's central government business would be moved to the outer regions of an expanded capital territory. Our friends were sceptical that this would happen, illustrating among other things the widespread expectation that anything Medvedev proposed was almost bound to fall through.

People are visibly better off. The women are usually quite stylish, though at times young would-be vamps achieve an over-the-top effect of Lady Gaga proportions. The once ubiquitous babushkas in black selling sundry goods are much sparser than they once were. The new mayor of Moscow, Sergei Sobyenin, who last year replaced the corrupt long-term mayor Yury Luzhkov (and his equally corrupt wife), has conducted a blitz against informal merchandise outlets, which may have contributed to the disappearance of the babushka, but it's probably also a demographic and economic trend. As for the new mayor, he and his wife have also recently become embroiled in allegations of possible corruption.

While Putin has put the non-print media through the 'blander', some Russian papers are still worth a read and there are a couple of radio stations that are listenable. A lot of interesting books are available on cultural and even political themes. Outside television, the autocratic system relies more on selective bans and sanctions than blanket

controls in the publishing and scholarly domains. The internet is still lively, though there are ominous signs that the authorities would like to control it closely in the way that their much-respected Chinese 'strategic partners' do.

We were in Moscow for Anna to receive a prize named after the famous Russian mathematician Roland Lvovich Dobrushin. This was a gratifying but slightly unsettling award given that Anna is a linguist rather than a mathematician. Our worry was that the choice of a linguist might prove to be some sort of excruciating misunderstanding. The fact that Anna's acceptance address was scheduled as the first paper at the mathematics conference in which the Dobrushin celebrations were embedded seemed to increase the chances that questions from the audience would assume high mathematical competence.

But our anxieties were misplaced. Anna's work often deals with Russian semantics and has been widely published in Russia and in English. Her semantics paper was well received, no one wanted to ask impossible questions, the discussion was good and everyone seemed pleased with the event. The fact that a foreigner spoke fluent Russian and so obviously loved the language and understood its subtleties was enough to ensure approval. But it is probably also the case that in Russia, compared to the Anglo-Saxon world, the barrier between C.P. Snow's 'two cultures' is less rigid.

There was something slightly sad about the fact that this distinguished group of mathematicians, many of them survivors from the Soviet scientific elite, appeared to be ageing and a bit depleted. Many Russian academic stars spend a good deal of their time at foreign universities while retaining links with the profession in their home country. Young people no longer want to study science as the pathway to prestige in the way that they did in Soviet times. At the outset of the post-Soviet era, able young people typically wanted to go into business, above all to make money. Now they often tell sociological researchers that they want to join the bureaucracy to make money, reflecting the growing blight of corruption and bureaucratisation. And recently came the startling official news that, over the past three years, some 1.25 million

people had emigrated from Russia, including disproportionate numbers of the young, educated and entrepreneurial.² Opinion polls suggest many more would do so if they could.

Like the mathematicians, friends and other people we met demonstrated again the exceptional warmth and hospitality of Russian people. Smallish tables in smallish flats were covered with an impossible array of food, and people were crammed in around the table for several hours of eating, drinking and togetherness (*obshchenie*). Conversations of impressive erudition raged, usually several at once and in competition, people interrupted, contradicted and outshouted one another unceremoniously, and no one took offence. Less fluent speakers of Russian like myself were at a serious disadvantage, but again the discussants showed a remarkable tolerance.

Those we met who spoke of politics were divided sharply into those who were broadly happy with the Putinist dispensation and those who were deeply unhappy with it. The opposition remains hopelessly fragmented and the regime, in any case, uses various devices to deny its opponents access to public media or the chance to compete in elections. Whether and to what extent the opposition might be more popular in a more democratic framework is hard to judge. People who deplore Russia's rejection of a more Western course feel beleaguered, much as they did before Mikhail Gorbachev and perestroika. And polls suggest that the popularity of Putin and the ruling United Russia party, though it has fallen significantly, is still fairly high by democratic standards.

Yet, as prosperity returned after the sharp downturn during the financial crisis, Putin and the regime's ratings might have been expected to stay as high or even climb further. The fact that they haven't suggests that there is considerable resentment at the regime's large and widening democratic deficit. In particular, there are strong indications that Russians are deeply unhappy about what is perceived to be growing official corruption up to the highest levels.

2 See Simon Shuster, 'Why young entrepreneurs are fleeing Russia', *Time*, 18 Jul. 2011, content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2080414,00.html.

The very popular anti-corruption blogger, Aleksey Navalny, coined a phrase for the United Russia party that has had wide resonance: 'a party of swindlers and thieves (*partia zhulikov i vorov*)'.³ We noticed the word *vor* (thief) and its derivatives *vorovstvo* (theft) and *vorovat'* (to thief or steal) recurring in our conversations, often used with great passion. This is a concern for a regime that worries chronically about 'colour revolutions' and has certainly noted the Arab Spring. Navalny, though not an easy target for the authorities because of his strong nationalism, is now being subjected to legal harassment.

Another subject that greatly distressed many of our Russian contacts was the continuing respectability, indeed popularity, of Stalin, including among the young. Putin has done a lot to contribute to Stalin's partial rehabilitation, ensuring, for example, that a 'balanced' view of the murderous despot was mandated for school textbooks. Medvedev has struggled hard to get a new wave of de-Stalinisation launched in Russia, but to date the results, as with nearly all his projects, have been modest. One interlocutor described Russia in this context as a 'gravely ill society'. Another angrily asked us why, given Stalin's standing in Russia, and the fact that the country was now run by the KGB, which even the communist party had never permitted, so many Western governments and businessmen were tumbling over one another to deal with it as if it were a normal country. If Hitler had anything remotely like that status in Germany, he said, the world would be in uproar.

Putin's response to Medvedev's pleas for a second term as president has been a combination of economic populism aimed at various voting blocs, macho public displays, occasional anti-Western rhetoric and revival of the old Soviet tactic of the national front, in this case the 'all-Russian National Front' (Russian acronym ONE). Taken together, these manoeuvres look very like a pre-election campaign. Whole organisations have been recruited into the ONE, often after minimal consultation with their members. Putin even found it necessary at one point to remind the organisers of the Front that they should not overdo things.

3 See *Russian election: Hundreds rally against Putin in Moscow*, BBC News, 5 Dec. 2011, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16042797.

We may see on 4 December how successful the ONF manoeuvre has been (though whatever happens, the intended electoral results will be achieved). But it is evident that Russia is again taking a turn away from most of the rest of Europe. It is true, as our interlocutor charged, that to date Russia has been cut a lot of slack in Europe. But Putin's credibility may be wearing thin even in countries like Germany, where he has been held in greater esteem.

Recently, a high-profile German NGO, Quadriga, announced that they were awarding one of their prestigious annual prizes to Putin, apparently for his leadership of Russia and his services to Russo-German relations. The annual prize, which is described as being intended for people who are in some way role models for Germany, has in the past been awarded to various luminaries, including former Czech president Václav Havel. On hearing of the proposed award to Putin, Havel threatened to send his own prize back. His intervention added to a growing groundswell of concern within Germany itself, and the group decided to cancel all its awards for 2011. That incident might suggest that even Germany's resolutely positive engagement with Russia at the level of business and government may be coming under some strain.

This may be good news for Medvedev. Putin and his advisers may decide that they still need Medvedev in the ostensibly top job as a front man who goes down well with Western leaders. We shall see, but recent events seem to confirm that whether Putin or Medvedev or some third person ends up in the presidency might not affect the country's real direction much anyway.

So Poland is headed west while Russia, alas, seems headed east. This is more than a bilateral matter. Depending on the outcomes in countries like Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, there is a fair chance of a new division appearing in Europe on the current eastern border of the European Union. It will be less ideological than the last one, but there are certain defining characteristics nonetheless: on one side, open societies, human rights, free markets and democracy, if at times flawed; on the other, autocracy, whether softer or harder, economies marked by heavy corruption and state intervention, the absence of rule of law, and a tendency to look to the People's Republic of China as the best developmental model.

In the shadow of growing 'enlargement fatigue' in Europe and the seemingly never-ending financial crisis in the West, and given Russia's heavy pressure on wayward former republics, the EU's chances of convincing its eastern neighbours to adopt its civilisational model seem less than assured.

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