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Russia and its western neighbours: A watershed moment¹

Russia's relationships with Belarus, Ukraine and Poland are delicately poised at present, as indeed is the domestic situation within Russia itself. How these relationships and Russia's internal politics play out in the near future will go far towards determining whether Russia pursues a path towards democratic normality, or reaffirms its recent trajectory towards corrupt, anti-Western autocracy, taking Belarus and Ukraine with it.

For a few years before his deeply flawed re-election on 19 December 2010, President Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus had been flirting with the European Union in search of financial backing and a hedge against Russia. In an attempt to meet EU expectations, he had even allowed a presidential election campaign to proceed that bore some faint resemblance to the real thing. Then suddenly on election night, in response to a large opposition demonstration against the implausible result announced by the regime, his security forces unleashed a brutal crackdown, arresting hundreds, beating up many (including most opposition presidential candidates) and charging over 40 opponents with crimes against the state; some have already been sentenced,

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others remain incarcerated. In this way, despite his burgeoning economic problems, Lukashenka opted to cut himself off from any further support from the West.

Belarus's economic crisis is now galloping downhill. Lukashenka continues to perform a dance of economic death to stave off devaluation, inflation and mass panic-buying, but a denouement cannot be far off. Moscow is offering Lukashenka a short-term bailout, but subject to conditions that could threaten his sovereignty. The sinister terrorist strike in Minsk during peak-hour traffic on 11 April 2011, which resulted in 13 deaths and over 200 injured, has no logical explanation; but it will give Lukashenka a further excuse to brutalise his already cowed opposition. He seems bent on attributing the attack both to them and to their putative paymasters in 'Strasbourg', by which he presumably means the European Union. Doing so will further deepen his alienation from the West but won't necessarily shore up his position against a Russia that wants to buy his strategic economic assets in exchange for keeping him afloat a while longer.

Ukraine, meanwhile, seemed to gravitate rapidly towards Moscow after Viktor Yanukovich's election as president in February 2010. But now, having quickly conceded nearly all of what Russia wanted on security, national identity, religious matters and 'historical policy', Yanukovich is digging his heels in and trying to defend his economic independence against pressure and economic inducements from Moscow. Russia is competing with the European Union for influence in Kyiv, seeking to draw Ukraine into the customs union it has created with Belarus and Kazakhstan. The European Union is offering negotiations on a free-trade agreement as a stage towards possible membership in the future. Ukraine is trailing its coat in both directions, hoping to get the economic benefits of each without having to choose between them.

Yanukovich has erected a system of autocracy strikingly similar to the system Vladimir Putin established in Russia after succeeding Boris Yeltsin as president. But he has repeatedly emphasised that economic integration with Europe, rather than the Russian-sponsored Eurasian Customs Union, remains his priority. Now Russia is raising the stakes, playing on Ukraine's economic vulnerability after the global financial crisis. (In 2009 alone, it suffered a 15 per cent slump in GDP.) On 12 April, Putin visited Kyiv seemingly at short notice. During the

visit, he promised his Ukrainian counterpart that joining the Customs Union would entail savings of between US\$6 billion and US\$9 billion a year on Ukraine's gas bill. He also warned that not choosing the Customs Union would mean that Russia (Ukraine's main trading partner) would have to impose heavy duties on Ukrainian exports. Moscow will maintain its pressure in an attempt to drag Ukraine fully into its sphere of influence.

Poland's Western choice is probably accepted by Moscow. But it would like to strengthen bilateral ties to avoid Poland's using its growing influence in the European Union against Russian interests. The plane crash that killed President Lech Kaczyński and many other members of the Polish elite near Smolensk on 11 April 2010 seemed to greatly strengthen an incipient warming of relations between Poland and Russia. But the strongly anti-Russian main opposition party, led by the dead president's brother, Jarosław, refused to accept the *rapprochement*. With little evidence, Kaczyński blamed the Polish Government and Russian officialdom for the crash; he has since maintained a barrage of criticism, hinting at conspiratorial links to conceal the 'true' causes of the disaster.

Now, one year after the event, the issue of the Smolensk disaster and its real and purported links with the Katyn massacre – the subject of last year's apology by Moscow – has risen to the surface again. Just days before the Polish President was due to pay an anniversary visit to the site of the crash, Russian officials decided to remove a commemorative plaque placed there a few months ago by a Polish opposition delegation, on the grounds that the wording on the plaque was offensive to Russia. Buoyed by this fresh affront, the anti-Russian camp of Jarosław Kaczyński, has returned to the offensive with renewed vigour.

Russia: De-Stalinisation?

Russia's 'tandemocracy', which involves President Dmitry Medvedev making the pronouncements and Prime Minister Putin calling the shots, is showing serious strains. Recently Medvedev has taken to challenging his mentor, even appearing at times to dress him down.

The most widely noticed challenge was Medvedev's rebuke to Putin on Libya. Putin had declared that any attempt by outside powers to interfere in Colonel Gaddafi's military onslaught against his own population would be illegitimate and reminiscent of the medieval crusades against Islam. Putin made this typically neo-Soviet statement, repeating arguments deployed by Gaddafi himself, in a missile factory where he was talking up the need for Russia to rapidly expand its strategic arsenal to deal with external threats. Expressing what he called a personal opinion, Putin denounced UN Security Council Resolution 1973 that provided the legal basis for the French-led intervention to create a no-fly zone in Libya, an objective that was endorsed by the Arab League.

Russia chose not to use its veto in the UN Security Council, allowing the resolution to pass with five abstentions, including China, Russia itself and Moscow's preferred EU interlocutor, Germany. Foreign policy is ostensibly the prerogative of the president, as Putin acknowledged and, within hours, Medvedev responded. He reaffirmed his view that the abstention was appropriate and reproved those who referred to 'crusades' for risking a 'clash of civilisations', which he characterised as 'unacceptable'. A spokesman for Putin then repeated publicly that the president was responsible for foreign policy matters. Even more remarkably, Putin's earlier statement, initially given wide coverage, abruptly disappeared from the media.

Putin's and Medvedev's public declarations have long diverged in spirit and, at times, their spokesmen have exchanged sharp words. But, between the tandemocrats themselves, a certain decorum has always been maintained. Typically, Medvedev makes a speech or places text on one of his websites full of liberal phrases and calls for reform and 'modernisation'. Either there is no policy response or Putin issues an oblique rebuttal. Over the three years of Medvedev's presidency, observers hoping for democratic reform have become accustomed to this choreography, and disappointment and cynicism have set in.

But, recently, the challenges from the junior tandem partner have become more overt, even strident, and the liberals are daring to hope for another thaw along the lines of Mikhail Gorbachev's or Nikita Khrushchev's. There is a feeling in certain quarters that the Putin era

may be approaching some kind of crisis, though the strong price of oil and the still very high, though declining, public approval ratings for Putin seem to suggest otherwise.

Still, the policy skirmishes between the two camps continue thick and fast. The Medvedev camp's hopes of burying Stalinism once and for all and the Federal Security Service's (FSB – the KGB's domestic successor) proposal to ban the use of foreign-based internet services like Skype, Gmail and Hotmail are two recent examples. In both cases Medvedev's view is clear: he has been at the rhetorical forefront of the anti-Stalin drive and he uses some of the internet services in question himself. Although the presidential administration has only mildly opposed the internet plan, Medvedev is unlikely to favour major restrictions.

By and large Putin has hitherto tolerated blogging dissent. Computer attacks on foreign enemies like Estonia and Georgia have been plausibly attributed to pro-Putin Russian youth groups in the past, a use of the internet of which Putin would certainly see the value. But lately some domestic bloggers have been getting close to the bone with corruption stories aimed at Putin. There have been reports this week of extensive hacking attacks on opposition blogs, suggesting that some uses of the internet will prove to be more equal than others.

On Stalin, the proposals emanating from the Medvedev camp are essentially that Stalin should be removed from any honourable place in the public domain, that memorials to his many victims should be erected across the length and breadth of the country (there are remarkably few at present) and that officials who deny his crimes should be dismissed. The tentative steps towards de-Stalinisation were accelerated after Moscow reacknowledged during 2010 that Soviet forces were responsible for the Katyn massacres in 1940.

Stalin's standing in Russia is particularly relevant to the relationship with Poland, but it also affects relations with the Belarus and Ukrainian leaderships, both of which hold the late dictator in rather higher esteem than does Medvedev.

Another long-running and increasingly obvious difference between the two Russian leaders concerns Medvedev's campaign against official corruption. Putin has made occasional populist gestures in the same direction but, during his presidency, corruption greatly increased, and Putin himself is believed by many to be an extremely wealthy man.

At first, Medvedev's moves against corruption seemed no more serious than Putin's. He instituted, for example, an ultimately absurd ritual of requiring all officials, including himself and the Prime Minister, to make annual income declarations. Unsurprisingly, the published results have lacked credibility.

But, recently, Medvedev has announced sharper measures aimed at creating a better investment climate and has set out a series of goals for the government to achieve by an early deadline. Most strikingly, he has demanded that senior government officials withdraw from the high-ranking positions they often have in large state-run or ostensibly private companies.

Among other things, these measures involve removing Putin's key *silovik* ally, Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, from the position of president of Rosneft, the Russian oil giant. Rosneft was directly involved in, and benefited from, the stripping of the assets of jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Yukos empire. Sechin, often seen as the de facto number two in the regime after Putin, has obediently withdrawn from his position in Rosneft. Whether this will reduce corruption or the politicisation of the most important commercial decisions of big Russian companies remains highly doubtful. But on the face of it, this was a remarkable intervention by Medvedev, especially when compared with earlier efforts that disappeared without trace.

What are we to make of this belated search for relevance by Medvedev? While most observers have long agreed that Putin was the dominant partner in the tandem, interpretations of the relationship have varied significantly. Some saw no serious political differences between the two and believed that the different shadings of emphasis that sometimes seemed to emerge were minor nuances in a wholly harmonious and functional political partnership. Others maintained that the differences were completely phoney, all part of an elaborate charade intended to deceive and manipulate observers and interlocutors, especially naïve foreigners ready to be duped by a good-cop, bad-cop routine.

Others again held that the differences were psychologically real and potentially even important politically, but that Medvedev had no hope of making his writ run on any of the disputed issues. He had always been in Putin's shadow and would remain so unless the global financial crisis or some other external shock reshaped the political chessboard.

When the crisis failed to deliver any perceptible destabilisation or liberalisation, these observers concluded that Medvedev would never challenge his mentor.

It seems unlikely that Medvedev does expect to overcome Putin and his governing United Russia party, senior figures in which are overtly sceptical of the president's recent moves. Nor would he expect to tame the security establishment, of which Putin is the paramount leader. Medvedev has never belonged to either of these key structures in the power elite. In fact, his assertiveness of late might be the boldness of desperation. But hope springs eternal, especially in the minds of politicians, so it should not be ruled out that he really believes he can convince enough of the elite and the public to be given a second term as president.

Even if he is resigned to being nudged out of the top job, it seems clear that at a minimum, whatever the views of Putin and his camp, he wants to set out clearly where he thinks the country should head. He may calculate that if he is rejected for a second term he will at least be awarded a worthy post from which to keep his career alive while waiting for some game-changing shock. When the oil price slumps again or something else crystallises latent public discontent, he might hope to return as the man whose time has come.

Belarus: Re-Stalinisation?

While the situation in Ukraine, which has more than four times the population, is of greater strategic significance, events in Belarus have certainly been more newsworthy. Since the mass detentions after the presidential elections on 19 December 2010, there has been a steady stream of reports of new arrests, use of torture, suppression of media, denunciations of the West and threats against the opposition. Then, on 28 March 2011, the Central Bank in effect devalued the currency by 10 per cent, amid reports that Belarus was lurching towards disaster. On 19 April, the bank further loosened the exchange rate.

Lukashenka has maintained much of the old Soviet command economy and, thanks to generous Russian subsidies on oil and gas imports, till recently the system worked nicely. By avoiding reform, he also avoided some of the pain encountered elsewhere in post-communist

economies. But Lukashenka, despite his loyalty to Soviet Russian traditions, did not wish to subordinate himself to the Kremlin. He is popular in Russia itself, especially with die-hard Stalinists and Soviet nostalgics, of whom there are many. Indeed, he has sometimes seen himself as the natural leader of Russia and Belarus. His vanity and insubordination irritate Putin, who may even feel threatened by him. And Moscow became tired of subsidising him. So, in recent years, they have been forcing him to pay something nearer to market prices for his energy imports.

Instead of adapting to his new station in life, Lukashenka essentially continued with a Soviet-style economy and sought to stave off the need for reform by obtaining loans, whilst hiking public sector wages extravagantly in preparation for the 2010 elections. The trade deficit deteriorated sharply, nearly all of it owing to trade with Russia, with foreign debt increasing by 30 per cent last year. Foreign currency reserves are naturally slumping rapidly towards zero, declining by 20 per cent in January/February 2011 to US\$4 billion, and they are under further pressure. Goods shortages and inflation have set in and Belarusians are afraid that if a large devaluation occurs their savings and assets will be dissipated. Naturally, they have sought to obtain foreign currency as a hedge, increasing the drain on reserves. Bizarrely, amidst all this, GDP is supposedly continuing to grow by over 7 per cent a year, but much of what is produced is unsaleable and simply consigned to warehouses, another traditional Soviet practice.

The economy was beginning to show the strain last year, but this year all these processes have accelerated. Economists are expecting a 40 per cent devaluation, whether acknowledged or de facto. The government meanwhile is thrashing around with ad hoc bans and prohibitions. Having slammed the door on the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Lukashenka's best chance of relief, probably his only one, is to secure the US\$3 billion in loans being offered by Russia. But Moscow, too, is insisting on conditionality. It wants to see some economic reform measures adopted in Minsk. And it also wants its own state and crony capitalists to be able to buy up some of Belarus's best and most strategic industries. Even if the US\$3 billion is forthcoming, without sharp reductions in state expenditure – and hence in wages – a hefty devaluation and other painful reforms, it won't postpone a severe crisis for long.

In this deepening economic gloom, the mysterious terrorist attack in the double subway station in Minsk during peak-hour traffic at 6 pm on 11 April 2011 looks like a bright ray of light for Lukashenka. The president summoned together his security forces, headed by the sentimentally named KGB, and exhorted them to seek the support of their Russian counterparts and find the culprits without delay. The KGB, in keeping with its best traditions, had cracked the case inside 36 hours. 'At 5 am this morning', reported the President proudly on 13 April, 'the crime was solved.' Having earlier hinted that the first detainee was of swarthy appearance, the authorities later corrected themselves to say that the five arrested terrorists were all Belarusians from the same provincial town. So efficient was the KGB that, within these same 36 hours, the malefactors had also confessed to two earlier bomb incidents in 2005 and 2008 in which there were no fatalities, though some 50 people were injured in each.

Those two earlier incidents had been most unusual in a country with no tradition of terrorism and, unlike Russia, no Islamist insurgency or significant Islamic minority or other well-documented violent groups. Apart from announcing comprehensive success in the investigation, Lukashenka and his security chiefs were very sparing with details. The event seems incomprehensible. There is no evidence that has been made public that adequately explains it, though it has been suggested by an anonymous source in the investigation that the main perpetrator is a psychopathic sadist. But the timing, adroit execution, and use of explosives claimed by the regime to be unique in the world all suggest a degree of planning, even professionalism, that is scarcely credible in Belarus.

Moreover, the fact that the bomb was stuffed with lethal metal shrapnel suggests a malign violence totally uncharacteristic of the opposition and indeed of any group in Belarus society, with the possible exception of Lukashenka and his security forces. He and his administration are the only people who stand in any sense to gain from the disaster. But at this stage there is little evidence to point to anyone other than the detainees, one of whom was reportedly identified on a security camera.

Lack of evidence is not, however, constraining the President from suggesting that a vast conspiracy of all his enemies is involved. He has demanded an exhaustive enquiry into 'all statements by activists and

politicians ... Question them all, regardless of democracy and the cries and groans of their foreign sympathisers'.² And he has darkly hinted that the domestic criminals have employers beyond the country's borders.

Almost before the noise of the explosion had abated, opposition spokesmen were gloomily predicting a fresh wave of arrests, interrogations and repression. And already there are reports of security forces zealously carrying out the president's requirement that all 'politicians' (that is, oppositionists) be called in for questioning.

Coming on top of the rorted elections and the sudden economic freefall, this latest dismaying event has reportedly shaken the population in the capital and probably further afield as well. But for Lukashenka, the bomb blast is a splendid way of changing the subject. Clearly people must now forget about petty economic tribulations or political disputes and prepare for the iron discipline that the President is promising them. Any contacts with the evildoers to the West should be eschewed forthwith. Backsliders and panic-merchants will deserve any punishment they get. In a word, the scene seems set for repression and rigid controls in all spheres of life.

Some speculative explanations turning on machinations within the Belarusian security apparatus with possible Russian involvement have been launched. The *cui bono* test and the location of the metro station next to the presidential compound may be consistent with theories of Belarusian KGB involvement. But though terrorists active in Russia may conceivably have passed on some of their skills and modus operandi to the perpetrators, it seems unlikely that Russian officials or agents would have been involved. Moscow now has plenty of other more conventional means at its disposal to influence events.

More liberal-minded figures in the Moscow leadership will deplore Lukashenka's resort to further repression. But most, regardless of whether or not they feel that the President is a primitive throwback to an earlier era, will feel strong satisfaction that Belarus's flirt with

2 See Michael Schwartz, 'Belarus says suspects confessed to subway bombing', *New York Times*, 13 Apr. 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/04/14/world/europe/14belarus.html?_r=0.

the West has been decisively curtailed and that the task of bringing Lukashenka to heel as his economy sinks begins to look much more manageable.

Ukraine: Leaning east, but keeping a European option open

After coming to the presidency in February 2010 by a narrow margin, Yanukovich quickly re-established autocratic rule in a country that had seen five years of turbulent but democratic rule by the leaders of the 2004–05 Orange Revolution, ex-president Viktor Yushchenko and ex-prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko. It had, moreover, been devastated by the global financial crisis, sustaining a 15 per cent drop in GDP in 2009 alone. By dubious constitutional means and with some alleged bribery of backsliders from other parties, Yanukovich set up something similar in Ukraine to Putin's 'power vertical', centred on his own Russophone and relatively Russophile home province of Donetsk. In the year since he has further consolidated his domestic control, though as he has sought to grapple with Ukraine's continuing economic problems, his popularity has declined sharply.

His domestic regime is now widely seen as becoming progressively more undemocratic. Judicial independence has become a mockery and selective prosecutions, typically on trivial or dubious charges, have been pursued against many senior members of the former Orange governments, including, in particular, Tymoshenko. This has resulted in many cases in the accused being held in pre-trial detention; that is, jailed, for months at a time. One of the former ministers so threatened has successfully sought political asylum in the Czech Republic. Pressure has been exerted against the media, particularly non-print media, to toe the line. Television now almost exclusively depicts the doings of the government, with little coverage of other views. Freedom of assembly has also been subjected to significant restrictions.

These trends have not passed unnoticed by international monitoring agencies like Freedom House. The US State Department and the European Union have both expressed official concern and Ukraine has been warned by senior EU representatives that backsliding on democratic norms would not assist its progress towards EU integration.

In foreign policy, Yanukovich moved quickly to restore warm relations with Russia. Moscow had felt uncomfortable about the freewheeling democracy in Orange Ukraine (many Russian journalists, for example, moved to Kyiv to ply their trade, including with hard-hitting commentary on Russia). And the Kremlin hated the Orange leadership's nationalist policies, in particular its desire to join not just the European Union but also NATO as quickly as possible. This latter prospect Moscow had been particularly determined to prevent. Yanukovich was quick to oblige them by explicitly ruling out NATO membership, something none of his post-communist predecessors had done. In many other ways he soon showed himself to be a loyal Russophile ex-Soviet citizen, like much of the rest of the population in the Russified eastern and southern provinces of Ukraine.

Yanukovich promptly cancelled Yushchenko's efforts to secure international recognition of the deliberate starvation of over 3 million Ukrainians by Stalin in the 1930s as an act of genocide. He appointed an extremely Russophile Education Minister, celebrated for his public contempt for Ukrainian-speakers, who set about reversing all the Orange policies aimed at removing the Russian and Soviet bias from the educational system. He also cultivated close relations with the Moscow Patriarch Kirill, a deeply divisive figure in Orthodox Ukraine, where the Kyiv Patriarch has a larger flock than his Moscow counterpart. Kirill has made a special personal project of trying to Russify the Ukraine Orthodox Church. And there was much more of the same. Ukraine seemed to be heading rapidly back into Moscow's orbit.

After an initial flurry of economic agreements and numerous bilateral visits in both directions, however, Moscow began to push too hard on the economic front, proposing to take over many of Ukraine's most significant enterprises. In particular, in keeping with Putin's 'energy diplomacy' (using energy supplies and acquisition of neighbours' energy infrastructure to establish a potentially coercive control over their key decision-making options), they proposed that the Russian gas giant Gazprom should 'merge' with (that is, take over) its much smaller Ukrainian counterpart, Naftohaz. This would have obviated the need for any more 'gas wars' of the type that created havoc in Ukraine and many countries further west in January 2009.

For Yanukovych and his governing Party of Regions, in which many of Ukraine's biggest oligarchs have a strong involvement, this was a step too far. The bilateral ardour suddenly cooled and, in recent months, contacts have dropped off somewhat. Relatively few new cooperative agreements have been concluded lately, though Russia has continued trying to achieve a decisive breakthrough in drawn-out negotiations on the gas sector.

In parallel with its dealings with Russia, Kyiv has also been working on negotiating an Association Agreement (AA) and, within that framework, a Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union. The DCFTA is particularly important for Yanukovych and his oligarch supporters, as the European Union is, after Russia, Ukraine's largest trading partner. The European Union, for its own strategic reasons, is eager to encourage Ukraine's waning Western orientation and, while it has been critical of Ukraine's progressive slide away from democratic norms, it has tried to be flexible in advancing the negotiations. Moscow seems to have become aware recently that there was a serious danger the free-trade deal might materialise before the end of the year and has unleashed a threat-and-charm offensive to stave it off.

Russia has been pushing its own counterblast to the European Union, the Eurasian Customs Union, to which so far only Belarus and Kazakhstan have signed on (though Kyrgyzstan has just announced it will join the group next year). Moscow is particularly keen to inveigle Ukraine into the arrangement, partly as a way of kneecapping the DCFTA. The European Union has declared, and recently confirmed, that Ukraine could not proceed further with the free-trade agreement if it joined the Customs Union.

Ukraine has been officially cool on the Customs Union, but it still has serious economic problems and associated domestic discontent, and Moscow's short-term threats and promises are potentially persuasive to both political and business leaders. The fact that the gas-pricing formula is in itself highly contentious, and that Ukraine has been charged by Moscow more for its gas than nearly all other customers, cannot, however, be reassuring for the Ukrainians who might accept the bribe and then find that it is again confronted with an unpalatable pricing ultimatum some time in the future.

Moreover, Moscow is vigorously pushing a project to build another bypass route for its gas exports to Europe (called South Stream, mirroring the one already well advanced in the north, known as Nord Stream). Both projects are intended to avoid Ukraine and thereby cost it valuable transit income. They will also make it possible for Moscow to cut off gas supplies to Ukraine to enforce its will on any disputed bilateral issue without in the process cutting off its customers further west. Yanukovich probably assumed that Ukraine's highly cooperative approach to Moscow should have led to the abandonment of the scheme, which was originally employed as a weapon against the Orange leadership. He has protested against South Stream repeatedly, but in vain. Some observers believe that South Stream will prove unviable, but Kyiv can't be sure of that. In the meantime, the Nord Stream/South Stream pincer movement is another weapon that Moscow can hold to its fraternal neighbour's head and is therefore probably another element in the bilateral negotiations.

Despite its coolness towards the Customs Union and its frequently reaffirmed preference for the free-trade agreement with the European Union, Ukraine's final decision cannot yet be confidently predicted. The benefits of doing a deal with Russia are short-term, whereas the European Union is promising some initial pain and only then larger mid-term benefits. Politicians in volatile domestic circumstances are always looking for short-term advantage, and so it may yet prove in this case. Moreover, the Ukrainian leadership is divided on the issue and there are some out-and-out Moscow sympathisers in their midst, as well as those, seemingly including Yanukovich, who want to keep a door open in both directions.

The Yanukovich Government's expressed preference for the EU option is not a choice of the heart. In most ways, Yanukovich feels more naturally at home with Russia. His interest in the EU is purely pragmatic. Kyiv does not relish criticism of its democratic shortcomings from Brussels and, though it does throw up propaganda smokescreens and claim to be committed to democratic norms, one suspects that despite the protestations of an intention to ultimately join the European Union, it would be happy to settle for the DCFTA and an agreement on visa-free bilateral travel, without the lectures on democracy.

Recently the Ukrainian prosecutor-general, a self-confessed old crony of the President, initiated proceedings against the former president, Leonid Kuchma, in connection with the murder of a prominent independent journalist, Hryhorii Gongadze, whose headless body was found in a forest near Kyiv in 2000. One of Kuchma's bodyguards had secretly taped and then leaked some of the president's intimate political conversations, in one of which he appeared to be calling in colourful language for Gongadze to be somehow removed from the scene.

Yanukovych was Kuchma's anointed successor in the fraudulent presidential election of 2004, the results of which were ultimately overturned. Their relations have since frayed somewhat but, after years in which for whatever reason even the Orange leadership did not pursue the Gongadze case effectively, it was curious that Kuchma should now apparently be prosecuted at the behest of his former ally. Part of the explanation for this enigmatic development could be that Yanukovych wanted to give the lie to the widespread conviction in the West that he was practising at best selective justice against his Orange enemies. Going after, or even pretending to go after, a big fish from nearer his own side of politics, like Kuchma, might get EU critics of his democratic credentials off his back.

On balance, Yanukovych's heart says Russia and the Customs Union, while his head says the European Union and the AA. Having thus come to a fork in the road, Yanukovych might simply wish, as was once said of Bill Clinton, to take it. While reaffirming his commitment to the EU negotiations, Yanukovych has also been pitching for 3 + 1 trade negotiations with the three Customs Union members: Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Deputy Premier Serhiy Tyhypko, one of the relatively few committed liberal economic reformers in Yanukovych's team, has argued that the European Union's huge market would be a decisive advantage over the longer term, and that eastern countries who've joined the European Union have usually done very well economically as a result. Tyhypko advocates integration with the European Union and 'friendship' with the Customs Union, which is another version of 3 + 1.

This difficult choice is about much more than trade. As Oleksiy Kolomyiets, an independent Kyiv think-tanker has said: 'The Customs Union is a camp of authoritarian regimes, and our political system would follow the economic logic if we became part of it.'

Acknowledging that Yanukovych has publicly rejected the Customs Union, he added: 'There is intense political struggle over this issue, and it's only just beginning. Ukraine's economy is very fragile and extremely vulnerable to Russian blackmail.'³

Moscow remains keen to re-establish some latter-day incarnation of the Soviet Union, and the Putinist version of that would likely be much as Kolomiychuk described – unless, that is, Russia again reverses course and pursues the more reformist path that Medvedev and his followers are trying to lay out. But on form to date, that looks a long shot.

Poland: An uneasy *rapprochement*

The sudden warming of Polish–Russian relations at governmental level that followed the Smolensk air disaster of 11 April 2010 has more or less survived the following year, though with occasional discord, mainly relating to official investigations into the causes of the accident. The Russian enquiry, which suddenly announced its findings without having previously offered them to their Polish colleagues for comment or proposed amendments, placed all the blame for the accident entirely on the Polish side. Polish officials accepted that the blame lay more on the Polish side (for which view a good deal of evidence has emerged from both the Russian and the Polish enquiries), but emphasised with some heat that there was contributory negligence on the Russian side as well and submitted a long list of objections to the Russian report. As the months went on, Warsaw also increasingly blamed Russian authorities for being slow to respond to requests for information from the Polish enquiry.

But at the level of public opinion, particularly on the Polish side, relations have been more torrid. The main Polish opposition party, the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice (LaJ), headed by Jarosław Kaczyński, has continued its campaign against the Polish Government for having allegedly been complicit in covering up malfeasance both by themselves and the Russian authorities. Over the last year, Kaczyński and his followers have fought elections and daily political

3 See Fred Weir, 'Ukraine struggles to balance lure of Europe, pull of Russia', *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 Apr. 2011, www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2011/0413/Ukraine-struggles-to-balance-lure-of-Europe-pull-of-Russia.

battles largely on this issue, hinting darkly at alleged conspiracies by Polish and Russian authorities to somehow cause the accident, then conceal their traces.

As evidence has accumulated pointing, not surprisingly, to some typical Russian disorder at the provincial Smolensk airport on the day, and as the Russian side has increasingly sought to play down or deny any fault of its own (partly in response to the endless accusations of mass murder from some Polish press and politicians), LaJ have seized every opportunity to renew their accusations or devise fresh ones. The anniversary last week produced a fresh crescendo. In the absence of any solid evidence to substantiate the more extravagant conspiracies, senior LaJ politicians have become carefully vague in their assertions: 'President Lech Kaczyński had to die because he was a true Pole', and similar.

Without seeking the agreement of local Russian authorities, LaJ sympathisers, including some of the bereaved, had laid a memorial plaque that the Russians removed from the crash site last November. The plaque, which was only in Polish, had linked the crash to Katyn by saying that President Kaczyński and the other passengers had been on their way to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the 'Soviet genocidal war crime' committed against Polish officers in 1940. The Russians were reportedly unhappy about the word 'genocidal'. They currently acknowledge that the massacre was a crime, but maintain that Stalinism committed similar and worse crimes against people of all ethnic groups, including above all Russians, and that therefore this was not a case of genocide.

The argument is unpersuasive to a Western ear, but there is a further aspect to the case. Medvedev's campaign for de-Stalinisation has acquired some of its current momentum from the decision to restore the Yeltsin position of apologising for Katyn, a decision taken in the first instance primarily for foreign policy reasons. For Medvedev to meet President Bronisław Komorowski of Poland on the anniversary, as was planned, and lay flowers on a plaque in Polish, of unofficial Polish composition and including the words 'Soviet genocidal war crime', would be severely embarrassing for him at a delicate time in the ongoing struggle over Stalin's place in Russian history. In the event, the two sides agreed that the presidents would instead jointly

lay wreaths under a birch tree at the site of the crash, not on the Russians' new, blander and bilingual plaque, hopefully thereby postponing the issue until a better moment.

None of this satisfied LaJ, which denounced it as yet another sign of Polish official servility towards Moscow. While the governing Civic Platform party of Premier Donald Tusk and President Komorowski has maintained a clear lead over LaJ over the last year, with LaJ sometimes looking electorally marginalised by its own anti-Russian obsessions, recent events seem to have contributed to a revival in LaJ support and a lessening in that of Civic Platform. The national elections, which are expected in October this year, could yet prove difficult for Civic Platform and, in the run-up to them, Kaczyński will not be holding back from his denunciations of the government's 'eastern policy'.

Though they overstate the case and are given to implausible conspiracy theories, there is justice in some of LaJ's reproaches. The Polish Government has, for example, concluded in the last year a long-term agreement on gas supplies from Gazprom, which seems disadvantageous to Poland, placing it in a state of high dependence on the one problematical supplier, at high cost (US\$336 per thousand cubic metres) and for a seemingly unnecessarily long period. Warsaw has been working towards creating LNG import infrastructure as a partial alternative to Russian gas. Moreover, while this was not fully apparent in the earlier stages of the negotiations, Poland is reportedly on the cusp of developing its extensive shale gas deposits.⁴ So the pressing need for such an expensive, long-term deal was not obvious.

The Gazprom agreement was also at odds with Warsaw's campaign within the European Union in recent years for diversification of gas imports away from Russia as a politically motivated, often expensive and unreliable supplier. Ironically, Poland was only rescued from reaching an even worse deal with Gazprom by the intervention of the EU energy commissioner, who insisted on becoming involved in the negotiations at the 11th hour to ensure that Poland complied with the European Union's new legal requirements. The so-called EU third energy package insists *inter alia* on competitive market access of

4 Since this article was written, evaluations of the extent and economic viability of Poland's shale gas deposits have become more pessimistic, and exploration and investment in them have declined markedly. See Andrew Kureth, 'Polish shale gas hits a dry well', *Politico*, 8 July 2015, www.politico.eu/article/polish-shale-gas-hits-a-dry-well/.

other suppliers to energy infrastructure, like, in this case, Gazprom's gas pipelines to and through Poland, which the final draft of the deal had not ensured. In the last stages of the negotiations, various improvements were introduced, including scaling back the date of termination of the agreement from 2037 to 2022.

The Polish Government did its best to keep key details of the negotiations out of the public domain, but they have recently been exposed in the leading conservative newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*.⁵ The government's reticence on this matter is understandable. The deal was disputed within the government, and it is difficult to believe it would have gone ahead with it, were it not for the *rapprochement* it had reached with Moscow. The late President Lech Kaczyński opposed the deal and, as prime minister before 2007, Jarosław Kaczyński would hardly have negotiated one like it.

In retrospect, given the bilateral difficulties that have arisen, LaJ's criticism that Poland was not sufficiently energetic about seeking a greater direct involvement in the enquiry into the Smolensk disaster also seems persuasive, and their explanation that the Warsaw Government did not want to ruffle Russian feathers may not be far off the mark.

But, in general, the endless harping of LaJ politicians on the subject and the extreme polarisation of political life that they have thus engendered may be a double-edged sword for them electorally. Opinion polling indicates that a majority of Poles disapprove of LaJ's partisan exploitation of the tragedy. For as long as the issue remains alive, there is great potential for the Polish–Russian *détente* to run aground. Other bilateral disputes could well arise and there are plenty of long-standing differences between the two countries that will continue to generate tensions of their own. If, at the parliamentary elections in October, through a strong performance at the polls and adroit coalition manoeuvring, LaJ were to regain a place in government, the bilateral relationship would come under great strain.

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⁵ See Igor Janke, 'Igor Janke o kulisach pertraktacji z Rosja w sprawie gazu', *Rzeczpospolita*, 2 Apr. 2011, beta.rp.pl/artykul/636014-Igor-Janke-o-kulisach-petraktacji-z-Rosja-w-sprawie-gazu.html.

Summing up, there is some prospect of liberal and more pro-Western policies gaining greater traction in Russia, but their chances of doing so are tied closely to the weak-looking reed of Medvedev's aspirations for a second presidential term.

Belarus is heading from provincial neo-Stalinism to something much worse in the short term, after which it is likely to fall under stronger influence from Moscow. This, however, depending on how things play out in Russian politics, could conceivably be a moderating factor and might, together with Lukashenka's declining popularity and the economic meltdown, lead to a change in the Belarus leadership. But in such an event, any new leader would have to be to Moscow's taste.

Ukraine is at a crossroads, torn between its current leadership's strong preference for the ethno-political comfort zone of Russia and its recognition that its future economic health can probably be best assured if it keeps some essential links with Europe alive.

Poland is likely to see the moderate Civic Platform party returned to power later this year. This will help to maintain Poland's increased status in Europe as it undertakes its first rotational presidency of the European Union in the second half of this year. It will also shore up the fragile *rapprochement* with Russia, which should in turn reassure the Russian governing elite that its apologies for Katyn were not a misplaced political investment. Such an outcome would be a positive, though not decisive, factor favouring continuation of the latest de-Stalinisation tendency in Russia itself and a more constructive course in Russian external policies generally.

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