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Towards a greater Putistan? Part 2¹

Since announcing his intention to reclaim the Russian presidency, and especially since the outbreak of public demonstrations in late 2011, Vladimir Putin has been pursuing a hard line both domestically and externally. At home he is strengthening his 'power vertical' by reinforcing his instruments of control and repression at all political levels and doing away with the wishy-washy liberal rhetoric of his placeholder predecessor as president, Dmitry Medvedev. Externally he is pursuing the anti-American and anti-Western line that he adopted in his second term as president (2004–08), also stripped of the more emollient accents of Medvedev.

The urban revolt against Putin and his system has largely run out of steam for the time being. Discouraged by the failure to win any concessions from Putin, and probably deterred by the recent spate of repressive legislation, dwindling numbers are turning out for street demonstrations. Though in his last months as president, Medvedev tried to respond to the unrest with liberal reforms to the electoral system, his successor has gutted virtually all of them.

¹ First published in *Open Democracy*, 4 Oct. 2012, www.opendemocracy.net/john-besemeres/towards-greater-putistan.

But Putin and his system are no longer sacrosanct, and dissidence continues to spread on the internet and in local communities fed up with the Kremlin's incompetence and venality. A further crackdown on the internet is likely (a move to ban YouTube from Russia is mooted, for example). But, despite the growing repression, unrest could be reignited by a sharp economic downturn, some spectacular scandal or disunity within the elite (an outbreak of overt conflict between Putin and Medvedev's more liberal government, for example). If that occurs, Putin could respond harshly.

A particularly important, if not the most important, foreign-policy objective for Putin is to build the existing rather feeble post-Soviet multilateral institutions into something he has called – by misleading analogy with the European Union – the Eurasian Union. Within this proposed bloc, Putin wants Moscow (led by his St Petersburg coterie) to play the role of both Brussels and Berlin. His aim is to bring in as many former republics as he can muster by using a mixture of persuasion and coercion (mainly economic, but he is also embarking on a very ambitious military buildup).

Kazakhstan, with its large Slavonic minorities, has joined the Customs Union and has maintained productive relations with Russia, but is also strengthening its ties with China and the West. Russia continues to have hopes of greatly expanding its influence in other former republics, such as Georgia; hopes that have been boosted by the parliamentary elections on 1 October in which the strongly pro-Western and anti-Russian government of Mikheil Saakashvili was defeated (and a similar outcome could occur in the elections of 14 and 28 October in Lithuania).

A struggle for influence is taking place in Moldova, where the pro-Western coalition government is making a determined effort to seek integration with Europe. On 11 September, Moscow delivered a public warning to the visiting Moldovan Prime Minister, Vlad Filat, that, if Moldova wanted to pay less than the current US\$392 per thousand cubic metres for its gas, his government would, in effect, have to renounce its Western orientation. Moscow is also holding Moldova responsible for the US\$3.5 billion gas debt of Transnistria, a breakaway pro-Moscow province, which Russia has been cosseting, supporting and controlling for the last two decades. The European Commission President José-Manuel Barroso quickly responded to Moscow's

ultimatum with a declaration that an Association Agreement (AA) between the European Union and Moldova could be signed by 2013. Meanwhile, Moldova's opposition pro-Moscow Communist Party is pressing for a referendum on joining the Eurasian Union.

Moscow is fighting a long-term positional battle for influence in most of the other former republics, with mixed and fluctuating fortunes. But the possibility that it will consider applications to join the Eurasian Union from countries further afield cannot be ruled out. There is some sentiment in both Russia and Serbia in favour of Serbia's becoming a member. The new president and government that came to power in Serbia earlier this year are markedly more pro-Russian than their predecessors. While for economic and electoral reasons they continue to emphasise their desire for European integration, this project could come unstuck over Kosovo or some other issues.

Both Serbia's President Tomislav Nikolić and Prime Minister Ivica Dačić have interesting pasts – Dačić as former president Slobodan Milošević's party spokesman and Nikolić as deputy leader of an extreme nationalist party – but both emphasise they are now pro-European. Nonetheless, during his two visits already to Moscow since becoming president in May 2012, Nikolić has embarrassed some of his fellow countrymen with his expressions of love for Russia. 'The only thing I love more than Russia is Serbia', he announced at one point. This and other Nikolić statements – including his apparent denial of the Srebrenica genocide – could yet cause serious trouble in Brussels, potentially opening the way for increased Russian influence.

But, within Putin's plans, a crucial role is accorded to the two Slavonic former republics of the Soviet Union, Ukraine and Belarus, which have many ethnic, political and cultural links with Russia. If they were to form a stable alliance or, better still from Putin's point of view, confederation with Russia, Moscow would be at the head of some 200 million people, with much of the industrial capacity of the old Soviet Union again under its leadership. Individually and as a group, these three countries pose thorny dilemmas for Western policymakers.

And none more so than Russia. Even when Moscow doesn't deliver on such important issues as Iran and Syria, the United States still sees the need to struggle for its support in the UN Security Council. Because of its difficult relationship with Pakistan, Washington's forces in

Afghanistan rely on logistic support both from Russia and from former Soviet republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – where any American presence evokes strong objections in Moscow. And Obama's nuclear-disarmament agenda, which is a high priority for the President though not for Putin, depends crucially on Moscow's cooperation.

The US administration has played down the differences over Russia's incursion into Georgia in 2008 and the role of human rights in the bilateral relationship, and has modified its missile defence plans for Eastern Europe in deference to Russian sensitivities. But Moscow continues to argue that the missile plans are a deadly threat that is forcing it to rearm comprehensively, at the same time declaring that it could easily dispose of the installations and will target them preemptively in any future conflict.

The Kremlin has also threatened former vassal states that make decisions about their own defence of which Russia disapproves. And both the chief of the general staff, Nikolai Makarov, and (less bluntly) Putin recently threatened Finland with retaliation in the event of its pursuing any degree of military cooperation with NATO. Makarov even queried why Finland should have military exercises on its territory at all, demanding to know against whom such exercises were directed and asserting that Finland should instead cooperate militarily with Russia.

Finland and the other Nordic states have been disturbed by the increased regional deployments and exercises that Russia has undertaken under Putin's ascendancy, as well as by its frequently threatening language. They were also unfavourably impressed by the heavy pressure unleashed against Estonia in April 2007 – including an apparent cyber-attack on Estonia's highly computerised government infrastructure – when the government in Tallinn had the temerity to relocate a statue commemorating the Soviet 'liberators' of Estonia from a central square in the capital to a military cemetery.

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Washington has responded to pressure of this kind by acceding to Eastern European requests for a more visible NATO military presence. Again in deference to Russian sensitivities reflected in the 1997 NATO/Russia Founding Act, Washington and NATO long refrained

from placing significant hardware or conducting military exercises in the region, but that policy has now been modified. The Obama administration has also been reluctant to export arms to Georgia since the conflict with Russia, despite the fact that Moscow has been militarising the territories it detached from Georgia after its invasion.

Back home, the Obama administration has done its best to persuade Congress to repeal the Jackson–Vanik Amendment – a restrictive trade provision routinely waived by the President – in accordance with World Trade Organization rules, now that Russia has finally joined the organisation. (US support and assistance, including helping to short-circuit a threatened Georgian veto, helped facilitate Russia’s membership.) And it has sought to head off the strong pressures in Congress for sanctions against Russia over a spectacular case of corruption involving high-level officials acting against a foreign-owned company in Moscow; and over the imprisonment and suspected murder of Sergey Magnitsky, a Russian lawyer employed by the company, who blew the whistle on the affair.

While he was still in the presidency, Medvedev made a typically ineffectual attempt to look into the Magnitsky case. But that led nowhere, and the Kremlin has responded to international complaints with bluster and threats of counter-sanctions. Unwisely perhaps, though also not surprisingly, Congress has dug in its heels and still not repealed Jackson–Vanik. For his part, Mitt Romney has come out in favour of introducing Magnitsky sanctions as a precondition for repealing the amendment. More bilateral turbulence on this and other issues can be expected.

On 19 September, Moscow announced that it was expelling the US Agency for International Development (USAID) from Russia, demanding that it close its doors by 1 October; i.e. in less than a fortnight. USAID supports some 57 Russian NGOs concerned with human rights, election monitoring, Aids prevention, disability support, governance and environmental issues. GOLOS (Voice), the Russian volunteer election-monitoring group that earned Putin’s rage and indignation during the electoral season, is among the organisations funded by USAID, and will find its work much more difficult without its support. Russian oligarchs will not be risking their fortunes to support them or any of the others. USAID activities and outlays in Russia have been declining under the Obama administration and the

administration's response to this development was characteristically mild and forbearing. But this looks like yet another Putinist punch in the eye for the 'reset' in relations between the two countries.

In Europe's relations with Russia, the central underlying geopolitical issue is probably the fact that, to a greater or lesser degree, Russia has still not accepted the sovereignty of the countries that it used to dominate in Eastern Europe. Given their historical experience of Moscow's attentions, those countries feel understandably anxious, and have very often sought reassurance in EU and/or NATO membership and support. To the extent that they are successful, Russia declares itself threatened and takes countermeasures; and so the cycle continues.

Russia wants to re-establish influence, if not control, over as much as it can of the territory it once dominated; and it is prepared to do so by political infiltration, using its energy exports as a geopolitical tool, exploiting Russian minorities or applying military pressure, at times including nuclear intimidation. It is an awkward neighbour.

Moscow's energy diplomacy is best exemplified by the operations of its national gas corporation, Gazprom. Gazprom's primary role is not to make a profit, though it has often done that, but rather to set prices, build or dismantle pipelines, and satisfy or not satisfy customers, all in such a way as to further the president's geopolitical objectives. It is a subject close to Putin's heart: in a remarkably short time in the mid-1990s, he wrote (or as some have suggested, commissioned) a thesis on the optimal management of national resources. Energy diplomacy has brought both Belarus and Ukraine to heel in the recent past, and Moscow is doing all it can to ensure that it remains an effective weapon.

But now it has begun to encounter some pushback. The European Union and individual EU countries cooperated with Gazprom projects for many years, and some still do. But in 2004, with the acceptance into the European Union of former Soviet-bloc countries that are heavily dependent on Russian energy imports, the tide began to turn. Moscow's subsequent 'gas wars', especially those against Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 with their collateral damage for Western European consumers, increased Europe's disquiet about Gazprom's hardball tactics.

On 27 September 2011, European Commission officials raided a series of Gazprom-connected firms in 10 EU countries, seeking evidence that Gazprom was in breach of anti-trust laws. A sensational sequel came when Brussels announced on 4 September 2012 that it was launching an anti-trust case against the Russian giant. Gas is not the only commodity that Russia uses as a geopolitical weapon, but it is the main one; so this is a significant volley across its bows. The prima facie case seems strong: Gazprom's prices in Europe vary wildly, reflecting Moscow's view of the country in question. The prices are often discreetly withheld from public view, but Belarus is understood to be paying around US\$165 per thousand cubic metres while Poland, for example, is paying well over US\$500.

Putin has responded to the announcement with characteristic pugnacity, declaring that Russia would not subsidise Eastern European countries on behalf of Brussels, and issuing a hasty decree forbidding Gazprom or other 'strategic' Russian enterprises from providing information to EU authorities on any such matters without the regime's explicit approval. He also announced, with heavily implied menace: 'In Asia they are waiting for us.'

Putin has deployed threats to redirect Europe's gas to Asia many times before, but of course Russia's pipelines (Gazprom has been very slow to embrace LNG) are not easily redirected. And Putin knows all too well that his 'strategic partner', China, has been wary of allowing itself to become dependent on Russian energy, and also drives a much tougher bargain than any European country. It is clear, however, that Russia's relations with the European Union on this and other topics could be in for another torrid time.

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Where do Ukraine and Belarus fit into this pattern? Russia's attitude can be summed up very briefly: it wants them back. Putin once said, very quotably, that the collapse of the Soviet Union was 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century'. Many ethnic Russians living both inside and outside Russia would agree with him. Though large numbers of them migrated to Russia from the former Soviet republics after 1991, there is still a heavy concentration of Russians and Russian speakers in several former republics, including Ukraine and Belarus.

In Ukraine, a little over 8 million of the country's 45 million (or 18 per cent) identify as ethnic Russians. But a larger proportion (around 30 per cent) give Russian as their native language to census-takers, something approaching half tell researchers that they use Russian at home, and a much larger percentage again are fluent in Russian. Of Belarus's 9.6 million, about 8 per cent identify as ethnic Russians and fully 70 per cent acknowledge Russian as the language they speak at home. In both countries, Orthodoxy is clearly the strongest religion. Despite the turbulence and violence of the region's history, public attitudes towards Russia remain broadly positive, reflecting much common experience and shared culture. Putin has enjoyed very high popularity ratings in both countries, higher at times than any local politicians.

But there are important differences between the two countries. In Ukraine there is a much stronger attachment to the native language and to the country's distinct cultural traditions. Most Ukrainians tell enquirers that they are not religious or do not clearly identify with a particular group. Those who identify as Orthodox are divided among the Moscow Patriarchate (about 30 per cent), the more nationalist Kyiv Patriarchate (formed in the early 1990s after independence – 40 per cent) and the Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church (about 3 per cent). Greek Catholic or Uniate Christians (15 per cent) are concentrated in the west of the country, where historical connections to Russia are weakest and attitudes generally hostile to Moscow.

A strong majority of Ukrainians tell pollsters that they favour Ukrainian independence (which they voted for resoundingly in 1991). But Ukraine is also the country Russians most regret losing, with Kyiv widely regarded as the historic heartland of their state and of national culture. As President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin found it politically expedient to agree to the secession of Ukraine and Belarus in December 1991, but most Russians probably still find it absurd that Ukraine has somehow become a separate country, complete with the Crimean peninsula and access to Russia's Black Sea Fleet. As Zbigniew Brzezinski once said, also very quotably: 'without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire'.²

2 See Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'The premature partnership', *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 1994, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1994-03-01/premature-partnership.

Putin has been at pains to draw Ukraine back into close communion with Mother Russia. In 2004, he overtly interfered in the presidential election, strongly supporting Viktor Yanukovich who, as he rightly judged, was much more pro-Russian than his Western-leaning rival Viktor Yushchenko. But Yanukovich's fraudulent victory was overturned by popular resistance, with some involvement from the judiciary and – mediated by the Polish and Lithuanian presidents – from the European Union. This treacherous involvement of former vassals enraged Putin, who always sees a political reverse anywhere in the former Soviet Union as the product of Western plotting, not popular will. He had nonetheless learnt a lesson: during the 2010 presidential election in Ukraine he kept his distance, at least on the surface, and Yanukovich won with full international acceptance.

In the current election cycle in Ukraine, both Moscow and Putin personally have been discreet, though their sympathies are obvious. Yanukovich awarded Russia a series of major unilateral concessions early in his term as president, most notably striking a deal on allowing Russia guaranteed access to its naval and security facilities in Crimea until the 2040s. But Putin has mixed feelings about Yanukovich because, when it became apparent that Russia was not planning to reciprocate with more than a temporary cut in the price of its gas, he became stubborn and started playing his Western/EU card more frequently, something Ukrainian leaders often do to ward off Russian pressure or strengthen their leverage.

As the price of gas resumed climbing, reflecting the rising cost of oil (the two typically being linked in Gazprom contracts), Ukraine desperately sought further price relief. Innumerable meetings have been held to discuss the subject, but each time Russia has insisted that concessions would only come if Kyiv agreed to sell its gas pipelines to Russia and join Moscow's Eurasian Customs Union (to which only Belarus and Kazakhstan have signed up so far). Putin continues strongly encouraging Kyiv to consider how much it is paying as a non-member of the union (US\$425 per thousand cubic metres) contrasted with how much Belarus pays (US\$165).

Meanwhile, Moscow continues to push its South Stream gas pipeline project, which, like the Nord Stream pipeline under the Baltic, is designed to bypass Ukraine and other unfavoured states. Moscow's purpose is to deprive these governments of their transit fees and

negotiating leverage, and to ensure that Russia is able to cut off their vital gas supplies to enforce its will while still servicing important customers like Germany and Italy further afield.

I recall a prominent Russian economist recounting how he and others like him had sought to remonstrate with Russian policymakers about the huge and, as they saw it, unnecessary costs of the bypass gas pipelines to north and south. They were told emphatically to back off; this was 'strategic'. The total costs are undoubtedly much greater than the alternative, an upgrading of Ukraine's and Belarus's ageing pipelines. But the Russians have turned a deaf ear to Yanukovich's pleas that they desist from constructing the new pipeline and invest instead in upgrading a friendly pro-Russian neighbour's infrastructure.

As the elections and South Stream's construction draw nearer, Yanukovich has shown signs of capitulating to Russian pressure. In August, he introduced a major change to Ukraine's language policy that greatly strengthens the position of Russian (something Moscow has long demanded, but which is extremely divisive within Ukraine). And, on 25 August 2012, on the margins of a meeting with Putin, he hinted broadly at his readiness to make unspecified concessions in exchange for cheaper gas.

One of Yanukovich's biggest problems is that he has all but burnt his bridges with the European Union, which further undermines his bargaining position with Moscow. Determined to rig the parliamentary elections in October more effectively than he did during his presidential bid in 2004, he has used his manufactured majority in parliament to change the electoral act to disadvantage the opposition and has restricted freedom of the media, particularly television.

To make doubly sure, he has prosecuted several of the previous government's ministers, including, above all, the former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko (whom he only narrowly defeated for the presidency in 2010) and the former interior minister Yuriy Lutsenko. After lengthy periods in pre-trial detention that were disproportionate to the flimsy charges against them, both were duly convicted and sentenced to long prison terms. After both then appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, further charges were laid to ensure

there would be a legal pretext for keeping them out of circulation beyond the elections if the court demanded their exoneration on the earlier charges.

The jailings are a misstep by Yanukovych on two grounds. While they have kept a formidable campaigner, Tymoshenko, off the hustings, they have also restored some of her erstwhile popularity and stimulated the opposition to work harder and cooperate better. And they are the clearest possible red line for the European Union and its member states. Brussels has repeated over and over again that the association and free-trade agreements laboriously negotiated and initialled with Kyiv will not be signed while Tymoshenko and Lutsenko remain behind bars.

But winning the election by whatever means was clearly more important to Yanukovych and his party than EU integration, despite his repeated claims that this was Ukraine's primary objective. He may be calculating that once his Party of Regions gets over the line he can make some magnanimous gestures to bring the deals with the European Union back to life. But if he does win the election by one means or another, he may decide his next objective should be to ensure that the opposition is disabled more permanently, which would attract a further reaction from Brussels.

Ukraine's difficult economic position means that it desperately needs financial support from somewhere. It was granted a US\$15 billion credit by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010, to be dispensed in several tranches, but the agreement was suspended because of compliance issues after disbursement of the second tranche and has not been renewed. Kyiv continues to try to extract further credits from the IMF, but without meeting the fund's tough conditions. Doing so would have affected the government's domestic popularity in the run-up to the elections. Again, this may be a matter that Yanukovych plans to come back to after the elections.

In the meantime, Ukraine is developing a number of credit arrangements with China that may, if all come to fruition, serve as a partial substitute for the IMF, as well as a warning to Moscow that Kyiv has other and worrying options. Russian banks (no doubt in consultation with the Kremlin) have also been more forthcoming than the IMF, providing Ukraine with credit facilities to help pay for its expensive gas imports

from Russia. But clearly such loans have the effect of helping secure Ukraine's head in Gazprom's noose. Yanukovich knows he could get more from Russia if he were prepared to sell more sovereignty. While so far he is holding out, he seems to be weakening.

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Belarus's President Alexander Lukashenka has also tried repeatedly, and with some success, to strengthen his freedom of manoeuvre by playing the European Union off against Russia. But despite intermittent family quarrels with Moscow, he has always been closer to Russia than any of his Ukrainian counterparts. And now he has backed himself into a corner. During the economic crisis into which his mismanagement plunged the country in 2011, he finally agreed to sell Gazprom the rest of Belarus's gas pipelines. He also appears to have agreed in principle to further privatisations of big Belarusian companies in favour of Russian purchasers. And he has not returned to the testy, even hostile relations with Russia that prevailed in the period leading up to the December 2010 presidential elections.

Since Boris Yeltsin's time in the later 1990s, Belarus and Russia have ostensibly been working towards some kind of unification. The Union State of Russia and Belarus, created under a different name in 1996, has passed through several mutations, but it has never amounted to much. Russia has always expected subordination, whereas Lukashenka, for all his Russophilia and intermittent enthusiasm for the project, was clearly only prepared to agree to unity if it involved a very senior position for him, perhaps even as president of the new entity. There is activity and enthusiasm from Lukashenka again on this front, however, and it can't be ruled out that progress might be made.

Lukashenka's flirting with the European Union has probably always been entirely cynical, intended only to gain ad hoc goodies and greater leverage in his dealings with Russia. Periodically, Brussels has held out inducements for him to embrace democracy, rule of law, human rights and so on, but with little success. Lukashenka's domestic regime has been so retrogressively Soviet that even Putin, himself something of a Soviet nostalgic, views both the President and his regime as slightly pathetic. Ideally, Lukashenka would like to see the return of some Soviet world in which he was the leader and the resources of the entire bloc were available for import into Belarus at bargain prices.

In their bilateral dealings, Putin has usually tried to pursue Russia's pragmatic national interests. His recent resumption of generous subsidies for Belarus's unreformed economy, which extracted it from its 2011 slump, was timed to pull Lukashenka back onto the reservation. But in the near future, Minsk will be under great pressure to sell its crown jewels to Russia and embrace some Russian-led economic reform. At that point, Lukashenka may revert to holding out his cap to Brussels, but it could be hard for him to play that game again.

During the first half of 2012, Belarus's export performance and balance of payments position underwent a mysterious improvement. Lukashenka also chose again to distribute wage increases to voters to improve the pre-electoral atmosphere. It seems that this further apparent economic top-up to what Moscow's tactical generosity had already given him resulted from a scam Lukashenka had employed against his Russian benefactors. Having access to Russian oil imports free of export duties at preferential prices for domestic consumption, Belarus had been processing and refining a substantial proportion of the oil and re-exporting it at a big mark-up, disguising it as solvents and diluting agents. When it became apparent that Moscow was onto this scam, Lukashenka appears to have attempted a similar manoeuvre in exports to Ukraine.

But the game is up. As the relatively independent *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* commented:

Moscow is dealing with this problem quietly ... but is not intending to let Lukashenka off the energy hook. His dependency will be long-term, and he must settle accounts for the subsidies he has received either by selling property in a best-case scenario, or in a worse one by surrendering his own grasp on power and the independence of his country.³

The scam, like the teddy-bear invasion, taps into the rich strain of farce, sometimes dark, that runs through public life in Lukashenka's Belarus. Speaking of farce, the parliamentary elections on 23 September have predictably resulted in yet another resounding win for Lukashenka's regime. Opposition representatives, who have been excluded from parliament since 2004, were again prevented from taking any

³ See 'Minsk prikidyvayet kak obmanut' soyuznika', *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 5 Sep. 2012, www.ng.ru/cis/2012-09-05/7_minsk.html.

effective part in the contest. Some of Belarus's brutalised opposition parties decided to boycott the election from the outset; others did so demonstratively in the last days before the poll.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer mission severely criticised all aspects of the conduct of the election. A rival Moscow-led observer mission pronounced it fully kosher. It would be tedious to enumerate even the main abuses but, by way of example, over one quarter of all registered voters cast their votes before election day in voting precincts where there was often no independent supervision. Opposition groups said the turnout was overstated by about 20 per cent.

But for Lukashenka the splendid victory demonstrates that the deep economic and social malaise and the political unrest of 2010–11 have been overcome. And in a sense they have been – thanks to a mixture of Russian economic subsidies, relentless repression and society's own relapse into passive resignation. The only threat to Lukashenka's power at this point comes from Moscow. But that is a real one, with which no doubt he will now be forced to come to terms.

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Lukashenka's regime is more dictatorial than Yanukovich's or even Putin's, though Putin's current course suggests Russia may be taking more and more leaves from the Belarusian book. What is clear is that the three regimes are moving progressively further away from the democratic and national promise of the early 1990s towards deepening autocracy, marked by high levels of corruption and repression, muffled public discourse, increasing estrangement from their European neighbours, and a regrouping – if at times acrimonious or reluctant – around Moscow as their shared cultural capital.

Neither Lukashenka nor Yanukovich wants to be a provincial administrator in a Russian-dominated Eurasian Union. But that is the unavoidable logic of Lukashenka's attitudes, political system and unreformed economy. Yanukovich still tolerates greater pluralism at home, defends his independence more stubbornly and displays more interest in achieving some sort of European orientation. But that interest does not extend to European values. For him, as for Lukashenka, the most precious thing that Moscow offers is an external guarantee for his autocracy. Both of them also look with interest to

China's potential as another munificent patron, whom they could hope to play off against Moscow without having to endure any hectoring about human rights and the like. China is displaying interest in these and other post-Soviet states and significantly building up its trading links with them. But that may still be a hedge too far.

Over the past two decades the European Union has managed, with a remarkable degree of success, to use the attraction of its model to integrate most of post-communist Eastern Europe. And, despite deepening 'enlargement fatigue', it is continuing to work with the tougher cases of the former Yugoslavia and the non-Baltic western republics of the former Soviet Union. It does not want – and its most eastern members emphatically do not want – to share a border with prickly autocracies falling in behind a rearming and increasingly nationalist Russian Federation.

Brussels has consistently left the door open for erratic wannabe members to turn over enough of a new leaf to qualify for some level of integration, and even potentially membership. It is prepared to reward those who show a commitment to taking on EU values and the *acquis communautaire*. It also reprovves and sometimes sanctions countries that flout those principles. But as the new cases get harder and the European Union continues to struggle with its long-running internal crisis, its power to attract and the force of its sanctions become weaker, and Ukraine and Belarus seem to slip further away from its outstretched hand.

Some would argue that the European Union should try to reduce the two countries' dependency on Russia by bending its rules as far as it takes to draw them into some kind of integration, in the hope that the values might start to filter in at a later date. But, given the behaviour of the two regimes, it's highly unlikely that such pragmatic agreements, even if they could be reached, would be ratified by all EU members. For the moment a weakened Brussels seems to have no good options.

Conditions for Putin to pursue his ultimate goal of a Eurasian Union are currently about as favourable as they are ever likely to be; and they are particularly favourable in the Slavonic core. The European Union is in crisis and Putin has pro-Russian autocrats in place in Kyiv and Minsk who need his support and for whom Russian is their native language and Russia a second homeland. Gas prices are under

some economic and political pressure internationally but, for the time being, gas blackmail is still a strong weapon. Oil prices, though always volatile, have so far been holding up well. And all three regimes seem to be headed very much in the same direction.

But, since 1991, the non-Russian former Soviet republics have become used to being their own masters, and drawing them firmly into the post-Soviet orbit and keeping them there has been like herding cats. In that respect, the culturally and linguistically close Ukrainians and Belarusians have not been much more amenable than the others. Keeping them all in the tent will probably involve long-term retention of expensive subsidies, which Putin's successors may find unattractive.

For their part, Russian generals, diplomats, intellectuals and political leaders seem to have been unable to restrain themselves from being all-too-nakedly imperious and imperial. And the urban populations of all three have a growing desire for dignity, democracy and respect. It's not yet an overwhelming majority taste, but there's enough of it around to make any structures Putin succeeds in launching or propping up more than a little unstable.

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