



Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev (L) speaks with his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yanukovich and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (R) as they walk at the Zavidovo residence in the Tver region, on Sept. 24. AFP PHOTO/ RIA-NOVOSTI/ KREMLIN POOL/ VLADIMIR RODIONOV

## **Ukraine and Russia as neo-Soviet mafia states**

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The new book on Russia by The Guardian's Moscow correspondent, Luke Harding, is entitled "Mafia State." It draws on U.S. diplomatic cables provided by WikiLeaks describing Russia as a "virtual mafia state."

A 2006 cable released by WikiLeaks described Ukraine's Party of Regions as "long a haven for Donetsk-based mobsters and oligarchs..." Harding discusses 10 criteria that make Russia a mafia state. All 10 apply to Ukraine. Hence, Ukraine is also a neo-Soviet mafia state.

First, the security services (FSB in Russia, SBU in Ukraine) are over-manned successors to the Soviet KGB and all-powerful.

Second, they draw on a Soviet political culture of xenophobia, spy-mania and conspiracy theories where the FSB and SBU assume foreigners to be spies.

Third, ruling elites are unaccountable and seek a monopolization of economic and political power. Russians and Ukrainians feel powerless with no influence over the authorities.

Fourth, elites have no remorse for crimes they have committed. They rule with impunity. As Russian president, Vladimir Putin was utterly cold in his handling of the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000 and Andrei Lugovoi was similarly nonchalant after being accused by the British authorities of assassinating Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006.

Leonid Kuchma, president of Ukraine from 1994 through 2005, has never shown any remorse for

his alleged role in the 2000 murder of journalist Georgiy Gongadze and, after the charges were dismissed on Dec. 15, demanded an inquiry into who was behind the “provocateurs.”

In Kuchma’s memoirs, “Posle Maidana” (2007), he is adamant that Western agents were behind the anti-regime protests in 2000-2004 and the Gongadze murder was a U.S.-backed operation to replace him by Viktor Yushchenko, president from 2005 through 2010. Viktor Yanukovych, who succeeded Yushchenko as president in 2010, has harangued Western leaders with the belief the U.S. was behind the Orange Revolution.

Harding writes about Lugovoi: “Some vital moral part is empty and lacking, as if someone had hacked off his conscience with a pair of giant scissors.” The same could be said about Kuchma.

Fifth, trials of opponents are meant to instill fear and subdue and marginalize the opposition so that the ruling elites can continue to be unaccountable. This is as true of Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s imprisonment in Russia as it is of Yulia Tymoshenko’s in Ukraine.

The International Federation of Human Rights and Kharkiv Human Rights Group point to a deteriorating human rights situation in Ukraine under Yanukovych. More than 50 activists and journalists have suffered political persecution under his first two years in power and the number of people dying in prisons doubled in 2010-2011 compared to the year before.

Sixth, Putin’s Unified Russia and Yanukovych’s Party of Regions, allies since 2005, are political twins using the Soviet Communist Party as their role models. As political machines they act as bulldozers destroying everything in their path and as vacuum cleaners they “expropriate” the country’s wealth. Both promise modernization but instead bring Brezhnev-era stability and stagnation.

Seventh, both regimes are built on eclectic neo-Soviet nationalism combining nostalgia for the Soviet Union, prioritization of Russian language and culture, hatred of Ukrainian nationalism and deep distrust of the West, particularly the U.S., Germany and NATO. Claiming a monopoly on patriotism they, as in the USSR, accuse the democratic opposition of being unpatriotic agents of the West who live of their grants.

Neo-Soviet nationalism is a threat to Ukraine’s democracy as seen by the actions of eastern Ukrainian presidents Kuchma and Yanukovych. The imprisonment of Tymoshenko, Yuriy Lutsenko and others by the Yanukovych administration are the first cases of political repression since Soviet Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky rule in the 1970s.

Neo-Soviet nationalism is more of a threat to human life than right-wing Ukrainian nationalism exemplified by the Svoboda party. Two people have died in Ukraine from political violence, both at the hands of Russian nationalists. On May 8, 2000, composer Ihor Bilozir was murdered in Lviv and on April 17, 2009, Maksym Chaika, a 20-year old student, was murdered in Odesa.

In 2003, the Yanukovych government celebrated Volodymyr Shcherbytsky’s 85th anniversary and the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor Soviet-induced famine from the 1930s. Deputy Minister Dmytro Tabachnyk was responsible for ensuring the Shcherbytsky celebrations went to plan while also campaigning for international support for the Holodomor to be classified as “genocide.” Today,

Yanukovych and Tabachnyk deny the Holodomor, which claimed the lives of millions of Ukrainians, was either specifically designed to target Ukraine or an attempted “genocide.”

Eight on the list is a merger of organized crime, corruption and the state.

Transparency International and the World Bank reported big declines in Ukraine’s rankings on doing business and corruption this year. Corporate raiding is massively growing, even by the admission of First Deputy Prime Minister Andriy Klyuyev.

Klyuyev epitomizes Soviet political culture – the incompatibility of building corrupt Putinism at home with European integration. He has combined the positions of chief Ukrainian negotiator with the European Union while allegedly being a main organizer of undemocratic practices during elections for Yanukovych (in 2004 he ran his shadow campaign) and the Party of Regions. Investigations by Ukrainska Pravda web site have linked Klyuyev to the Livella oil corruption scam and Yanukovych’s Mezhyhyria estate.

Ninth, policies directed at modernization, fighting corruption and integration into Europe are virtual – like Soviet calls to build a communist paradise by 1980 and fulfillment of five-year plans. Russian and Ukrainian leaders only have political will in two areas – personal self-enrichment and punishment of their opponents.

The 10th area permeating both mafia states is Soviet-style doublespeak. Russia has never sought membership of NATO and the EU and describes its path as a unique “sovereign democracy.” Ukrainian leaders claim they are building democracy and seeking integration into Europe.

At least the Russians are more honest as Kuchma and Yanukovych have sought to build “sovereign democracy” (i.e. Putinism) at home while seeking integration into Europe. Their mutual incompatibility was brought home on Dec. 19 when Ukraine failed in its earlier plans to ink an association agreement with the EU during a bilateral summit.

Both Russian and Ukrainian leaders lambast Western criticism, as seen in Silna Ukraina Deputy Leader Kost Bondarenko’s routine and droll attacks on European countries, specifically Germany. One of the greatest Western criticisms has been over selective justice against the opposition which the Ukrainian authorities have always rejected.

There are countless examples of Western criticism being condemned by Yanukovych and the Party of Regions. The Venice Commission condemned Ukraine on three occasions over constitutional changes, judicial reforms and the new election law. Criticism of the non-democratic conduct of Ukraine’s 2010 local elections has been brushed aside as have criticism of attacks on media freedoms.

Russian and Ukrainian leaders were once believers in communism and the formative periods of their lives were the Brezhnev era of stagnation. But, by the late 1980s most Communist Party members had lost faith in communism, becoming instead cynics and ideological chameleons.

In his position as Donetsk governor during the 1990s, Yanukovich praised the Soviet security services for their good service. As president nine years later, he laments the tremendous loss of life Ukrainians suffered under Stalinism. Which view does he believe in? Does he in fact believe in either?

Yanukovich has, for example, repeatedly stated that democracy is flourishing and that he cannot interfere in the Tymoshenko trial. The courts, he alleges, are independent. Few between Brussels and Kyiv believe these claims.

Ukrainians have heard such newspeak before. In 1936, a new Soviet constitution granted many democratic rights – on paper alone – to Soviet people just as Stalin’s policies of terror led to the murder of millions.

Yanukovich claims that Tymoshenko was justly sentenced for economic crimes that, in his words, incurred \$190 million in losses to the Ukrainian state. But he himself has served as a state official since the 1990s, earning a relatively small annual salary. He has no declared business interests, but his family seems to have amassed a fortune, allowing him to live in a palace-estate that would make European monarchs jealous.

In sticking with his contradictory lifestyle and rule, Yanukovich has demanded that the EU include a reference in the association agreement to Ukraine’s right to future membership, while he trampled on the most basic of European values. His behavior as president should not have surprised anyone. After all, Yanukovich has never accepted that there was election fraud in his favor during the 2004 fraud-marred presidential election vote that triggered the Orange Revolution.

According to numerous reports, Yanukovich has in recent months promised EU leaders repeatedly that he will resolve the Tymoshenko case by supporting the decriminalization of Soviet-era legislation used to sentence her. The empty promises proved to be nothing more than lies that have only deepened the level of mistrust towards him from the side of EU leaders, such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Through mouthpieces of propaganda, the Yanukovich administration blames Germany (it could be others) for Ukraine’s failed bid to integrate into Europe, suggesting that the largest economy in Europe is pandering to Moscow’s interests to keep Ukraine out of the EU. But Yanukovich steadfastly ignores growing criticism that it is his own roll back on democracy which is closing the door to Europe. Unaccountable elites will never take responsibility for their actions.

Foreign Minister Kostyantyn Gryshchenko always defended Ukraine’s “democratic standards” which ex-U.S. ambassadors to Ukraine took at their face value. At a Feb. 14 public talk in Washington, Gryshchenko offered “an eloquent defense of Ukraine’s recent record on democratic practices,” former Ambassadors Steven Pifer and William Taylor wrote in the New York Times on March 1.

It was in fact pure wishful thinking for Western leaders to believe in Yanukovich’s commitment to European integration (and thereby European values) until Tymoshenko’s Aug. 5 arrest led to their wake-up call. In the last two years, the Ukrainian authorities have shrugged off or condemned every instance of

Western criticism.

Doublespeak reflects the deep influence of Soviet political culture. When somebody believes in nothing they see no contradiction in saying one thing and then speaking another that contradicts the first. The presence of Soviet political culture means Western governments and international organizations should hold no credence in what Putin or Yanukovich, leaders of neo-Soviet mafia states, say or promise.

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