

First Anniversary of the Vilnius Summit

Or, how Tolstoy might have portrayed the legacies of Yanukovich and Putin

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It's time to reflect on the tumultuous year that has passed since President Yanukovich reneged on signing Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU, thereby provoking on 21 November 2013 the Maidan revolt against his dreadful regime. The EU's Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius a week later on November 28-29th saw the signing by Georgia and Moldova of their agreements alone. Yanukovich held on to his formal status as President until he fled for his life to Russia on 22 February 2014, long after he had ceased to control his country, and immediately following the 'snipers' massacre' of some dozens of Maidan supporters. In the intervening, fatal three months, the Maidan movement had swelled and in part become radicalised. This in turn triggered a flood of Russian disinformation about Kiev being run by fascists, which led on to the counter-Maidan in the eastern regions, with the rapid and bloodless annexation of Crimea, formalised in Moscow on March 18th. But then the counter-Maidan escalated into violent separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, supported by civilian and military Russians accompanied by tanks and other military hardware. Described as a 'hybrid' or 'covert' war, yet to this day denied by the Kremlin and the official Russian media, it is nonetheless a deadly war costing so far over 4,000 lives, including the foreign victims of flight MH17. Meanwhile Ukraine's leadership has been replaced democratically in presidential and parliamentary elections, respectively, on May 25th and October 28th, and its Association Agreement with the EU was ratified by the Rada and European Parliament simultaneously on September 16th.

The chronology of the last twelve months will not be further detailed here. It has just been touched upon to recall a few of the milestones. Rather, the task at hand is to begin tentatively to sketch the course of these events in terms of Ukrainian and Russian history. This may be framed by theories of history discussed in famous passages from Tolstoy's epic novel War

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and Peace. We draw in particular from its last chapter, on the role of leadership and power in the course of history, which is portrayed as a great and powerful river, whereas so-called 'great men' are no more than captains of ships trying to navigate the stream; on how the power of the single person at the top is only a conditional mandate of the "collective will" of the people, and on how "swift transferences of the people's will" can occur, and notably how civil wars, revolutions and conquests may be "the products of the ill-directed will of one or more individuals, that is ... as usurpations of power".¹ Of course the whole of *War and Peace* is about Napoleon as a genius, the single person at the top, who in the end miscalculated in attempting to take Russia, and ended his life incarcerated on a wretched little island in the Atlantic.

According to the presidential and parliamentary elections held in Ukraine in 2014, the collective will of a large majority of the Ukrainian people has expressed itself in favour of democracy, independence and Europe. This was consistent with the elections that had followed the Orange Revolution a decade earlier, which led to the Yushchenko-Tymoshenko tandem, who however went on to deceive the collective will of the people due to their squabbling incompetence.

Yanukovich as leader denied this collective will even more egregiously. His legacy is clear: the loss of Crimea, the virtual loss of the eastern Donbass regions, the loss of over 4,000 lives and horrific economic and financial losses and hardship for the whole country. Yanukovich usurped his presidential powers to try and divert the river of Ukrainian history away from its post-Soviet, democratic and European course. The diversion was a temporary one, but at what a cost.

The question can also be asked what the course of Ukrainian history would have been if Yanukovich had not reneged on signing at Vilnius. There would have been no Maidan, and then also no counter-Maidan, no loss of Crimea, no war over the eastern Donbass. As for Russia's concerns over the consequences of the Association Agreement with the EU for its own economy, an agreement had already been reached by the EU and Russia in June 2013 to discuss these in a format of structured consultations. These would surely have been difficult, but they might have been manageable. Yanukovich's presidency might have lasted out until its term ended, but given his deeply corrupt and inept performance, he would have been replaced at the next presidential election. And if he would have attempted to rig his re-election, that surely would have been resisted and prevented by another Maidan.

And what about Putin's legacy? His annexation of Crimea certainly resonated with the collective will of the Russian people, who celebrated joyfully. But also at a cost, which is mounting. Russia's intervention in Ukraine over the last year tore up all the rulebooks of international relations and public morality. Putin actually entitled his annual Valdai Club conversation with some foreign experts in September as "New Rules or No Rules". Putin tore up all ten of the basic principles of the 1975 Helsinki Treaty. Even more directly pertinent, he tore up the rules of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in which Russia had, along with the US and the UK, guaranteed the security of Ukraine in exchange for its nuclear disarmament (rule no 1: "Respect for Ukraine's independence and security within its existing borders"). As for public morality, there is the disinformation and propaganda about Kiev being run by fascists, about denial of Russian military intervention first in Crimea and then in eastern Ukraine, about MH17 having been shot down by the Ukrainian air force, silence over the return of body-bags back to Russia, etc. There may be no international treaty against the sin of lying, but for the remarkable prescience of Moses, whose ninth of the Ten Commandments in the

¹ English translation of Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* published by Penguin Classics, 1957 (p. 1,414).

common Bible of Western and Eastern Christians reads: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.”

Putin’s Russia of ‘no rules’ is therefore being sanctioned by the West. The track record of sanctions points to the great difficulty of making them effective. As a former diplomat at the UN Security Council asked, “Why are sanctions so popular when they are so often ineffective?” His answer was: “When there is the imperative of objecting to a foreign power’s behaviour, there is nothing else between words and war.”² The Kremlin chose war, the West chose not to reciprocate with what would have been a new world war, but rather more timidly with sanctions. But in this case, the evidence is mounting that Putin has brought upon Russia very serious economic costs with grave political implications.

The financial sanctions now combine with the plummeting of both the oil price and the rouble exchange rate. The economy was already stagnating and is now heading for recession and financial instability. Putin’s tactics on the politico-military side seem to combine opportunism with unpredictability: Will his tanks stay quietly in the separatist regions, or will they be used to expand the separatist territory, or drive further down the Azov Sea coastline past Mariupul to make a land connection with Crimea? But this amounts to a climate of grave strategic uncertainty, which is deadly for the economy. It raises the risk premium and required rate of return on investment to impossible heights. There can only be state investment, for which there is a finite and dwindling amount of money, and in any case this portends the end of economic modernisation. Putin’s international reputation was on show at the Brisbane G20 Summit, where he was placed at the end of the line in the family photo, after South Africa, and returned home early to avoid continuing embarrassment, after his pathetic show of pretence of power by sending four naval warships all the way down close to Australian waters.

How long can this behaviour remain consistent with the collective will of the people? For the first time, the expression ‘post-Putin’ is being heard in the last month or two on Russia’s only independent mass media (Dozhd television and Echo Moskvyy radio). The Kremlin has privileged politico-military-territorial objectives in Ukraine, while ignoring the economic consequences, and this begins to look like a strategic miscalculation, or Tolstoy’s “ill-directed will of one individual, and usurpation of power”. Maybe his legacy will be: to have tried but failed to restore the Soviet Union, to have regained Crimea but lost most of Ukraine, and in the course of so doing, cut his country off from the modern world and wrecked the advance of the Russian economy and his people’s well-being. Coincidentally or not, Putin announced yesterday (November 24th) that he would not carry on to be ‘President for Life’, but had not yet decided whether to stand down in 2017 or 2024.

Is there still time to put this course of Russian history back onto a more auspicious track? Much of the damage is already irreversible or promises at least to be very long-lasting: Russia’s new reputation as the enemy of Ukraine, and its renewed reputation as an all-too-risky place for investment. But a decent peace and de-militarisation in the separatist regions, with a clear return of Russian forces back home, would be helpful first steps. And what is the role of the European Union in all this? Stripped down to the level of Tolstoy’s caricatures of history, Europe just exists, and lets others choose. But that would be a bit too simple. The EU has to make its new Association Agreement with Ukraine work, be prepared to pay some big bills to bail out its partner’s virtually bankrupt economy, and to sustain or even intensify its sanctions against Russia – until and unless a decent peace descends on the region.

² Jeremy Greenstock, BBC.co.uk/news, 26.07.2010.



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