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The ugliness on the EU's eastern flank is dangerous to ignore

By Marko Attila Hoare, 21st April 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. The brutality with which the Moldovan regime of Vladimir Voronin is dealing with its domestic opponents represents an affront to civilised and democratic European values that should not be tolerated.**

- 2. The behaviour of the Voronin regime is not occurring in isolation, but is consistent with the behaviour of other Russian clients in Europe, of which the most egregious example is the Islamist-terrorist tyranny of Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya, within Russia's borders.**

3. Dependent as it is for the maintenance of its imperial sphere in Europe upon propping up such tyrannies, the Putin regime in Moscow is structurally incapable of playing by the rules or of being a good neighbour.

4. The Western alliance must take a very hard and vocal line against such abuses, naming and shaming their perpetrators, and should not shy away from moves that might destabilise the neo-Soviet order that generates them.

It's official - Serbs are the agents of Western imperialism ! This, at least, is what the xenophobic Communist dinosaur Vladimir Voronin, President of Moldova, seems to believe; he has [claimed](#) that nine Serb nationals, working for the US, were responsible for organising protests in the Moldovan capital of Chisinau. Indeed, just as the Poles and other Central Europeans spearheaded the revolution against Communist tyranny that swept across the Eastern Europe and the Balkans in 1989 and the former Soviet Union in 1989-91, so it was the spectacular popular revolution against the Milosevic regime in 2000 that presaged the subsequent 'colour revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. As democratisation spreads eastwards, so nations that were yesterday in the firm grip of tyranny are today viewed as sources of the democratic contagion by the tyrants and xenophobes who remain.

Moldova is not a one-party dictatorship and Voronin's regime may enjoy the support of a majority of Moldova's citizens. Yet the regime's reaction to the popular protests against the Communists' disputed electoral victory earlier this month shows that Voronin and his clique are anything but democrats. While the activists of Moldova's 'Twitter Revolution' carried US flags and demanded EU integration, Voronin resorted to the familiar demagogue's tactic of blaming evil foreign influences for the resistance to his regime. In addition to Serbs, he has singled out ['imperialist'](#) Romania as the instigator of the protests - the former land of Ceausescu is apparently now a dangerous source of democracy. The Romanian ambassador to Moldova has been

ordered out of the country and the Moldovan envoy from Bucharest recalled, while a visa regime for Romanian visitors is being **reintroduced**.

Natalia Morar, the supposed architect of the Twitter Revolution, has been placed under **house arrest** and may be charged with ‘inciting mass disorder’. A UN investigation has found evidence of the beating in prison of detained Moldovan protesters. Three people in total may have been killed in custody; the corpse of one, twenty-three-year-old Valeriu Boboc, was returned to his parents **covered in bruises**. Indeed, the torture meted out to prisoners has echoes of Serb concentration camps in wartime Bosnia. According to one victim, **Ion Butmalai**, ‘We were made to stand with our hands up facing a wall... They beat us with truncheons, and with their fists, and kicked us. They also hit us with rifles, on different parts of our bodies, in the head, in the back, in the legs.’ After being made to spend three or four hours outside in the cold, Butmalai says they were taken inside and forced to strip naked, then beaten again: ‘We were beaten until some of us were covered in blood, falling over. After that we were taken to the cells, 15 or 16 people to a cell.’

Police brutality, persecution of dissidents, extra-judicial killings and raging xenophobia are precisely what one would expect in response to popular protests from the regime of a president who, after being elected in 2001, **pledged** at a rally celebrating Lenin’s birthday: ‘Moldova must hold out in Europe as Cuba is holding out on the American continent... We will hold out to the end as Cuba is holding out among imperialist predators.’ You can take the apparatchik out of the Communist dictatorship, but you can’t take the Communist dictatorship out of the apparatchik. Yet Voronin’s tyranny does not exist in a vacuum: he is simply one of the clients of the Russian despot Vladimir Putin’s neo-Soviet empire. For Moldova never fully achieved independence following the break-up of the Soviet Union, as Moscow responded to Moldovan independence by providing decisive military support to separatists in Moldova’s Transnistria region, ensuring that this considerable slice of Moldovan territory would remain a Russian imperial outpost. Voronin has pursued a pro-Russian and anti-NATO foreign policy and **soft-pedalled** Moldova’s pursuit of the reintegration of Transnistria in return for the Kremlin’s backing. Moscow has ‘rewarded’ its

Moldovan client by not formally recognising the ‘independence’ of Igor Smirnov’s grotesque neo-Soviet puppet-regime in Tiraspol, as it has with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which it similarly hacked out of Georgia.

Voronin may be aspiring to be a [Moldovan Putin](#) and retain power behind the scenes after he steps down to make way for his presidential successor, but he is far from the worst of the Kremlin’s clients. That honour probably goes to the Russian-installed tyrant of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. Although Moscow justified its murderous and destructive reoccupation of Chechnya with the claim that it was fighting Islamist terrorists, it is Moscow’s own protege, Kadyrov, who has introduced an exceptionally crude and brutal Islamic regime in the country. He was recently reported as [justifying the murder](#) of seven young Chechen women in honour killings on the grounds that they had ‘loose morals’ and deserved to die. In the words of the [New York Times](#): ‘Kadyrov describes women as the property of their husbands and says their main role is to bear children. He encourages men to take more than one wife, even though polygamy is illegal in Russia. Women and girls are now required to wear head scarves in schools, universities and government offices.’ Meanwhile, Kadyrov has shown himself to be an adept instigator of [international terrorism](#), systematically assassinating his exiled Chechen opponents from Vienna to Dubai. With Russia this month declaring its military operations in Chechnya over, the results of its Pyrrhic victory are all too clear: the creation of a Islamist, terrorist [Frankenstein’s monster](#) enjoying arguably as much real independence as the rebel Chechen regime of the 1990s ever did, but exercising it with a great deal more brutality.

The nature of the regime in Moscow is such that it works ceaselessly to prevent democratisation and stabilisation in the region. Following his energy dispute with Russia in 2007, Belarus’s Alyaksandr Lukashenka has moved closer to the EU and relaxed the reins of his dictatorship. Yet [Russian pressure](#) on him to recognise the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may, in the entirely possible event that he succumbs to it, drive a new wedge between Belarus and the EU and derail the country’s reform.

In Georgia, meanwhile, pro-Western president Mikheil Saakashvili is far from being a model democrat. Yet as the *Economist* [notes](#), he is showing a willingness to reform: following a heavy-handed crackdown against protesters in November 2007 and resulting international disapproval, Saakashvili has responded with restraint to recent demonstrations against his rule, in a manner that contrasts favourably with Voronin's behaviour. Even Eric Fournier, the French ambassador in Tbilisi, recently [praised](#) the Georgian government's reaction to the protests as proof that 'Georgia is developing as a democratic country.' Yet the democratisation of Georgia, too, is being sabotaged by Moscow. In a manner reminiscent of Slobodan Milosevic's use of Kosovo Serb demonstrators to threaten and destabilise other Yugoslav republics, Moscow recently attempted to send a [convoy of vehicles](#) carrying activists of 'Nashi', the Kremlin's youth movement, into Georgia. The aim was to join the anti-government protests in Tbilisi, or failing that, to stage an incident at the demarcation line between Russian-held South Ossetia and government-held Georgia.

The Nashi foray was a continuation by other means of the Kremlin's brutal assault on Georgia last year; an [attempt](#) to prevent the country's transition into a functioning, economically successful Western-style democracy, and keep it within the Russian imperial sphere. Hardly surprising, then, that Saakashvili should be [apprehensive](#) about the possibility of a US detente with Russia in which Georgia would be sacrificed in return for Russian support for the US in other parts of the world: 'I used to idealize America under Bush, when ideas were above pragmatic politics. Now it is a new time, when pragmatic politics are in charge of ideas. That might spoil the America I know.'

There are [worrying signs](#) that the Obama Administration may be seeking an entente with Russia at the expense of the US's alliance with Central and East European states - Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Georgia - in the hope that Moscow will prove cooperative over Iran, Afghanistan and other areas. Such a policy would be disastrous. For quite apart from ethical objections to sacrificing relations with allies to appease an enemy, it simply will not work. The Russia of Putin and Dmitri Medvedev sees itself as a

great power with the right to its own imperial sphere of influence in eastern and southeastern Europe, one that it sees as rightfully extending over countries that aspire to join NATO and the EU. Organised as it is along fundamentally authoritarian and populist-nationalist lines, the Putin regime is aware that maintenance or extension of this sphere is fundamentally irreconcilable with democratisation of the countries that lie within it, and with acceptance of the same set of international legal norms employed by the European democratic family. The present Russian regime is, in other words, structurally incapable of playing by the rules and of being a good neighbour.

To counter this Moscow-inspired corrosion of the eastern flank of democratic Europe, the Western alliance must insist loudly on respect for democracy, law and human rights. Flawed democratic allies such as Georgia must be firmly pressed to reform, but equally, we must take a very hard and vocal line against abuses of the democratic process in Moldova; against violations of international law by Belarus; and against acts of international terrorism and persecution of women by Chechnya. States whose police beat up and kill peaceful protesters or imprison pro-democracy activists, or that collude in the territorial dismemberment of other states, or that assassinate their dissidents abroad, must learn that they will pay a very heavy price in terms of their relations with NATO and the EU. In the case of Chechnya, which is not an independent state, Russia should be named and shamed for promoting an Islamist-terrorist regime within its own borders.

Romania has responded to the Moldovan regime's behaviour by proposing that up to [one million](#) Moldovan citizens be granted Romanian citizenship. As [Paul Bisca](#) notes in the *Washington Post*, it is indicative of the EU's pusillanimity in its reaction to the Moldovan events, that it has been more upset by the supposed danger to regional stability represented by the Romanian plan than by the behaviour of the Voronin regime in the first place. In fact, if the Romanian plan helps to destabilise the order represented by Putin, Medvedev, Lukashenka and Voronin, it should be welcomed, not feared. There can ultimately be no *modus vivendi* in Europe between democracy and neo-Soviet tyranny. The other side appreciates that; it is time we did as well.

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