



# BULLETIN

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## Russian Strategy towards Ukraine's Presidential Election

by Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz

*Dmitry Medvedev's letter to Viktor Yushchenko is a clear signal of Russia's intention to influence internal developments in Ukraine, including the course of the presidential campaign. In the run-up to the January 2010 poll, unlike in the period preceding the Orange Revolution, Russia will very likely refrain from backing just a single candidate, and instead will seek a deepening of the existing divisions and further destabilization on the Ukrainian political scene, destabilization which it sees as helping to protect Russian interests in Ukraine.*

**Medvedev's Letter.** In an open letter to Viktor Yushchenko, dated 11 August, Dmitry Medvedev put the blame for the crisis in bilateral relations on the Ukrainian president, and he explained that the arrival of the new ambassador to Kiev, Mikhail Zurabov—replacing Viktor Chernomyrdin, who was recalled last June—would be postponed. Medvedev accused his Ukrainian counterpart of having knowingly abandoned the principles of friendship and partnership with Russia during the past several years. Among the Yushchenko administration's alleged anti-Russian actions, he listed weapons shipments and support extended to Georgia in last year's armed conflict in South Ossetia; endeavors to gain NATO membership (which, he wrote, were being pursued against the Ukrainian society and justified by the non-existent Russian threat); problems created for the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in the Crimea; putting in jeopardy the security of the joint gas pipeline network, as a result of separate agreements with the EU concluded without Russian participation; restricting Russian investors' rights in Ukraine; falsifying history (by imposing a nationalist interpretation of the Holodomor [famine] of the 1930s); driving the Russian language out of public sphere; interfering in the independent affairs of the Orthodox Church and expelling two Russian diplomats last July.

Dmitry Medvedev's critical letter came as a surprise. It elicited scarce comment in Russia, and the subject swiftly dropped off the front pages of the Russian press. Representatives of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Presidential Executive Office sought to tone down Medvedev's statement, indicating it did not mean a freezing of diplomatic relations.

**Reaction from Ukrainian Politicians.** An immediate reaction to the Russian president's pronouncements came from the leader of the Party of the Regions, Viktor Yanukovich, fully agreeing with Medvedev's criticism and issuing assurances of normal, good neighborly and mutually-beneficial partnership relations with Russia which his victory would bring about.

Viktor Yushchenko sent his reply two days later: he expressed disappointment with the letter's unfriendly tone and surprise at Medvedev's failure to notice Russia's co-responsibility for a deterioration in mutual relations. Yushchenko fended off all charges from the Russian president, arguing that Ukraine does not pursue an anti-Russian policy. On military supplies, he said Ukraine acted in accordance with international law, which has not imposed any embargo on such shipments to Georgia. In respect of NATO, he cited each sovereign country's right to choose their respective security policies, including participation in political and military alliances. He further added that Ukraine had met its commitments, assumed in 1997, concerning the deployment of the Black Sea Fleet on its territory, even despite serious violations of the agreed provisions by Russia. He assured his Russian counterpart that the modernization of Ukraine's gas-carrying system, being in line with international standards, would improve that system's security. He also rejected the accusation of a nationalistic interpretation of 20th-century history. In refuting the charges, Yushchenko raised

Russia's failure to observe the rights of that country's Ukrainian minority and he cited the positive assessment of a recent pilgrimage to Ukraine by Cyril, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. On the expulsion of two Russian diplomats, he said the Ukrainian government had thrice notified to Russia—and evidenced—their illegal activities on Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian president expressed readiness to cooperate towards improving the relations between both countries.

A statement was then issued by Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, who expressed her concern over the tone of the heads of state's public debate on bilateral relations, and she called for emotions to be restrained and problems to be solved at a negotiating table. She vowed that her public activity is aimed to deepen the mutually beneficial cooperation between Ukraine and Russia, and she emphasized her intention to develop partnership relations with Russia, based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity—but she emphasized that she would not allow any interference in Ukraine's internal affairs.

A position similar to that of Yulia Tymoshenko was taken by Arseniy Yacenyuk, another potential candidate in the forthcoming presidential election. Yacenyuk unexpectedly distanced himself from the policies of the Ukrainian president; he expressed hope that relations with Russia would improve after the election and he criticized Yushchenko, who, as he suggested, gave ample reasons to be seen as pursuing an anti-Russian policy.

**Russian Goals and Motives.** The sending of Medvedev's letter was neither emotional nor accidental. While none of the Russian accusations against Ukraine were new, one should mention the timing and the public form in which two-way differences were articulated. Several days later, Medvedev repeated his criticism of the Ukrainian authorities at a press conference he held with Angela Merkel.

An important goal behind the letter was to list issues of the greatest weight for Russia and specify the terms for a possible improvement in bilateral relations. In this sense, the letter's actual addressee was the next president of Ukraine, not the present one. There can be no doubt that Medvedev's pronouncements were also motivated by the desire to impact the just-starting electoral campaign. Relations with Russia would then become a major issue in the campaign, and the absence of an unequivocally indicated favorite would provoke candidates to seek Russia's indirect support. In addition, Ukrainian politicians were thus faced with an uneasy test of loyalty to the present head of state. Yulia Tymoshenko and Arseniy Yacenyuk, vying to enter the second round against the top-ranked Viktor Yanukovych, have found themselves in a tight corner: lack of support for their presidential-race rival, Viktor Yushchenko, in his conflict with president Medvedev, might be viewed unfavorably by their electorate.

The Russian president may have realized that sharp criticism of unpopular Viktor Yushchenko (who is scoring some 3% support in public opinion polls) may slightly increase the latter's following—the more so as the Russian accusations were easy to deflect (something which Mr. Yushchenko took to his advantage, by responding to Medvedev's letter and coming up with an address to the nation). Actually, an increase in Yushchenko's popularity during the campaign seems to be favorable to Russia, by calcifying the divisions among the pro-European candidates. A politically unstable Ukraine, at least in the short run, gives the best guarantee that the process of getting closer to NATO and the EU has slowed.

**Assessment.** The open letter indicates that in the run-up to the Ukrainian presidential election, Russia plans to take a different track than five years ago. The Russian authorities will very likely refrain from backing the candidate who, in their opinion, best takes into consideration their economic and political interest. A solution which is now seen as better for Russia is to petrify Ukraine's existing political divisions and use them to wrench concrete concessions, no matter who holds the country's presidency. Importantly, the president's influence on internal and foreign policies has been limited by a post-Orange-Revolution amendment to the Ukrainian constitution, and therefore Russia now prefers not to antagonize political forces that will participate in the formation of future governments.

Russia must remember the risk that overly ostentatious activity during the presidential campaign might give a boost to anti-Russian sentiments—and not only among backers of the former "orange camp." In such a situation, the foreign policy of the future president, even if it were Viktor Yanukovych, would very likely differ little from the line pursued by the present head of state.