

What Putin, Lukashenko and Yanukovych Share

By [David Marples](#)

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Last Friday marked the 10th anniversary of the imprisonment of former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Meanwhile, former presidential candidate Nikolai Statkevich, leader of the Belarussian Social Democratic Party, will start the third year of a six-year sentence in a medium security penal colony. In Ukraine, Yulia Tymoshenko will have completed two years of her seven-year sentence for "abuse of power" and "embezzlement" unless released under the pressure of the European Union.

All three are widely considered to be political prisoners. But while focus has often been on the wrongfulness of their detentions, less has been written about the motives of those behind them: Presidents Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukashenko and Viktor Yanukovych.

They have much in common. All three are products of the Soviet era. They are all of similar age: Yanukovych is 63, Putin is 61 and Lukashenko is 59. All three have a checkered past. Yanukovych has a criminal record, now erased, Putin instituted harsh repressions in Chechnya, and Lukashenko has effectively usurped power by eliminating the 1994

Constitution and empowering the KGB to harass and punish opponents.

What is more, all three have a gangster mentality. Their language is populist but crude. Of the three, Putin is the most articulate, though Lukashenko is equally comfortable before an audience with pre-circulated questions or speaking off the cuff. All have an inclination to undermine their rivals by eliminating them as potential threats.

More simply put, enemies must be destroyed.

In Putin's case, the charges against Khodorkovsky are not entirely false. Without doubt, he and others took advantage of the loans-for-shares policy of a fragile Russian state during the 1990s. By buying lucrative oil companies at cut rates, the new oligarchs could quickly make fortunes. Yukos was the leading company in Russia in 2003, and Khodorkovsky was the country's richest man. But his sentence was extraordinarily harsh and politically motivated. His original charge was for tax evasion. Five years on, he was sentenced again for embezzlement and money laundering. More allegations will likely surface before his sentence ends in 2017.

Lukashenko's arrests of political prisoners are well known. The most recent batch derives from the demonstration in Minsk after the December 2010 presidential election, when seven presidential candidates initially ended up in jail, and two others were released after denouncing their fellows.

They were taken to KGB isolation cells and subjected to a variety of tortures, including standing naked in cold temperatures, getting beaten and being deprived of contact with families and lawyers. The goal was to force them to request pardons through admissions of guilt. Several did so. Two subsequently fled abroad and received asylum in the Czech Republic and Britain. Statkevich refused to ask for clemency and remains incarcerated.

Tymoshenko's case has been in the headlines since she was detained in 2011. A murder case has also been drawn up relating to events in the 1990s when she was deputy energy minister and a close ally of the disgraced former Prime Minister Pavlo Lazarenko. Her situation has been much publicized in connection with the forthcoming EU summit in Vilnius, when it is scheduled to sign an association agreement with Ukraine. Although both the government and opposition favor signing, the EU thinks that the release of Tymoshenko should be a precondition.

But Yanukovich has balked at releasing Tymoshenko, who would be expected to run against him in the 2015 presidential election. He is taking a serious risk. If the EU summit fails, Ukraine will have few alternatives to joining the Russia-led Customs Union, with Kazakhstan and Belarus. For Yanukovich, such a failure could end his political career.

Each leader could gain significantly from showing clemency. According to recent opinion polls, a majority of Russians would welcome the release of Khodorkovsky, who can hardly be considered a serious rival now with his wealth dissipated and with several reports about his poor health and depression.

Statkevich has never been a major political threat to Lukashenko, yet he has been treated harshly in his punishment cell. His roommate in prison for two months was a prisoner with

tuberculosis. It is a common practice to place political prisoners alongside difficult inmates. In January 2012, Statkevich was transferred from the correctional facility in Shklov to a stricter prison in Mogilev. The president will not release him until he requests a pardon.

Tymoshenko is suffering from spinal disc issues. Unlike her two fellow internees, she has been able to publicize her case widely. Two distinguished politicians, Alexander Kwasniewski and Pat Cox, who have been monitoring criminal cases against leading opposition members in Ukraine, presented Yanukovich with a petition for Tymoshenko's release Oct. 2. The president appeared to consider consenting but has not allowed her to depart to Germany for medical treatment.

In each instance, liberation of prisoners is perceived as a major concession. From the leaders' standpoint, the Europeans are interfering. Lukashenko has even accused them of spying. Any sign of vulnerability in their authoritarian states could reduce the chances of engineered election victories in the future. They see no democratic opposition but only see enemies backed by hostile powers prepared to fund their campaigns.

Of the three, Yanukovich is a relative neophyte. He has been in office for only three years, compared to 13 years for Putin and 19 years for Lukashenko, Belarus' only president since its independence.

The Ukrainian leader is also in an unusual position in that the EU seems prepared to grant him considerable license, despite past transgressions. One reason is that the Eastern Partnership founded in 2009 has been notably short of discernible successes to date. Ukraine's signing, accompanied by the initializing of EU Association Agreements by Moldova and Georgia in late November, would be a major step forward.

But a mere signature on paper will not change Yanukovich's outlook or policies. In this respect, there is little to choose between the countries on the EU's inside track, Ukraine, and outside it, Belarus and Russia. Of the three presidents, Yanukovich, despite his potential success with the Europeans, is the least secure in office. The Ukrainian opposition remains strong, and the allies of his Party of the Regions are dissatisfied with his leadership and direction.

Twenty-two years after the Soviet collapse, the mindset of the current leaders of the three Slavic states remains very similar. They will take whatever is given to them without making concessions and regard any form of "engagement" as evidence that their Western neighbors are showing a lack of resolve.

Domestically, the quasi-democrats that succeeded the former Soviet leaders have "strutted and fretted" their brief time on the stage and departed. The hard-liners who replaced them perceive their states as a form of self-image and follow democratic rules only insofar as they can derive personal benefits. Although ostensibly moving toward Europe, the difference between Ukraine and its Slavic neighbors at the elite level is narrowing rather than widening.

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