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Why Kleptocracies Don't Get Along

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President Vladimir Putin traveled to Kiev on July 27. The official reason for the visit was the 1,025th anniversary since Kievan Rus adopted Christianity, but the real reason for the trip was that it was apparently Putin's last attempt to convince Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych to join the Customs Union with Russia.

Those talks failed, and only two days after Putin's visit, Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's vigilant chief sanitary inspector, suddenly discovered benzopyrene in chocolates from Ukraine and banned their import into Russia.

The factory that produces these chocolates belongs to pastry king Petro Poroshenko, whose extensive assets in Ukraine also include auto-assembly plants. Under pressure from Poroshenko, the Ukrainian government imposed prohibitive import duties on foreign cars, particularly those produced by Russia's AvtoVAZ, a company near and dear to Putin's heart.

Ukraine did not understand the warnings. Yanukovych not only had no intention of joining

the Customs Union, but planned instead to sign an agreement with Europe establishing a free-trade zone.

Then, Putin reportedly instructed his officials to restrict Ukrainian exports. And because Russia has no real system of government and everything is carried out based on vague orders from the top, officials became overly zealous and ended up banning all imports from Ukraine.

Russia has invested an insane amount of money and effort in discrediting the Orange Revolution, and Putin's inner circle has always had huge and completely unrealistic plans for Kiev. They assumed that after the collapse of the Orange Revolution, Putin's men would be able to buy up everything they wanted in Ukraine. It has been reported that after Yanukovych came to power, Russia's presidential administration sent an extensive list of factories, newspapers, steamships and so on to Kiev that St. Petersburg businesspeople with ties to Putin had wanted to purchase for a song. They got nothing. Everything they were after went instead to Yanukovych's friends, supporters and business partners in Donetsk.

In fact, Ukraine has nothing to discuss with Russia. The only thing that makes sense is for Kiev to negotiate with Europe, which has transparent rules.

What can Russia offer Ukraine? Corruption? Know-how on imprisoning opponents on trumped-up charges? New skills and techniques on how to seize private property? Ukraine has enough expertise in these fields that they hardly need Russia's help.

Democratic states enjoy a certain camaraderie among themselves, and despite their shortcomings democracies manage to peacefully coexist. At least, they do not behave like unruly neighbors, tossing beer bottles into each other's yards. But in contrast, there can never be an international brotherhood of kleptocracies. All of the deals Putin struck with Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko or all of the pow-wows Putin once had in Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi's tent did nothing to change this.

The very nature of modern authoritarian kleptocracies makes it impossible for them to have meaningful working relationships. Such states are built exclusively upon the principle that the president distributes the country's wealth among his friends. And when two such leaders come together, they can smile all they want for the press and claim to have reached agreement on this or that issue, but they can't pretend that businessmen in St. Petersburg own factories in Ukraine that have already been sold to local business moguls in Donetsk.

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