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Russia's western neighbours

Ukraine comes to the forefront

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An already fragile Ukraine has been made a lot more nervous by Russia's war with Georgia—and it is not alone



EPA

THE first priority for Europe after Russia's short August war with Georgia was to secure a ceasefire and a genuine pullback of Russian forces (see [article](#)). The second was to start fretting about Russia's other neighbours. And the most significant of these by far is Ukraine.

Ukraine could not have ignored the war even if it had wanted to. Sebastopol, on the Crimean peninsula, is home to Russia's Black Sea fleet, some of whose warships dropped anchor off the Georgian coast during and after the fighting. Evidence of Ukraine's proximity to the conflict is also on show at Moscow's military museum, where visitors can gawp at war booty: Georgian T-72 battle tanks that were modernised in Ukraine. This, say the Russians, shows Kiev's support for what it sees as a "criminal regime". Indeed, Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's president

(pictured above) flew to Tbilisi to support his counterpart and friend, Mikheil Saakashvili.



The world is crazy.

Add to this the fact that Russian nationalists believe Crimea, which has a large ethnic Russian population, should be returned to Russia (there are rumours of new Russian passports being handed out, just as happened in South Ossetia and Abkhazia). Throw in, too, the fact that Ukraine, like Georgia, has for years been trying to secure a place in both the European Union and NATO. The inevitability of Ukraine catching a post-war cold becomes clear.

Ukraine's always anarchic politics have been directly shaken up by the war. The usually pro-Western government led by Yulia Tymoshenko, the prime minister, is unravelling. The first cracks emerged when Ms Tymoshenko blocked a parliamentary motion to condemn Russia's aggression. She also resisted Mr Yushchenko's attempts to impose restrictions on the Black Sea fleet, accusing him of populism ahead of a presidential election in 2010 that both will contest. But it was her decision to join, temporarily, with the pro-Russian Party of the Regions, led by Viktor Yanukovich, so as to push through legislation diluting presidential authority, that incensed Mr Yushchenko, who promptly pulled his own Our Ukraine party out of its coalition with the Tymoshenko block.

Mr Yushchenko claimed that Ms Tymoshenko had formed a de facto rival coalition with Mr Yanukovich's party. Ms Tymoshenko urged him to reconsider and "save" a political partnership that burst on to the world stage in the Kiev snow in the 2004 "orange revolution". Both went on television to put their case, evidence (said some) that their relations had become so sour that they could no longer bear to sit down and talk to one another.

Even by Ukrainian standards, the recriminations have got out of hand. Mr Yushchenko accused Ms Tymoshenko of "high treason", suggesting she was a Kremlin agent out to win Moscow's support (and financial backing)

for her presidential bid. Even as she begged his party to rejoin the coalition, she poured scorn on him, poking fun at his abysmal popularity ratings. (One poll gave him 5%, against 22.5% for her.) Yet Ms Tymoshenko is no Russian stooge. She says her muted response to the Georgian war is motivated by a desire to guarantee Ukraine's territorial integrity—without inflaming relations with Russia.

Ukraine faces three political options: a fresh parliamentary election, a face-saving truce between Mr Yushchenko and Ms Tymoshenko or a new coalition between Ms Tymoshenko and Mr Yanukovich. America's vice-president, Dick Cheney, made his preference abundantly clear on his recent whistle-stop tour of Baku, Tbilisi, Kiev and Rome by calling for orange unity. He said that Ukraine should be "united domestically first and foremost, and united with other democracies." He reiterated that the Bush administration backed Ukraine's NATO aspirations, angering Mr Yanukovich, who pointed out that a majority of Ukrainians are against joining.

At a European Union-Ukraine summit in Paris on September 9th, the EU too had little beside warm words of support to offer. The "maximum" it could do, said France's Nicolas Sarkozy, was to offer to sign a vague "association agreement" next year. But unlike similar-sounding agreements for the Balkan countries, this one would not carry any implication of eventual membership. Countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany are unwilling at this stage even to hint at candidate status for Ukraine.

The Russians have been publicly silent about Ukraine in recent weeks, knowing that they hold some strong cards, besides having just defeated Georgia. Ukraine is almost entirely dependent on Russia for its oil and gas, for uranium enrichment, and as a market in which it can sell its own goods. It may agonise about its east-west choice, but in reality it will have to maintain reasonable relations with Moscow as well as the rest of Europe.

The Georgian war is reverberating among Russia's other western neighbours. The Baltics, already in both the EU and NATO, are still wary. Belarus, Europe's "last dictatorship", is trying to use the war to thaw its frosty relationship with the West. Resisting Russian pressure to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia immediately, Belarus's president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, said he would let a new parliament decide the matter, after an election at the end of September. It is not, he hinted, a foregone conclusion; he even added that it would be wrong to "run with the crowd" (what crowd?) and recognise the two regions simply because Russia had done so.

Mr Lukashenka's diplomatic tiptoeing came as the EU publicly voiced a desire to reward Belarus for releasing three political prisoners in August, a

move that led to a slight easing of Western sanctions on the country. Mr Lukashenka seems also to have ruled out the possibility of hosting Russian nuclear missiles on his soil as part of the Kremlin's response to America's planned missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic. Yet he still rejoiced, in an interview with a Russian daily, *Izvestia*, that Moscow had got one over Washington. "The Americans got kicked in the teeth for the first time in years," he said. "That means something, you know!"

Tiny Moldova is also anxious. Like Georgia, it has a breakaway enclave, Transdnistria, that is "protected" by Russian troops. Although Moldova has no aspirations to join NATO, it is keen to get into the EU. Its president, Vladimir Voronin, met his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, in late August. Mr Medvedev said there was a "good chance" of settling the dispute. But after the August war, the Moldovans fear, rightly, that this might be done only on Russian terms.

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