

### **IS UKRAINE RIPE FOR THE PICKING ?**

No doubt, the President of The Russian Federation, Mr Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, must, today, be licking his lips while scanning intelligence reports that appear to be marking the beginnings of a very chaotic situation as it ferments further, day after day, in Kiev, the Capital City of Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin, who is, today, 63 years old, knows all about chaotic situations and how to initiate them be such since he has had a hand in many of them, over the years.

Last Monday-week (August 31, 2015), Ukraine time, there was the genesis of a very ugly situation in Kiev: Nationalists fought riot policemen, resulting in the death of at least three National Guard Officers and injuries to some 140 people, with 11 of the injured, still in very critical condition as this report was being finalised before going to Press.

Most of the 140 people who were injured were still in hospital, last Saturday, and most of them are law-enforcement officers.

The three dead National Guard Officers died from their wounds, caused by one of the Nationalists, throwing a grenade into the line of Officers.

The Nationalists were armed with truncheons, pipes and sticks, encrusted with nails.

The law-enforcement officers were armed with shields and truncheons, only.

It was the worst incident of civil disobedience in the country since President Petro Poroshenko came to power on June 7, 2014.

The fighting, ostensibly, broke out due to 265 Members of the Ukraine's Parliament, out of 450 Members (about 58.89 percent), agreeing to a number of reforms in respect of granting more autonomy to areas in the eastern part of the country where pro-Russia factions had claimed that they had established two independent republics, having separated from the Kiev Government.

The parts of the country that are under the control of pro-Russia militants are the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions, very close to the boundary that separates Ukraine from The Russian Federation.

Thus far, The Russian Federation has not commented very much on this situation, but it is highly unlikely that President Vladimir Putin is not keeping himself well informed of the latest events as they unfold in this former satellite state of The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

#### **First, A Little Bit of History**

Ukraine was granted independence from the USSR in 1991, following the dissolution of the USSR on December 26, 1991.

That was at the time that Mr Mikhail Gorbachev was President of the USSR. He stepped down from office, one day prior to the declaration of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, acknowledging the independence of the former republics of the USSR, thus creating The Commonwealth of Independent States that came to known by the acronym: The CIS.

Since becoming independent of the USSR, Ukraine, as a sovereign nation in its own right, has had problems in introducing democratic principles to its 44.30 million citizens, most of whom have yet to enjoy the prosperity that they fully expected upon becoming independent from the USSR.

Economic reforms have been slow in coming, during the past 24 years, and corruption has flourished at the very highest levels of Government, especially under the leadership of Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich.

In November 2013, President Viktor Yanukovich, who had risen to power from Prime Minister (in August 2006) to President (in February 2010), made an about-turn on a trade agreement with the **European Union (EU)** in favour of fostering closer ties with The Russian Federation with the express approval, of course, of President Vladimir Putin, who had become close to the Ukrainian President.

Civil disobedience, leading to violence, followed on from the announcement of the about-turn and, for a period of about three months, protestors occupied Kyiv's Central Square in Kiev.

Force was, then, used to try to break up the occupation protests in February 2014, leaving many of the protest leaders and their followers dead on the streets.

With President Viktor Yanukovich's failure to curb civil disobedience within Ukraine, he made a rather hasty retreat, seeking refuge in The Russian Federation – with the blessings, of course, of his friend, President Vladimir Putin.

In the spring of 2014, new elections were held in Ukraine and Mr Petro Poroshenko assumed the office of President.

What followed, then, shocked the Western World: President Vladimir Putin ordered an armed invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, claiming that Russia's intention was, simply, to protect the majority ethnic Russian population, living in that part of Ukraine, numbering about 1.50 million, men, women and children.

Two weeks after the Russian invasion, the people of the Crimean Peninsula held a referendum in order to make a determination as to whether or not to integrate into The Russian Federation.

Predictively, the result of the referendum was a forgone conclusion.

History records that the referendum proved, conclusively, that more than 90 percent of the Russian-speaking population of the Crimean Peninsula were in favour of the Ukrainian territory, being welcomed back as an integral part of The Russian Federation.

The referendum was labelled as being invalid by EU, The United States of America as well as the General Assembly of The United Nations.

Be that as it may, the Crimean Peninsula is, today, part of The Russian Federation and President Vladimir Putin has stated, on numerous occasions, that it shall always be a Russian possession.

To this day, The Russian Federation continues to support the Pro-Russia separatists of the East of Ukraine.

State-of-the-art weaponry, Russian military manpower, and funding, when necessary, are made available to the Pro-Russia, irregular military as it engages in regular skirmishes with Ukraine Army units.

All this and more has been the end result of the Russian Government's interference in the affairs of Ukraine.

### **The Potential Ukrainian Dilemma**

Would it be totally unthinkable for there to be two more referenda, held in Ukraine in the two, self-proclaimed '*republics*' in the Donetsk and Luhansk Regions of the country?

As everybody and his/cat knows, Ukraine, prior to December 26, 1991, was an integral part of the USSR.

Following the dissolution of the USSR, today's demographics of Ukraine are, inter alia, 77.80 percent Ukrainian and 17.30 percent Russian.

Thus, of the total population of Ukraine (about 44,429,471 people), about 34.57 million people are ethnically Ukrainian versus 7.69 million people are ethnically Russian.

As for the two major languages of the country, 67.50 percent of the permanent residents of Ukraine speak Ukrainian (about 29.99 million people) and the Russian language is spoken by 29.60 percent of the permanent residents (about 13.15 million people).

President Vladimir Putin would be well aware of the aforementioned intelligence and, being a staunch patriot of The Russian Federation, it would be in keeping with his political philosophy to want to protect 'his' people, wherever they may be.

This was demonstrated on March 18, 2014, when the ethnically Russian population of the Crimean Peninsula begged The Russian Federation to allow Crimea, once more, to be an integral part of The Russian Federation despite the fact that the land, legally, at international law, was the sovereign territory of Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin does not suffer fools gladly and so it is quite likely that it shall be he, alone, who determines when is the best time to squeeze the trigger with regard to any actions that he decides to take in respect of Ukraine.

He is, still, smarting from the 1991 determinations of the former President of the USSR, Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, in respect of his plan for the dissolution of the USSR.

He has stated his ire, openly, in this respect on many an occasion.

He, also, cannot be said to be a friend of the current President of Ukraine, Mr Petro Poroshenko.

(In truth, it would be fair to state that Mr Petro Poroshenko considers Mr Vladimir Putin his enemy. This has been exemplified on a number of occasions when the two presidents had to attend the same conferences on neutral territory: The animosity between these two leaders could have been cut with a knife.)

But the wily President Vladimir Putin must hold with the theory that, if one gives a sufficiency of rope to an enemy, that enemy will find a method to hang himself.

It does appear, therefore, that if the Ukraine Parliament votes in favour of allowing the Pro-Russia Separatists of the Donetsk and Luhansk Region of the country to be granted further powers, following the passing of a Decentralisation Bill, it might well be considered a lit fuse as far as The Russian Federation is concerned.

It is well known, also, that the two self-proclaimed republics in the east of Ukraine want to be completely independent of Kiev and will settle for nothing less than that.

The leaders of these self-proclaimed, Eastern Ukrainian republics have stated, openly, that the Decentralisation Bill does not go far enough in spite of the fact that it was The Russian Federation that demanded a decentralisation of Ukrainian Governmental powers.

Speaking recently from Donetsk to Russian news agencies, one of the leaders of the Pro-Russia Separatists, Mr Alexander Zakharchenko, said that the President Petro Poroshenko had taken out a clause in the Decentralisation Bill that would permit sovereignty to the east of Ukraine.

While the Decentralisation Bill has been given preliminary approval by the Ukraine Parliament, the Bill comes up for a final vote where it can only be passed with at least 300 votes in favour of it.

If it does not pass, then ...

Enter, Stage Left: Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

### **President Vladimir Putin's Achilles Heel**

The one, very obvious failure of President Vladimir Putin – his Achilles Heel, if you will – is his undeniable hubris.

At the age of 63 years, one would have thought that he would have accepted the inevitable: He is ageing.

One quick look at the changing face of this leader of The Russian Federation, over the past 15 years or so, indicates, among other things, that he has lost a great deal of hair on his head and that his abdominals are no longer chiselled as before.

This, and much more, is indicative of the fact that he is unable, today, to take part in the strenuous activities of yesteryear: His body can no longer comply with his mind's desires.

For a man of 63 years, there is little that is exceptional about the body's ageing mechanism and, to most people, ageing is an acceptable part of living, leading to dying.

But, for some people, ageing is unacceptable and they refuse to admit that time takes its toll on us, all.

Obviously, not for this leader of about 144 million men, women and children.

President Vladimir Putin believes that he has not changed, appreciably, maintaining his macho tough-guy image of years gone by – *'Just look at my photographs and see how I ride a horse!'*

Recently, President Vladimir Putin agreed to have his torso photographed in a gymnasium, clearly as a demonstration of his great strength to the world and the fact that he maintains a regimen of clean living and regular exercises.

The officially released photograph shows President Vladimir Putin, exercising in a gymnasium at the Bocharov Ruchei State residence in Sochi, Russia, on August 30, 2015.

One has to ponder:

*Are these photographs meant to indicate the confidence of this healthy weight-lifter or, perhaps, the consternation of an ageing, world leader who fears that his public persona is endangered?*

If President Vladimir Putin's health was imperilled, one can only conjecture as to what would happen in The Russian Federation.

There is no clear line of leadership succession in the country because, among other things, power has been, for many years, vested in President Vladimir Putin and his political allies who rely, solely, on him.

Without Mr Vladimir Putin at the helm of The Russian Federation, aside from the unpredictability of the political situation in one of the strongest, military countries of the world, there is the fear of catastrophic consequences should a political weakling come to power.

The photographs of President Vladimir Putin in a gymnasium, along with other photographs of him, riding, shirtless, on a horse, swimming in ice-cold water, or sitting in the cockpit of a Russian-made, long-distant bomber as it sits on the tarmac, cannot be indicative of the power of the man, guiding the fortunes of The Russian Federation, but of fear should it be perceived as the President's inability to maintain health with the country, being forced to find his replacement.

Does President Vladimir Putin suffer from that unpleasant emotion, commonly called, '*fear*', an emotion that is the result of the threat that his body is failing him, and, should this stage in his physical deterioration become patently evident, will this signal the beginning of the end of his monarchy?

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