

Russian-Ukrainian tensions with the anniversary of the Christianisation of Kyivan Rus in the background

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On 27-28 July, President Vladimir Putin took part in celebrations commemorating the 1025th anniversary of the conversion to Christianity of Kyivan Rus. After the religious part of the visit, the Russian president met the President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich, and participated in a conference entitled 'Slavic-Orthodox values – the basis for Ukraine's civilisational choice'. This conference had been organised by Viktor Medvedchuk, a former head of administration for President Leonid Kuchma. Medvedchuk who is closely associated with Russia's top politicians, has lobbied for Ukraine's integration with the Customs Union.

Commentary

- The face to face meeting between Putin and Yanukovich only lasted 15 minutes. This should be seen as an affront to the Ukrainian president, caused by the two sides' failure to reach agreement on some key issues of bilateral relations: renegotiating the gas contract, and the prospects for Ukraine's integration with the Customs Union. In a speech at the conference organised by Medvedchuk, President Putin announced the main message of his visit: he spoke of the common spiritual and cultural roots of Ukraine and Russia, and of a centuries-old 'community of destiny'. Putin stressed the contribution of Ukrainians to the construction of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, as well as the profound modernisation of Ukraine which was made possible by union with Russia. The speech ended with a clear indication that Ukraine can develop only as a member of the Customs Union. Putin's words, which were addressed primarily to the Ukrainian public, can be read as a warning to Yanukovich, and as a signal towards those Ukrainian voters who favour rapprochement with Moscow (who constitute a majority of the Party of Regions' electorate) that the Ukrainian president is not making good on his promises to cooperate with Russia.
- The political exploitation of the celebration of Rus's Christianisation by Russia is characteristic of the Kremlin's current foreign policy, which is working to consolidate its political position in the post-Soviet area by making use of the cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church. The interests of the Russian government in this area are in line with the aspirations of the Moscow Patriarchate, which wants to assume the role of heirs to the whole Eastern Christian tradition, and seeks to dominate the so-called *russskiy mir*

(‘Russian world’), the transnational space dominated by the Russian language, culture and Orthodox tradition, which also includes Ukraine.

- The key role in organising the celebration of the anniversary of the Christianisation of Kyivan Rus was played by the Russian government, which took advantage of the religious ceremony to symbolically emphasise its pursuit of Ukraine’s subordination. The main objectives of Russian policy towards that country are to prevent Kyiv from coming closer to the EU and to achieve its membership in the Customs Union. To achieve this Moscow is resorting to political and economic pressure. These measures include a ban on imports into Russia from the Ukrainian confectionery company Roshen, announced on 29 July by the head of the Russian sanitary service Gennady Onishchenko; the non-economic dimension of this move is shown by the fact that Kazakhstan and Belarus have verified the company’s products, thus failing to confirm the Russian allegations. After the liquidation of duty-free import quotas for pipes (July) and the temporary ban on dairy imports from Ukraine in 2012, this is another move intended to show Kyiv that moving closer to the EU will result in losses for the Ukrainian economy.