

# The EU's farmers are the victims of EU expansionism

Would you like to live in Vladimir Putin's Russia? Probably not. It's less oppressive than the Soviet Union used to be but it's hardly a bastion of freedom compared with the UK. Mr Putin isn't a particularly pleasant man; suspicions persist regarding his involvement in the assassination of the Russian security officer Alexander Litvinenko in London and a number of his opponents within Russia itself have died in mysterious circumstances.

So the idea that the good folk of Ukraine of their own free will want to keep as much distance as possible from this nasty man and align themselves, like the former Warsaw Pact nations, to those bastions of liberty in Western Europe is at first glance a pretty convincing narrative. Unfortunately, it doesn't stand up to serious scrutiny.

For one thing, a substantial minority of the Ukrainian population would actually prefer the embrace of Mr Putin. There can be no doubt that Russia was heavily involved in Crimea's secession from Ukraine and its military is working closely with the Russian-speaking groups in the Donbass region, but there is equally no doubt that in these two areas, the majority of the inhabitants feel far more affinity with Moscow than with Kiev, let alone with Paris or Berlin. The vote to re-join Russia in the Crimea was not rigged by the Kremlin and the Russian troops in the east are viewed more as brothers-in-arms than foreign invaders.

Secondly, the EU has gone to great lengths to cultivate Ukrainian support for membership of the Community. Financial aid amounting to over €2 billion has been provided in the last two years alone to prop up the country's failing economy. Ukraine certainly needs help; the annual inflation rate has

consistently topped 50% in the last five months, interest rates stand at 27%, the money supply is shrinking and GDP fell by 17.6% in the first quarter of 2015. Furthermore, the country is rated as the most corrupt in Europe and life expectancy for men is lower now than in 1964. In short, the country is in a terrible mess, so why are we investing so much in it? Altruism? Sadly not. Ukraine is in the forefront of the EU's desire to expand its sphere of influence and in the process to rub President Putin's nose in the dirt. There is strong evidence of EU involvement in the coup which ousted former pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014.

There is a distinct lack of logic here. Why is Ukraine being cultivated as a potential EU member whereas Russia is being excluded? Historically, the two nations have been close – indeed, Kiev was the capital of a state regarded by Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians alike as the place from whence their civilisations sprang. It was in Kiev in 988 that Prince Vladimir the Great converted to Orthodox Christianity. The EU has already allowed Greece and Bulgaria, historically Eastern Orthodox, to join the club. If Ukraine is welcome too, why not its Orthodox northern neighbour?

Indeed, the only real justification for our supporting Ukraine is that under the 1994 Budapest Memorandum the UK and US are guarantors (morally, if not legally) of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Our task has not been helped, however, by either the EU's territorial expansionism or its cold-shouldering of Russia. The deterioration in relationships between the EU and Russia cannot be blamed entirely on its president. It was the EU which backed away from closer trading links a few years back. Basically, the powers-that-be in Brussels just do not want a good relationship with Moscow.

And who is paying the price for their pig-headedness? Not just the people of Ukraine caught up in a war which has largely disappeared from the headlines; Europe's dairy farmers are suffering as one of their biggest export markets has been

closed. When the EU imposed sanctions on Russia, the Kremlin replied by banning imports of dairy products. Russia was one of the EU's biggest markets for dairy products, accounting for 32 per cent of cheese exports and 24 per cent of butter exports. The net result is that European wholesale milk prices have fallen by 20% and no less than £365 million emergency aid has had to be provided to the EU's agricultural sector to keep it going. Even this gesture only came about following a demonstration by tractor-driving farmers in Brussels which brought the part of the city in which the EU institutions are located to a grinding halt.

Our farmers are affected as we are part of the EU. However, if we were an independent country, we could keep our nose out of many aspects of this unsavoury regional rivalry which is really of very little strategic interest to us. Norway decided to join the EU and the US in imposing sanctions on Russia, but the decision was made by the Norwegian government. Switzerland initially refused to apply any sanctions, only joining in during August 2014 and again, the decision was taken by the Swiss government. Some EU member states in Eastern Europe have not felt comfortable with the sanctions and view them as counterproductive, notably Hungary and Bulgaria, but they have no scope to lift them unilaterally. Whether our government would pursue a more independent course if we left the EU is very much dependent on who was in power at the time. At least, however, we would have the opportunity to do so.