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Viktor Yanukovich

Mother Russia's favorite son

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Like politicians everywhere, Ukraine's 54-year-old Prime Minister likes to invoke his humble origins, telling the media that "my main dream in life was to break out of poverty." What he often fails to mention in his Horatio Alger-style tale is that he spent almost four years in jail as a teenager for robbery and assault, though the charges were later reversed.

Genial but wooden tongued, more fluent in Russian than Ukrainian, Yanukovich is reminiscent of a Soviet-era party boss, an image aided by his almost 2 m, 109-kg frame. That style goes down well in his conservative home base in the Donbass, Ukraine's industrial powerhouse, where the Russian-leaning (and -speaking) population tends to view his rival, Viktor Yushchenko, as a pawn of the West. After what his official biography calls his "youthful indiscretions," Yanukovich worked as an engineer, a factory manager and the Governor of Donetsk before President Leonid Kuchma named him Prime Minister two years ago. Since then he has presided over dynamic economic growth and, more recently, doubled pensions.

Despite enjoying Russian President Vladimir Putin's energetic support, Yanukovich has seemed out of his depth in the current political crisis. At one point last week, he pledged to support a free press and transfer some presidential powers to the legislature. Soon after, he denounced Yushchenko for trying to

mount a "coup." But if his frequent calls to resolve the election dispute without violence are to be believed, perhaps Yanukovich really has left his troubled past behind.