

Review of: "Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine"

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Comments on Roger E. Kanet, "Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine."

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A fundamental argument of Kanet's article is that Russian policy 'under Putin is committed to the de facto reestablishment of the Soviet Union or Greater Russia.' My own take on Putin's aims are similar, but I would express the Kremlin's aims in a somewhat more circumscribed manner. I am not sure of the extent to which this indicates a disagreement inasmuch as I concur that, as Kanet also notes, Putin is 'committed to reestablishing Russia's greatness and dominant role in world politics.' Like Kanet, I also am not an adherent to the idea that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was a response to the perceived threat to Russia posed by NATO. (Even Prigozin a few days ago discounted that idea).

In this context, I have three main responses to the essay, and a minor point to note.

1. In my opinion, Putin, as well as many other members of the Russian political elite, consider Russia's status as a great power, to be a fundamental, in fact existential component of Russian identity. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this conviction. On the other hand, it is my opinion that Russia is lacking in the material capabilities—most crucially in the economic realm—that would justify a Russian claim to greatness, although quite obviously Russia retains the status of a superpower in terms of nuclear capability. Russia's claims to greatness have had a strong virtual component, and sometimes I get the feeling that the virtual element has been more important than the empirical reality. This tendency has become even more evident since the events of February 24, 2022. At the same time, however, Russian military performance in Ukraine has punctured the notion of Russian military greatness.
2. This leads to my second point, which is that I am not convinced that Russia has the capability in terms of power projection to rebuild a greater Russia. The Russian economy, even before the imposition of Western sanctions, was technologically challenged, lacking the ability to innovate and compete globally. The economy, moreover, is highly dependent on energy exports and fits the profile in certain respect of a third world country. This makes membership in the EAEU for the post-Soviet states a rather unattractive proposition, although the more dependent states—like Kazakhstan and Armenia—were more or less compelled to join. At the same time, the Kremlin hasn't devoted much of

an effort to winning the hearts and minds of the citizenry of the post-Soviet states. Its soft power programming tends to be Soviet style in its emphasis, and lacking in the construction of a vision of modern attractive Russia. How many memorial ceremonies to the victims of the Great Patriotic War are residents of say, Tajikistan, expected to attend?

3. Thirdly, I believe that Russian foreign policy ambitions toward the post-Soviet space can be seen as radiating in concentric circles of importance. The two most important post-Soviet states to stay in the Russian orbit are Belarus (to date not a serious threat) and Ukraine (obviously much more problematic). Then one can list the states that are if not Slavic in orientation, at least adherents to Christian orthodoxy, i.e. Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova. In last place are the Muslim republics, at least in terms of strict compliance with Putin's vision of Great Russia. It is notable, for example, that Azerbaijan has enjoyed more freedom of action than Armenia, although Azerbaijan also has more leverage in terms of its energy resources. I agree that all of them, as Medvedev noted years ago, are to be considered as falling within the Russian sphere of influence, but there are differences in how Russia perceives of its interactions with them on an individual level.

One other point:

1. Kanet suggests in the last sentence of his article, that if the Russians are successful in dominating Ukraine, other former Soviet states, for example-- the Baltics—are likely to become targets of future expansion. Personally, perhaps naively, I tend to think that NATO membership is an effective means of protection of the Baltic states against Russian attack. At least that is what the Swedes and Finns seem to think. I realize that the Russians think of the West as weak, and did not anticipate the Western reaction to the invasion of Ukraine, but I hope at least that NATO membership would be an effective deterrent to Russian aggression.