

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

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Review of *Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine* by Roger Kanet

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I am pleased to see Dr. Kanet still producing thoughtful works on Russia! I must disclose my own connection to him...I interviewed at University of Illinois in 1988 as I considered which grad school to attend. I was very excited at the time to be able to meet Dr. Kanet, one of the leading writers on Soviet politics.

This piece for *Qeios* is a short one. It gives a good quick overview of Russia's attempts to reassert its influence in the 'near abroad' since the 1990s. One valuable contribution it makes is in reminding readers that some moves in that direction had started already in the first years of the Yeltsin regime, which shows how deeply rooted this impulse is in Russia. It is hardly a product of Putin alone.

Overall, though, I would say the piece needs more specificity on exactly what goals Russia has been (and is now) pursuing. First, what are the goals and what has justified them? Here the piece offers a few tantalizing clues, but no detailed discussion yet. (There is an indication on the final page, in the section on "'Greater Russia' as Putin's Goal," that the author intended to add more detail, since a single partial sentence suggests at least one more paragraph was to be added here.) It is one thing to feel nostalgic for the years of Soviet greatness; it is another to try to conquer the entire former area of the USSR. The USSR is also, in many ways, a very questionable model for Putin. After all, he is hardly a Communist. And the USSR's nationality policy was much more ambiguous than Russian nationalists would support (retrospectively, and even at the time). While it did generally favor Russia's role as the 'first among equals,' the USSR also often supported the non-Russian nations (certainly far more than Tsarist Russia did). This was seen in the case of Ukraine in the 1920's 'Ukrainianization' policy and in Khrushchev's decision to cede the Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. The Soviet leaders often warned against excessive 'Russian chauvinism.' Is Putin's policy, then, more of a restoration of Tsarist ideals than of Soviet ones?

And even then, what exactly is this policy? Is Putin aiming at influence or control? Does he seek mainly to take back areas of Russian speakers? Areas of closely-related Slavic peoples (Belarus, Ukraine)? The entire former Russian empire (which could include Finland and Poland)? The 'near abroad' is a suggestive but ambiguous concept...it is, after all, both 'near' and 'abroad.' (And how far does it reach? It is usually defined as the former Soviet space...but could also include Eastern Europe, as Kanet reminds us it did in Russian arguments against the first NATO expansion in 1997.)

Could Russia learn to achieve its Great Power goals as a quiet and subtle regional leader, like some believe Germany is in the European Union? Or a more assertive (yet far from genocidal) regional power, like the US is in the Americas? There is much to be added to Kanet's analysis about the underlying concept of the *Ruskii Mir* and other ideas advanced by nationalist thinkers in Russia. What do these ideas mean, and is Putin consciously following them?

Second, how have those goals changed over time? Putin has clearly moved quite far from the policy of the Yeltsin years. Then Russia was mainly attempting to stave off total collapse. Even the effort to prevent Chechnya's secession was at first hesitant. It resulted in *de facto* recognition of Chechen independence from 1996-99. (If the US recognized the secession of a state by force, that would hardly look like a policy of strong nationalism.) While Russia's actions in Chechnya were brutal, they were carried out within the internationally recognized boundaries of the country. And when Russia intervened again in 1999, it was provoked by Chechen assaults into other Russian provinces. Even in his first 10 years as President, Putin never asserted that Ukraine did not exist as a nation. Today, in contrast, Russia is openly invading a neighboring sovereign state, and seemingly trying to wipe it out, despite no credible provocation on Ukraine's part. Is this part of a *logical progression*, or a shocking *change* in policy? I think both can be argued. If this piece wants to argue the former, it needs more evidence from Putin's words, from Russian government and media sources, etc.