

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.

Regarding the author's key argument:

I am not sure that "reestablishing Russia's greatness" is even de facto identical to "reestablishing the former Soviet Union". Reestablishing the Soviet Union is neither a condition for restoring Russia's greatness nor is it a condition for "extending Moscow's political and economic control over former Soviet territory". And even Putin's recent public statements, including on the war against Ukraine, while deploring the collapse of the Soviet Union, do not formulate the de facto or formal restoration of the Soviet Union as a political ambition. Putin's statement about the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" therefore did not concern the collapse of the Soviet Union per se, but was related to Russia's utter weakness, its loss of global power and prestige.

Neither do I believe Putin's alleged commitment "to recreate the former Soviet Union" is equivalent to the "construction of 'Greater Russia'" - again: to realize the latter, Putin does not need to achieve the former.

Putin refuses to "recognize the existence of Ukraine".

It is true that Putin considers Russians and Ukrainians as 'one people - a single whole'. But does this mean that Putin denies the existence of Ukraine? If so, why not also deny the existence of Belarus, part of the same 'single whole'? I suspect that in addition to historical-ideological arguments, strategic or geopolitical arguments also played a key role. Putin started the war against Ukraine not because he denied Ukraine's right to exist, but because he was increasingly losing political and economic control over Ukraine. In this light, Putin, I suspect, was guided more by banal geopolitical than ideological motives, most probably by a combination of both. In other words, Putin does not so much deny the "existence of Ukraine"; he cannot accept the existence of an independent and sovereign Ukraine.

And in this light, there may also be no hard distinction between the supposedly offensive and defensive variants of Putin's strategy toward Russia's neighboring states - they are two sides of the same coin. They are two intertwined aspects of Russia's efforts to establish and continue political, economic, and strategic control over the FSU. And precisely because Russia was increasingly losing that control, Putin was prepared to take the drastic military steps that he took, in the Caucasus and regarding Ukraine.

About the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008.

The simple statement that "Russian-backed separatist forces from Ossetia and Abkhazia, joined by the Russian military," started this war is a rather one-sided and incomplete account of the reason for the military conflict, one that leaves the role (perhaps not so much the responsibility), of Saakashvili, unfairly unmentioned.

The claim that Russia committed "genocide" in the areas "around Kyiv and further east" is insufficiently substantiated. It seems to me generally better to reserve terms like genocide for political / military ambitions and activities that deserve that name, which does not in any way diminish the magnitude of the war crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine.

It is wrong to lump Belarus and Armenia together. Perhaps Belarus can be characterized as a "narrower version of Russia," (although I would be hesitant to characterize it as such) but Armenia certainly not (yet).

In general:

This is an interesting, well-written overview article of Putin's politics vis-a-vis the Former Soviet Union. The analysis is rather mainstream, it follows the familiar 'Western' discourse, and therefore it contains few new insights – but I am not sure if providing these insights was the author's intention.