Research Article

Rebuilding a 'Greater Russia' and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Putin has made clear, as he stated more than a decade and a half ago, that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" and that he is committed to reestablishing Russia's greatness and dominant role in world politics. Thus, Russian policy toward its near neighbors under Putin is committed to *de facto* reestablishing the former Soviet Union – or Greater Russia. Russian wars or virtual wars with Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine – since 2014, but especially now since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – have all had at least one objective – extending Moscow's political and economic control over former Soviet territory. In the following pages we shall track this process, which is the attempted reconstruction of "Greater Russia," or Russian expansion and has led to the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russia's murderous, and unprovoked invasion and systematic destruction of Ukraine beginning in late February 2022 is part of Russian president Vladimir Putin's attempt to fulfill his commitment to recreate the former Soviet Union or, to put it differently, to push forward the construction of "Greater Russia." Putin has made clear, as he stated more than a decade and a half ago, that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century"[2] and that he is committed to reestablishing Russia's greatness and dominant role in world politics. He termed the end of the USSR as the demise of "historical Russia" and source of the major economic crisis that followed. "It was a disintegration of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union," Putin said of the 1991 breakup. "We turned into a completely different country. And what had been built up over 1,000 years was largely lost," he asserted, noting that 25 million Russian people now found themselves in newly independent countries cut off from Russia, part of "a major humanitarian tragedy (Osborn and Ostroukh (2021"[3]

In many respects Putin was referring to a "Greater Russia" (Sakwa, 2021) – a Russia including areas outside the state of Russia populated by ethnic Russians, as well even as regions of the state of Russia largely populated by non-Russians who have been part of the Russian state in the near or distant past. Russia has had a centuries-old tradition – both as Russia and the Soviet Union – of expansion and domination of other national groups. It is, since the dissolution of the USSR into fifteen independent states, that substantial numbers of ethnic Russians found themselves living outside Russia.[4] As Putin notes, he finds this situation "a major humanitarian disaster."[5] Associated with this view of Greater Russia has been the idea of Moscow as the "Third Rome" or the center of an alternative international civilization which has justified an assertive and often unilateralist approach to the rest of the world. While other European states have modified their views of sovereignty and pursued policies that *de facto* have resulted in a form of pooled sovereignty over the course of the past half century, the Russians have continued to view the international system in stark Westphalian terms (Kanet, 2022). The Soviet Union and its major successor state, the Russia Federation, have been seen as more than simply the current nation state of the Russian Federation. In all these cases Moscow and Russia are the center of a potentially single expanding political system, regardless of the ethnicity of the population.

The Rebuilding of the USSR/Greater Russia

One of the indicators of Putin's view of Russia's place in its political environment is his refusal to recognize the existence of Ukraine, the second largest of Soviet successor states, as a state, or of Ukrainians as a nation, rather than but subset of Russians (Putin, 2021). "Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole... Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe (Putin, 2021)." The fact that all three peoples were Orthodox Christians and spoke a similar language, "Old Russian," and that Moscow gradually exercised increasing political authority over the entire region after the sixteenth century are directly relevant to Putin's assessment. This, plus his argument that Ukraine was collapsing

economically since its separation from Russia in 1991, are part of his justification for invading Ukraine supposedly to reintegrate the larger community of "Russians" in a single state. Putin summarizes his argument with the words:

> I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people (Putin, 2021).

Although the Russian leadership that took power immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union officially accepted the independence of the fourteen other Soviet successor states, relations among them were not equal. Russia, under the leadership of Prime Minister Boris Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who were initially committed to joining the West – to integration into the "community of civilized states," to use Yeltsin's phrase – (Yeltsin, 1992) moved toward a policy that emphasized rebuilding Russia's links with (and influence in) the other successor states of the USSR. One aspect of this approach called for strengthening the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), which had initially served mainly as a tool to manage former Soviet military forces after the USSR's dissolution, and in facilitating a program of economic cooperation (Papp, 1994). Already in February 1993 Yeltsin, who had asserted that Russia had no intention of resurrecting its imperial past, responded to domestic complaints about the plight of the 25 million ethnic Russians "stranded" outside Russian borders and to the growing disorder in a number of post-Soviet states. He noted that "the time has come for authoritative international organizations, including the UN, to grant Russia special powers as guarantor of peace and stability in this region." In other words, Yeltsin was requesting a specific Russian zone of influence on the territory of the former USSR (Yeltsin, 1993).

By then Russia was already fully involved in a series of regional conflicts – from Moldova in the West to Tajikistan in Central Asia – in which Russian forces were playing an important role (Arbatov, et al., 1996; Jonson and Archer, 1997). Russian involvement exhibited a number of objectives. There was the desire to fill the power vacuum that had resulted from the demise of the USSR and to ensure Russia's regional dominance. Second, while the Russian military was in decline, it was important to find a way to impose unity on what remained of the collapsed union. Third, Russia needed the means, namely the recently created Community of Independent States (CIS), as a way to preserve existing links of interrepublic cooperation, mainly in the economic sphere. Finally, Russian military involvement in ongoing conflicts was justified by the desire to protect the interests of the ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in these countries (Kozhemiakin and Kanet,1998). By the middle of the 1990s this final objective had become an important rhetorical, as well as concrete, issue in Russian politics.

As noted, Russia's willingness to follow the Western lead on major international political issues was short lived. Even before 1995 Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Kozyrev had been led by internal pressures to redefine Russian foreign and security policy in a much more realistic (and nationalist) direction than they had done initially. With Kozyrev's replacement as foreign minister by Yevgeni Primakov in 1996, Russia proclaimed a formal Eurasian thrust in its policy, one that included active Russian involvement in, and primacy over, the so-called "near abroad" of former Soviet territory, as noted.. Closely associated with this approach was direct and indirect Russian military involvement in regional, mainly ethnically based, conflicts – such as those in Chechnya, a southern breakaway province of the Russian Federation, and elsewhere in Russia. Moreover, in Chechnya, when Putin took over the Russian presidency while the conflict was still in process, Russian policy led to the virtual annihilation of society there, much as in Ukraine currently. Support for secessionist activities in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan, which had already begun while Kozyrev was foreign minister, provided Moscow with other opportunities for regional influence (Kanet, 2008. This was especially true of Georgia, where in return for Russia's role as a "peacekeeper" in the secessionist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (conflicts that could not have developed as they did without Russian support for the insurgents), the Georgian government finally agreed to join the Russian-sponsored CIS and to grant Russia basing rights on its territory (Dale, 1996; Kanet,1996). By the end of the 1990s, with Russia playing the role of "peacekeeper," most of these conflicts no longer involved active military operations, although they were still far from being resolved. Most importantly, Moscow had successfully reasserted its influence over several other post-Soviet states (Kanet, 2015).

The gap between US and Russian policy goals grew significantly during the latter half of the 1990s. For example, Russia opposed the use of largely US-initiated UN sanctions against several countries that were viewed in Moscow as potential partners. The issue that raised the most serious response in Moscow in this period was the eastward expansion of NATO and the incorporation of former Warsaw Pact allies and ex-Soviet states into the Western security system.[6] Prior to NATO's Madrid meetings of July 1997, at which the decision was be made about possible expansion, Moscow orchestrated a multifaceted campaign that included pressure on applicant countries, many of which represented the "near abroad," and threats that the expansion would initiate a new Cold War. In fact, when NATO decided to invite the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join the alliance, Russia accepted the decision without retaliating. Yet it was clear in the approach that Washington and its allies took to Moscow's objections that Russia was not viewed as a major player in the restructured European security environment. Once it became obvious that it had failed to forestall NATO expansion, Russia seemingly

accepted reality and attempted to gain whatever benefit it could out of that acceptance. On 27 May 1997 Moscow signed the NATO Russia Founding Act that was supposed to provide clear parameters for the relationship between Russia and the Western alliance. In return, Russia was granted membership in an expanded Group of 8 (G8). During the rest of the year Russia participated in a US-led military exercise in the Baltic Sea and continued to cooperate with Partnership for Peace (PfP) activities.

Russia's relations with the "near abroad," therefore, evolved in an environment in which relations with the West, especially the United States, were increasingly conflictual. From Russia's perspective it was seemingly no longer taken seriously in world affairs, and its views and concerns were ignored.[7] Even in its immediate geopolitical environment Moscow could not control developments that it viewed to be of central importance to Russian security. This was the situation inherited by Putin at the turn of the millennium.

Putin, the Return of Imperial Russia and 'Greater Russia'

Soon after his replacement of Yeltsin as president on the last day of 1999, Vladimir Putin made clear his commitment to what were seen as preconditions for the fulfilment of these objectives, as the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept indicated ("The Foreign Policy Concept, 2000, Kolstoe, 1997). According to the document, Russia had to overcome separatism, national and religious extremism, and terrorism. As already noted, Putin moved coercively to re-establish Russian control over all parts of the Federation and Moscow's influence in the broader post-Soviet area.[8] In the following pages I wish to treat briefly, Russian efforts to intervene in and gain control or at least greater influence in neighboring areas.

Russia and the Wars in Transnistria and Chechnya

Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the newly established Republic of Moldova suffered a territorial change of its own with Transnistria, a pro-Russian separatist region in the east of the country, trying to break out and seek independence (Cimmino, 2021). This move was followed by the Transnistria war that lasted until 1992. Initially, when the war started in 1990, – long before the rise of Vladimir Putin to a leadership position – Russia adopted a policy of neutrality. Two years later, however, the fighting escalated, and the Russian involvement turned to active participation in combat. Eventually, the war ended with a Russian-backed ceasefire agreement and Russia began a peacekeeping operation in the region, which essentially meant it decided to keep its troops there – for three decades, until today. Russia's interest in Moldova was and remains a part of its larger bid for influence over post-Soviet states, as well as its posture against the eastward expansion of Western institutions like NATO and the European

Since the end of the war, Transnistria has developed strong political and economic ties with Russia, and Putin has been offering financial and military support to the breakaway state. Over the years, Moldova and international groups such as NATO, have repeatedly urged Russia to withdraw its troops from Transnistria, but it has refused to do so. Having troops in Transnistria allows Putin to influence policies in Moldova indirectly and to prevent its integration with the European Union. For Moldova to be able to boost its economic and political development, getting closer to being accepted into the EU, Russian troops must leave Transnistria.[9]

In addition to the Russian involvement in the military conflict in Transnistria during the Yeltsin years, after the disintegration of the USSR, Chechnya, a province in the far south of the Russian Federation declared its independence and war broke out between Moscow and the Chechens in 1994-96. A second war occurred in 1999-2000, when Putin, now president, carried out the literal obliteration of the city of Grozny – a foretaste of what would today occur in Ukraine – and Moscow regained control. Sporadic conflict continued until 2009 (McQuilkin and Chakrabarti 2022).

Russia Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the Wars with Georgia[10]

From the 1990s until the present Russian relations with Georgia have been strained – to the point of military conflict at times. Immediately after the dissolution of the USSR and the emergence of an independent Georgia, the provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which comprise about twenty percent of Georgia's territory, declared themselves independent. Russia recognized them and generally supported them in the ensuing military operations. It then oversaw peacekeeping forces in the regions. After Vladimir Putin came to power in Moscow in 2000 and a pro-Western government-controlled Tbilisi three years later, relations between Russia and Georgia began to deteriorate and the ceasefire broke down. They were destroyed in 2008, when Russian-backed separatist forces from Ossetia and Abkhazia, joined by the Russian military, moved against Georgia. Russian bombardment of Georgian cities proved to be a further harbinger of Russia's destruction of cities in Ukraine and the accompanying mass murder in 2022. Moreover, fourteen years later relations of Russia with Georgia were still seriously strained. Yet, Russia continues to exercise significant influence over its southern neighbor, including recognizing the independence of the two secessionist provinces and its *de facto* veto of the latter's entrance into NATO – as it attempts in most of the post-Soviet area. (McQuilkin and Chakrabarti 2022).

The Invasion of Ukraine and the Incorporation of Crimea in 2014 [11]

Although President Putin had met resistance to his proposal for the creation of a Eurasian Union, the decision by the Armenian president in fall 2013 to break off negotiations with the EU and join the organization, followed little more than a month later by President Yanukovych's similar announcement for Ukraine, seemed to put the matter at rest. Moscow's plan for a mostly economically and politically reintegrated Eurasia under Russian leadership seemed well on the path to establishment. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, along with Russia, had all apparently "signed on" to the plan for a multinational economic organization. Yet, Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan – not to speak of the Baltic republics – continued to resist Moscow's overtures and threats, and the route that Uzbekistan might take was not clear. But, with Ukraine in the fold, the likely success of creating the Eurasian project seemed enhanced – although its long-term impact in modernizing the economies of the member countries was by no means guaranteed.

In early 2014, ongoing and expanding challenges emerged in Ukraine to the president's announced decision to opt for closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Union. Then came the unexpected events that toppled President Yanukovych, followed by *de facto* Russian military intervention in Crimea – complete with propaganda about a fascist takeover in Kyiv that supposedly threatened the security of ethnic Russians in Ukraine – and the referendum in Crimea about union with the Russian Federation followed by incorporation of the region into the Russian Federation and the parallel secession of regions in eastern Ukraine, the Donbas, and their being recognized as independent states and given military aid by Russia (Fisher, 2014). In other words. Putin and Moscow moved dramatically in the ongoing process of expanding influence, even control, over an ever-broader post-Soviet area – it moved closer to the expansion of "Greater Russia," and this especially in Ukraine.

The Russian Invasion and Annihilation of Ukraine – virtual Genocide?[12]

Continuing Russian pressures on its neighbor came to a head on 22 February 2022 when, after the eight years of Crimean incorporation into Russia, of support for secessionists in eastern Ukraine and after months of the buildup of an estimated 125,000 troops along the mutual border, the Russian army invaded Ukraine. The justifications – across the board – were based on blatant lying in virtually every public statement concerning the war coming out of Moscow, starting with Putin's assertion that fascists controlled the Ukrainian government and threatened Russian security, that Ukraine was engaged in the genocide of ethnic Russians, and the denial that Moscow has invaded and is engaged in a murderous war in Ukraine – represent a current and extreme example of information warfare or disinformation.[13] Propaganda and disinformation policy are central elements in Russia's current military policy in Ukraine and build on developments of the recent past and, in fact, of many centuries (Pomerantsev, 2014).

Russia has literally decimated most of eastern and southern Ukraine and, as it was driven out of areas around Kyiv and further east, there has been widespread evidence of war crimes – even genocide – as bodies of hundreds of civilians shot in the head are being found, many with their hands tied behind their backs. Moreover, hospitals and schools have been shelled and civilian housing blocks destroyed in the rocket attacks that have become a highlight of Russian military policy – and numerous women have been raped by Russian soldiers (Lomas, 2022).

As we have already seen, other post-Soviet states that have disagreed with Moscow on various issues, including the "near abroad," has suffered Russia's ire, including military operations. If one looks at relations since independence with the other fourteen post-Soviet countries or with some districts of Russia itself, one sees the destruction of Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, as well as the effort to coerce Georgia and Ukraine militarily – even to the point of virtual annihilation – as Russian means of gaining control over portions of post-Soviet space. Other countries, such as Armenia and especially Belarus, are so strongly under Russian control that they have almost become smaller versions of Russia.

"Greater Russia" as Putin's Goal

As one examines the factors that have gone into Russian relations with its neighbors, as well as with the West, it is important to recognize the complexity of the answer. Are Putin and his supporters really committed to recreating the former Soviet Union or a "Greater Russia?" Or is the expansion of US involvement and influence in Central and Eastern Europe, including NATO expansion (NATO, 2022), the driving factor for a Russian defensive policy? Finally, do other post-Soviet states represent threats, alone or in conjunction with the West, to Russian security and is Russian policy, therefore, defensive? (Moskowitz, 2022)

By now in this examination of Russian policy, it appears fully evident that

Russia has responded to every challenge to its existence and control over territory, such as Chechnya, by suppression – with the ongoing conquest attempt to defeat Ukraine the current example of this efforts. Russia attempts to take advantage of comparable challenges to other states, as in Transnistria, on Russian energy, to expand Russian influence, even control, over the post-Soviet region. Overall, despite other factors that might play a role in influencing

Russian policy, the reestablishment of Moscow's influence/control over as much post-Soviet territory as possible is the most important issue. If the Russians are successful in dominating Ukraine, other former Soviet areas – for example, the Baltics – are likely to become targets of future expansion.

Footnotes

[1] No funding was received for this article, nor does it represent a conflict of interest. It draws upon several of the author's prior publications (Kanet, 2002; , Kanet 2021; Kanet, 2022).

[2] Putin, 2005. For discussions of the commitment of Russia's political elites to regaining great power status see Ingmar Oldberg (2005; 2007). Public opinion surveys in Russia indicated that a majority of Russians supported the return of Russia to great power status. Fifty-one percent expected Putin's successor to return Russia to a preeminent global role, while only nine percent expected the president to establish good relations with the West (*Angus Reid Global Monitor*, 2008). In August 2008, at the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, opinion in Moscow strongly supported the reassertion of Russian influence (Barnard, 20080).

[3] For a discussion of the general emergence of today's Russia from medieval Rus' see Kanet, 2021), An effective outline of the gradual expansion of Russia can be found in "Expansion," (2015).

[4] To a substantial degree the countries surrounding Russia, what many have termed the "near abroad," comprise 'greater Russia' (Kanet, 2022; Huasheng, 2021).

[5] Cited in Osborn and Ostroukh, 2021). For a brief, but excellent, review of Putin's policy concerning "Greater Russia," see Akage, 2022). For another brief survey see Ball (2019).

[6] For a discussion of NATO expansion see Kanet, 2015), Kanet and Ibryamova 2002, and Okoro *et al,* 2022.

[7] Senator Jesse Helms, (1999), then the powerful chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, was especially outspoken on this question. In introductory remarks before the committee, he dismissed Russian objections to US changes in the ABM Treaty. For a comprehensive analysis of Russian expectation of Western policy changes in the post-Cold War world, see Sakwa (2021).

[8] For a brief assessment of the expansion of Russian imperial policy until the time of Russia's incursion into Ukraine and the absorption of Crimea in 2014, see Putin, (2014).

[9] Russian involvement in Transnistria, which borders Ukraine, is directly relevant to Russia' invasion of and destruction of the latter country (Rybarczyk, 2022.)

[10] See Seskuria (2021); Shaiselashvili (2021).

[11] By the second decade of the twentieth century Ukraine became a major target of Russian expansion. See Bullough (2014) and Moulioukova, xxxxx (2014).

[12] See Nardelli (2021).

[13] On Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine see, among other works, U.S, Department of State (2022a, 2022b)

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Declarations