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Kremlin May Become Separatists' Next Target

By Ivan Sukhov

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June 12 marked one of Russia's least understood national holidays. Called "Russia Day" in official circles, the name currently evokes a national patriotic mood and the much-discussed idea of creating a single state for all Russian-speaking people.

Most know it more simply as Independence Day, as it marks the date on which Russia declared its independence from the Soviet Union. Despite the government's intent, though, the celebration has never taken on the heady excitement of Independence Day in the U.S.

In part, this is because nobody has ever really understood from what or from whom Russia gained independence. This confusion is rooted in deeply contradictory understandings of the Soviet Union, which work to dangerously preserve that state's imperial legacy.

Many Russians, of course, remember the Soviet Union's drawbacks. Russians enjoyed fewer rights domestically in the late 1980s and early 1990s than even Georgians and Uzbeks, satellite republics to Russia's place as leader of the Soviet Union. The inequality of the Soviet

economy, and the fact that industrially developed Russia had to foot the bill for the more backward republics, also had a tangible impact on the dinner table and wallet of every Russian worker and civil servant.

However, many Russians also mourn the collapse of the Soviet Union — a time when full employment was the norm and the state's military, political and scientific might awed the world. President Vladimir Putin has called the fall of the former empire "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century."

Citizens at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse were also uncertain about what they wanted. Nine of the 15 republics took part in the March 1991 referendum to preserve the Soviet Union — and despite the fact that almost 78 percent voted in favor of unity, none of those millions of citizens took to the streets to protest the breakup of the country only nine months later in December.

Even the wording of the June 12 declaration of independence was ambiguous. The very first clause in the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Russian Republic was, and still is, a statement about "a democratic state" not separate from but merely "as part of the liberalized Soviet Union."

These unresolved and contradictory attitudes mean that the Soviet Union's legacy has continued long beyond its formal dissolution. Recent events in Ukraine, for instance, show that the Soviet empire did not just collapse and get filed neatly away in the archives of history never to be heard from again simply because a few of its leaders reached an agreement and signed a few documents.

The idea of restoring the empire clearly informs the thinking and worldview of senior Russian officials, as well as of the Russian volunteers who fight to their deaths against Ukrainian army forces in the eastern Ukrainian cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. The energy and passions boiling over in the cauldron of conflict in eastern Ukraine suggest that the battle fought by pro-Russian separatists is but the most recent in a long series of events marking the collapse of the Soviet Union.

This striking passion, underscored by the unprecedentedly positive feelings that the Russian people now express for their government, might produce the illusion that Russia has finally found its raison d'etre after 23 continuous and fruitless years of searching. It turns out that the most important thing is to simply act like an empire, despite the condemnation of the outside world and the inevitable economic privations it incurs.

But the idea of empire means different things to different people— from the volunteer Russian fighter who returns home from Ukraine in a coffin to the Kremlin official raising his champagne glass to toast Russia Day, to ordinary citizens already beginning to feel the economic consequences of this "imperial renaissance."

For those volunteer fighters, empire is a kind of revolutionary ideal. They place no importance on the fact that the strange war for the independence of eastern Ukraine's self-proclaimed "Donbass" is a bloody path toward the further fragmentation of the former empire they ostensibly want to see unified.

For those in the Kremlin, the idea of empire is a useful tool for manipulating public opinion. If the same call for independence had arisen not in Slovyansk but on Russian soil, the authorities would have mobilized far greater force to suppress that "hotbed of separatism" than Kiev can muster against Ukrainian insurgents. War abroad also distracts from problems at home. The more Russian ultra-nationalists get caught up in a foreign war for independence and even lay down their lives there, the longer it will take for their fellow Russians to begin thinking about independence at home.

But in Donetsk and Luhansk, volunteer fighters are making it clear that their faith in a Russian empire is strong. This faith means that these militants may even strike at the Russian authorities once the fighting is over in Ukraine. The situation is getting out of control.

The "antidote" to this revolutionary toxin should be the law-abiding majority. This is the huge number of people who might get carried away by imperial fervor, but who ultimately put a higher value on food, salaries, taxes, schools, and health care.

The events of December 1991, when Russian citizens ambivalently stood by as the Soviet Union collapsed, showed that this seemingly powerful majority can simply disappear at the critical moment. If anything, common values are in even greater disarray now than when the Soviet Union rapidly collapsed. At least at that time, some citizens sincerely believed they were part of a grand and global experiment to build a humanitarian socialist society. But what do they believe now?

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