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Putin's Nationalism and Expansion Strategy Is Doomed to Fail

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However events continue to develop in southern and eastern Ukraine, one of the most important realizations that European and U.S. politicians have had in recent months is that, in terms of foreign and military policy, modern Russia no longer behaves like Estonia, Slovakia or other former Eastern Bloc countries.

That should not surprise anyone. After all, could the West have really expected that a political entity the size of Russia would remain inert and never pose a challenge to its neighbors? True, it remains a question as to which problem will be greater: the sudden and somewhat theatrical renaissance of Russia's imperial ambitions or the inevitable collapse of that renaissance.

A recent issue of the German magazine Stern ran a cover story titled "Understanding Russia." To illustrate the text explaining the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations, it included a map showing the European and Caucasian borders of the Russian Empire in 1783 superimposed on a modern map of Eastern Europe. The old border passes through Kiev and includes Crimea — dividing Ukraine in much the same way that some Moscow leaders would like to partition it

now.

That map shows that President Vladimir Putin and his entourage are not the first Russians to lay claim to Crimea and eastern Ukraine. However, it remains a question as to why the authors chose to show the Russian Empire of 1783 as compared, for example, to its border in 1914, when it included present-day Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, much of Poland, Ukraine and Moldova along with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and part of Turkish northeastern Anatolia.

And yet, the magazine article was correct in demonstrating how territorial expansion has always played a major role in Russia's political development. Western historians have calculated that, over the last 400 years of its existence, the Russian Empire expanded at an average rate of 50 square kilometers per day. Both Russian and foreign observers often fail to consider how this factor inevitably exerts a powerful influence on the formation of the Russian identity.

In fact, that military and later economic colonization of vast territories in northern and eastern Eurasia helped form the Russian identity. This is the historical memory the Russian president tapped into when he seized Crimea and cast it at the feet of his enthusiastic supporters, venting the simmering resentment and thirst for territorial revenge that for the past 20 years was considered the stuff of marginal politicians.

Only someone who knows nothing of the last few centuries of Russian history could have imagined that this president would have contented himself with merely winning over the hearts and minds of housewives and factory workers. Putin has truly felt the glory of laying his hands on the age-old motor that has driven the forward motion of this enormous country for centuries.

To some extent, this new strategy was born of despair: Vladimir Putin stands at the helm of a country at the downside of an economic boom full of missed opportunities for development. He needs to find mechanisms capable of preventing the state from sinking into mundane collapse.

In 2011, the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation of Germany presented the results of a major sociological research project: "20 Years of Reform in the Eyes of Russians." Among its findings: 40 percent of Russians would like the country to become more ethnically Russian. That was one of the first signs that nationalism had reappeared in mainstream Russian politics.

That trend found confirmation in elections held between 2011 and 2013. The authorities begin identifying Russian nationalism as a likely motor for powering the next phase of Russia's political history, and Putin latched onto the growing trend.

Putin's strategy boils down to good old-fashioned expansionism. The annexation of Crimea elicited an unprecedented groundswell of enthusiastic support while diverting the people's attention from such serious domestic problems as inter-ethnic animosities.

Now he confidently eliminates the Regional Development Ministry — the only government agency responsible for inter-ethnic relations in Russia — and transferred that task to the

Culture Ministry, thereby relegating what is actually a complex domestic issue into the realm of folk festivals and the meaningless escapades of Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky.

The idea of imperial ethnic nationalism as a means for "expanding and developing the state" only works as long as no one in the empire doubts the status of the imperial nation. The problems in managing the territories of the Soviet Union began immediately after sociologists noted a "demographic shift" among ethnic Russians in which the mortality rate exceeded the birth rate in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

It was then, and not in the 1990s as is now commonly thought, that Russians reversed the centuries-old trend of constant expansion and began departing from lands previously assimilated into the empire.

That trend continues today, as the percentage of Russians in this country continues to decline even as the number of migrants and members of non-Russian ethnic groups within the country increases. But on Moscow's City Day, metro passengers heard a loudspeaker proclaim congratulations reminiscent of Stalin's famous toast: "To the Russian people!" That drove home the idea that Moscow is a Russian city, a city of Russian glory.

For people with roots in Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Chechnya, Tuva, Yakutia, Mordovia, Khanty-Mansiysk or Ossetia, along with the members of dozens of other ethnic groups living on the territory of modern Russia and daily using the same metro system in the country's largest and most rapidly developing city, that emphasis on everything Russian presents a serious dilemma. In effect, it states: "Either you are Russian like us, or else this holiday — in fact, this city and this country — are not for you."

Such a vision of "ethnic purity" is simply inadequate when a country is no longer capable of using Russian ethnic nationalism to expand and develop the state. In that case, the only hope leaders have of preserving the territorial and political integrity of the state is to foster a sense of community transcending narrow ethnic identities. However, building such a society — a modern civic nation — is a more complicated and expensive undertaking than sounding a nostalgic appeal to the old empire. A civic nation is less focused on the "heroic past" and requires common goals and the determination to achieve them.

In responding to the growing demand for a nationalistic approach, Vladimir Putin is probably trying to find a balance between the interests of ethnic Russians and the many other ethnic groups in the country. The best way would be to contribute to the building of the civic nation — but after the events in Ukraine, the Kremlin seems to be rejecting that as an option. On the other hand, imperial nationalism cannot work for long when the country is clearly becoming less ethnically Russian and therefore less of an empire.

Of course, the Kremlin can keep those "imperial fires" burning for a while by exploiting the weakness of neighboring countries that only came into existence with the collapse of the Soviet Union. But not only does that drive a wedge between Moscow and its neighbors, it also puts Russia's own regional integration projects at risk. In the short run, though, this approach enables leaders to pander to widespread imperial nostalgia and win — at least for now — the loyalty of the majority.

The awakening from this temporary euphoria promises to be painful, and no less so for those

who induced this “mass hypnosis.” In fact, it could prove so painful that, in addition to the map showing the Russian Empire in 1783, it might make sense to take out a still older map showing the territory which was the starting-point for Russian imperial expansion.

An illustration of Russia “before empire,” it might also serve as a warning for what modern Russia might become “after empire.” Indeed, the dangers of today’s imaginary imperial renaissance might pale in comparison to the destabilization of the Russian state and a newer, more fundamental collapse of its imperial structure.

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