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The Rebuilding of “Greater Russia”: From Kievan Rus’ to the Eurasian Union (Note 1)

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Abstract

The purpose of the present examination is 1) to summarize briefly the evolution of historical Russia as the amalgam of multiple ethnic and cultural communities into a growing imperial domain; 2) to outline more specifically the policies pursued by the tsarist and communist regimes to integrate minority communities into the Russian majority; 3) to examine the impact on Russia of the collapse of the former USSR; and 4) to trace current efforts by the Russian government to reintegrate the disparate parts of the former USSR, including especially regions of other post-Soviet states with a significant ethnic Russian population, into a new “Greater Russia.” Although it will touch on Soviet integration policies that targeted national minorities who, by 1989, represented half of the population, the focus will be on recent and current policies intended to “Greater Russia.”

Keywords

Ethnic integration, Tsarist Russia, USSR, post-Soviet Russia, ethnic Russians, ethnic minorities, Eurasian Union

1. Introduction

Most Westerners who learn of a revival of Russian nationalism or of President Putin’s commitment to protect the interests of ethnic Russians in post-Soviet states where they represent a minority, do not think of the fact that the Russian population is quite diverse ethnically. This concerns not only the twenty percent of the population that is officially listed as non-Russian, but also the ethnic Russian population which results from the mixture and merger of various communities over the course of the last millennium. The first Russian state, Kievan Rus’, combined Eastern Slavs and Norsemen, or Vikings; in the Middle Ages Finnic groups in the far north and later Turkic populations in the south and east were absorbed by the expanding Russian state. While many remained culturally distinct from the ethnic Russian community, others were absorbed into that community over the course of later centuries.

In fact, russification, even forced Russification, became, at times, the official policy in both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 and the emergence of fifteen new states—all but one of which was built around a titular non-Russian ethnic community—and the revival of what one might termed “ethnic identity politics” in the new Russian Federation, the leadership in Moscow has faced the issue of disintegration. It has pursued a new policy aimed at recreating a “Greater Russia,” that will tie together as much of former Soviet space as possible into a single economic, political and security regime, with the dominant Russian Federation at its center.

The purpose of the present examination is 1) to summarize briefly the evolution of historical Russia as the amalgam of multiple ethnic and cultural communities into a growing imperial domain; 2) to outline more specifically the policies pursued by the tsarist and communist regimes to integrate minority communities into the Russian majority; 3) to examine the impact on Russia of the collapse of the former USSR; and 4) to trace current efforts by the Russian government to reintegrate the disparate parts of the former USSR, including especially regions of other post-Soviet states with a significant ethnic Russian population, into a new “Greater Russia.” Although it will touch on Soviet integration policies that targeted national minorities who, by 1989, represented half of the population, (Note 2) the focus will be on recent and current policies intended to rebuild what the Swedish scholar Bertil Nygren (2008a) terms “Greater Russia.” (Note 3) What are the central factors that are driving President Putin’s commitment—even to the point of military intervention in Ukraine—to creating a Eurasian Union, dominated by Russia?

2. “The Gathering of the Russian Lands”: From Kievan Rus’ to Imperial Russia

From its very inception the Russian political system was characterized by a diverse ethnic population, but increasing domination by Slavs. (Note 4) When Slavs first moved into the forest areas of what is now central Russia in the seventh century, Khazars, a Turkic group, dominated the Black Sea Steppe. By the ninth century the flourishing Volga River trade of the Khazars attracted the attention of the Norsemen (Vikings) who were at the peak of their aggressive expansion from Scandinavia. The trade route from northern Europe via the rivers of Eastern Europe to Constantinople became an important alternative route after the virtual closure of the Mediterranean by the Muslims. Over time the Norsemen built fortresses along these rivers, the four most important of which were along the Gulf of Riga, on Lake Ladoga, near Smolensk, and between the Upper Volga and the Oka. Other more isolated settlements included Kiev (Pipes, 1974, p. 29). From these bases the Norsemen were able to extract tribute from the indigenous populations of Finns, Lithuanians, and Slavs and protect their growing trade with the Byzantine Empire. Richard Pipes concludes that the collaboration between the Slavs and the Norsemen in conducting and protecting the trade represents the origins of the new state which traced its origins to Norse prince Hroerekr (Rurik). Although the Finnish name for the Norsemen was transposed to the larger population, the Norsemen rapidly assimilated in the east as in Western Europe.

But the initial gulf between the ruling elite and the masses of the population was one that dominated Russian/East Slavic politics in later centuries.

By the middle of the twelfth century, a century before the Mongol conquest, this new state was in great disrepair, primarily because of the lack of an effective system of succession and the splitting of the political system into three major parts. The one in the northwest was eventually incorporated into the Lithuanian state, later Lithuanian-Polish, while the poorest in the northeast eventually became the center for a revitalized East Slavic state, Russia. Here the population was primarily Finnic, but was rapidly inundated and absorbed by Slavic immigrants, eventually emerging as Great Russians. Thus, even before the Mongol conquest of Kiev in 1240 “Russians consisted of a mixture of peoples, with the non-Slavs dominated and culturally overwhelmed; this diversity would be increased significantly in the following centuries.

With the emergence of Muscovy as a political force in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries large numbers of non-Russian and non-Slavic peoples came under the control of the Russian state. In the north and northwest the majority of these groups were ethnically Finnish. Although the Mongol invasion in 1240 and indirect occupation for the next century and a half brought new Turkic (Tatar) populations into what would later emerge as Russia, it was not really until the sixteenth century and the rapid expansion under Ivan Grozny of Russian military control east and southeast to the major cities of the Golden Horde, Kazan and Astrakhan, in the 1550s that large numbers of Muslim Tatar or Turkic people came under the domination of Moscow. Russia viewed its culture and religion as superior to those of the peoples whom it conquered and generally treated these peoples as inferiors and resulted often in serious confrontations (see Khodarkovsky, 2004, pp. 34-39).

Writing of the emergence of Muscovy and its conquest of other small East Slavic principalities in the fifteenth century—“the gathering of the Russian lands” in the euphemistic words of the Russian chronicles of the age—Marshall T. Poe points out that the rulers of Muscovy of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries expanded the kingdom’s borders east beyond the Volga River, south to the Caspian Sea, west to the Dnieper River, and north to the White Sea. In so doing they came to rule peoples who had never been part of Kievan Rus’—Mordvinians, Chuvash, Mari, Samoyeds, Bashkirs, Tatars, Balts, Finns, Germans, Lithuanians, Poles, Cossacks, and Turks, among others. The once homogeneous Muscovite state . . . became a huge multiethnic empire (Poe, 2003, p. 34). (Note 5)

Over the course of the next three centuries Russia continued to expand; in the west into the Baltic area, Finland and Poland; in the south by absorbing Ukraine and then systematically incorporating portions of the Ottoman Empire. Territorially the expansion across Siberia and the Far East and, ultimately, the conquest of the Muslim polities in Central Asia brought millions of non-Russians, non-Europeans, and non-Christians into the empire by the 1870s. The colonial empire was virtually complete and at this point the government in St. Petersburg began to pursue a policy of explicit russification as the means to absorb and integrate this population into the Russian state.

Throughout its entire history—from Kievan Rus’ to Muscovy and the eventually the Russian

Empire—the population at large, whether ethnic Russian or one of the growing number of conquered peoples, had no voice in the political system. As Richard Pipes notes:

Once an area had been annexed to Russia, whether or not it had ever formed a part of Kiev, and whatever the ethnic and religious affiliation of its indigenous population, it immediately joined the “patrimony” of the ruling house, and all succeeding monarchs treated it as a sacred trust which was not under any circumstances to be given up (Pipes, 1974, p. 79)

Not only the territory, but also the population on that territory was seen as part of the extended patrimony of the monarch with no political rights. It is this view of the virtual ownership relationship between the monarch, the state, and the population that centuries later, although modified, continues to lie at the root of the Russian political system, for both ethnic Russian and non-Russian alike.

3. Integration’ of National Minorities in Late Imperial and Communist Russia

Russian historians of the imperial era focused on Russia’s right and duty to expand the boundaries of civilization and Christianity in dealing with the Muslim and other non-Russian peoples who now comprised a substantial part of the population (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 3). Religion served geopolitical purposes in relations with the various non-Orthodox Christian peoples of the steppe and the Caucasus. Ever since the fifteenth century the idea of Russia and its political and security interests were intertwined with the idea of expansion, which was justified on both ideological and theological grounds (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 49). This meant an ever-increasing number of non-Russians within the Russian Empire. The culmination of this process came in the years 1860 to 1880 with the final conquests of the various peoples of the Caucasus and the khanates of Central Asia. Given the repressive nature of the Russian political system, the new ethnic and religious minorities who were forcibly added to the population had no voice and were the object of repressive governmental policies. Since the middle of the sixteenth century, but especially during the eighteenth century, major efforts were made to settle and civilize the regions taken from the Kamnyks and other Muslim peoples, thereby pushing the original population out of the region entirely. In addition, the Russians pursued a policy of forced conversion to Christianity and russification in much of the territory that they conquered (Khodarkovsky, 2002, pp. 142-161). Throughout the eighteenth century this resulted in virtually permanent conflict between the Russians and the native populations on both sides of the ever-moving frontier. As Russia imposed its control, substantial numbers of the locals fled their homeland to beyond the Russian frontier areas to escape Russian military and administration and forced conversion (Khodarkovsky, 2002, pp. 201-206; Mironov, 1988)—generally fruitlessly, since the frontier continued to follow them. Not until the reign of Catherine the Great did a degree of religious tolerance enter Russian policy (Khodarkovsky, 2002, p. 196).

Although russification had been a central component of Russian policy in the areas that it colonized ever since the sixteenth century, with both Russian culture and the Orthodox religion of paramount importance, this policy was reinvigorated in 1881 when Emperor Alexander III concluded that all

minority cultures within Russia should be eliminated and replaced with a Great Russian identity (Weeks 2004, 2006). (Note 6) To be a loyal subject of the tsar one had to be a Russian. Russian became overwhelmingly the language of education, even in the vast areas of the country where it was not the dominant language. In portions of the empire, as in Armenia, non-Russian Orthodox religious schools were closed. Throughout the Central Asian lands of the empire major efforts were made to russify the population. However, Aneta Pavlenko concludes that russification measures were carried out only sporadically as an attempt to subjugate Polish and later Baltic German elites, to preserve the unity of the state, and to replace Polish, German, and Tatar with Russian as a high language. . . . These measures failed to turn peasants into Russians Most importantly, by imposing the russification measures late in the 19th century, the Russian empire created the pre-conditions for the consolidation of nations which would eventually turn against it (Pavlenko, 2011).

On the whole the efforts were a failure and at the outbreak of World War I, the Russian government faced widespread resistance to its policies (“How Successful”, n.d.; see, also, Weeks, 2004)

When the Bolsheviks seized power in fall 1917, they came with a clear view that past Russian policies toward ethnic minorities had been oppressive and exploitative and must be reversed for, in Lenin’s words, Russia was “the prison house of nations” (cited in Weeks, 2004). At one point he called for self-determination of all of the nationality communities within the emerging new communist Russian state. Before the revolution of 1917 Lenin had, in fact, supported substantial autonomy for national minorities and strongly opposed Great Russian chauvinism, going so far as to support minority secession. Soon after the Bolsheviks seized power and as the periphery of Russia was breaking away, Josef Stalin, in his capacity as Commissar for Nationalities, made clear that only workers possessed this right, not groups representing the bourgeoisie (Fainsod, 1963, pp. 57-58). In fact, independent states that had emerged in Ukraine and the South Caucasus were forcibly incorporated into the emerging Soviet state.

In the early years of the Soviet state various institutional arrangements were introduced that were meant to give the national minorities a political voice and autonomy. But, Lenin and Stalin soon broke on the issue of the treatment of minorities and, since Lenin died soon thereafter, Stalin set the framework for Soviet nationalities policy—a framework that permitted little or no autonomy below the central government. Stalin eliminated communist officials in Georgia, Ukraine and Central Asia who opposed what they viewed as the assertion of central, Russian, domination over nationality affairs (see Daniels, 1960, pp. 177-187).

As the new Soviet state system emerged in the period after Lenin’s death, a pseudo-federal system of government was established—pseudo in the sense that, *de facto*, political power and political decisions emanated from the top and were dispersed throughout the system. (Note 7) Moreover, the highly centralized communist party was the major source of power, not the formal institutions of the federal governmental system. Within this system the major units were republics named after the dominant titular population—Ukraine, Armenia, Kazakhstan, etc. Second and third level political units were also

established for smaller nationalities which represented minorities in the larger republics. Although the communist party encouraged cultural development of backward peoples within the overall federation, that cultural development was to occur only within the context of a monolithic communist culture, which was built substantially on Russian nationalism (Fainsod, 1963, p. 363; P;okhy, 2017, pp. 245 ff.). In the mid-1920s a major confrontation occurred between Josef Stalin, the new head of the Soviet Communist Party, and Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, a Tatar Bolshevik who advocated a single Muslim republic across Central Asia. He was charged with nationalist deviations and arrested and eventually executed in 1940 during Stalin's Great Purge (Baker, 2011). Important for our concerns is the fact that Stalin divided the Muslim areas of Central Asia into five small republics that, presumably, would be easier to deal with from Moscow, rather than a single large and unified Muslim republic.

It was not really until the 1930s that Soviet policy concerning national minorities shifted dramatically away from the attacks on Great Russian chauvinism and support for local and regional cultures. During the massive purges of the 1930s, although no national group was primarily targeted, *de facto* the impact of the purge was greater among national minorities than it was among Great Russians. However, as Dmitry Gorenburg (2006) points out, throughout the entire history of the Soviet Union an internal contradiction drove Soviet nationality policy. "The establishment of ethno-federalism, indigenization, and native language education were paired with efforts to ensure the gradual drawing together of nations for the purpose of their eventual merger." (Note 8) Parallel to this is the fact that among Western students of Soviet nationality policy there are those who maintain that the Communists in effect strengthened the cultures of the minorities and those who focus on the Soviet russification and assimilation (Lapidus, 1984; Gorenburg, 2006).

In the late 1950s, during the Khrushchev era, the Soviets introduced a new education policy which expanded the teaching of Russian in non-Russian areas and, *de facto*, cut into the teaching of local languages Bilinsky (1962) and Gorenburg (2006) concludes that "linguistic assimilation and reidentification in the Soviet Union were promoted by a combination of two factors, urbanization and the reduction of native language education." Similar findings are presented in the research of Brian Silver (1974) and numerous other scholars. Although titular languages were taught, they were downplayed over time and career advancement required fluency in Russian. The assimilation of minority populations resulted from the education system, urbanization, marriage across ethnic lines, and physical moves to live and work in Russia proper. The political domination of Moscow and the ethnic Russians was ensured by the domination of the communist party and the fact that the second secretary of each republican communist party was invariably a Russian or Ukrainian, who in effect served as Moscow's eyes and voice in the republics.

But, despite the great optimism voiced among Soviet analysts (Note 10) that ethnic and national divisions among the multiple communities that comprised the Soviet population no longer existed and about the success of the communists in creating a new "Soviet Man," ethnic and national identity—and hostilities between groups—remained strong and played the central role in the demise of the Soviet

Union in late 1991. When Mikhail Gorbachev opened the Soviet political system to discussion and debate as part of his policy of *glasnost* and democratization, ethnic and national issues soon dominated the political debate. They led, by December 1991, to the decision to dissolve the entire Soviet state and to the emergence of fifteen new, supposedly sovereign, states.

4. The Collapse of the Soviet State and the Challenge to Russia's "Great Power" Identity

In a speech to the Russian people in 2005 President Vladimir Putin stated: "The collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century. For the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens and countrymen found themselves outside Russian territory. The epidemic of disintegration also spread to Russia itself" (Putin, 2005). As many analysts have noted, the collapse also brought with it for Russians a major identity crisis. Almost overnight Russia, in the guise of the Soviet Union, went from being a global power and the head of a broad and powerful bloc of states to one of fifteen new Soviet successor states—one suffering major economic decline and challenged by multiple internal political problems that would soon bring it to the verge of being a "failed state." (Note 11) The Russian Federation that emerged had never existed before within its new boundaries. More important, as we have seen, Russia had since its emergence in Muscovy in the Middle Ages always been an imperial state that incorporated large numbers of non-Russians, starting with the other eastern Slavic groups in Belarus and Ukraine. The identity of Russia as a large, powerful, imperial state was shattered and much debate ensued about the very nature of the new Russia. (Note 12) Russians who thought of Kiev or Karkhov as part of Greater Russia could not imagine them in foreign countries. Upwards of twenty-five million ethnic Russians found themselves outside the boundaries of the new Russian state. Questions were posed concerning Russia's political orientation. On top of this the experiment with democracy and a market economy contributed to what Russians saw as political chaos and economic collapse.

The question soon arose whether Russia should continue its efforts to join the West and restructure its entire approach to both domestic and international politics, as those around President Yeltsin in the early 1990s advocated? Or, should Russia recognize its Eurasian heritage and unique history, challenge U.S. global domination and build closer ties with other like-minded states throughout Asia and beyond, as Prime Minister Evgenyi Primakov and later President Putin insisted? (Note 13) The latter is the option that has been chosen with the result of increasing confrontation with both the United States and the European Union.

By the time that Putin took office as acting president at the very end of 1999 the Russian political and economic systems had bottomed out and were just beginning to recover. The new president announced that his central goal was to reestablish Russia's regional dominance and its global importance. Essential preconditions for accomplishing these objectives, as noted in Putin's first "Foreign Policy Concept" (2000), included the internal political stability and economic viability of Russia. (Note 14)

Using increasingly coercive means, President Putin was able to re-impose central control over the

territory of the Russian Federation. Republic-level governors, many of whom had been elected, were now appointed directly by the president; political dissent was squelched and his opponents ran the risk of imprisonment or worse. (Note 15) Putin's success in dealing with the major domestic problems challenging the Russian state at the turn of the millennium meant that Russia increasingly faced Europe and the United States from a position of vastly increased strength. Besides rebuilding the foundations of the Russian state, at great cost to political liberty and democracy, as a precondition for Russia's ability to reassert itself as a major power, Putin and his associates benefited greatly from the exponential rise in global demand for gas and oil—at least until the global financial meltdown in fall 2008—and the ensuing revitalization of the Russian economy. This, in turn, contributed to Russia's ability to pursue a much more active and assertive foreign policy. (Note 16) This assertive foreign policy with its nationalist rhetoric, in turn, has proven to be an important factor in maintaining Putin's popularity and in generating acceptance of his repressive domestic policies.

In the foreign policy realm Putin sought allies who shared Russia's commitment to preventing the global dominance of the United States that represents, in the words of the *Foreign Policy Concept* (2000), a threat to international security and to Russia's goal of serving as a major center of influence in a multipolar world. Until the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, there was little evidence that the disagreements dividing Russia and the United States during the 1990s would disappear soon—in particular since they derived from core elements of their respective foreign policy commitments.

In the first half of 2001, immediately after George W. Bush entered the Oval Office in Washington, US-Russian relations reached their first post-cold war nadir. Bush expelled a group of Russian diplomats charged with espionage in spring 2001. This was followed by a tit-for-tat expulsion of Americans in Moscow. Over the first eight months of Bush's presidency relations deteriorated further, as the United States refused to consider signing the Kyoto Accords on the environment, announced that it would withdraw from the 1972 ABM treaty and would proceed with the development of an anti-ballistic missile system. (Note 17)

As we have already noted, part of President Putin's initial plan for rebuilding Russia's greatness was a reassertion of the central authority of Moscow over the vast territory of the country. This began in Chechnya with the brutal suppression by Putin as prime minister in fall of 1999 of the secessionist movement initiated. The elimination of elected governors in the constituent republics of the Russian Federation contributed to the taming of secessionist movements in Tatarstan, Buryatia, Sakha and elsewhere that had developed in the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR.

Along with ensuring unity within the Russian Federation itself, President Putin refocused Russian policy on what had been termed the “near abroad,” the post-Soviet states that had emerged out of the USSR along with Russia. To a substantial degree in the years immediately following the implosion of the USSR Moscow had virtually ignored these new states, as it focused on gaining acceptance as a full, equal and respected member of the Western-dominated community. With the shift to a Eurasianist

policy orientation, especially after Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency, Russia focused much more on rebuilding its relations with the other former Soviet republics—soon on support for dissident groups, often ethnic Russians, who challenged the unity of these states. (Note 18)

Bertil Nygren (2008a, 2008b), among the first Western analysts who has systematically examined the policies and instruments employed by the Putin government in its attempt to rebuild what he terms Greater Russia, concluded that through 2007, or so, Russia relied primarily on economic instruments, including the supply of oil and gas, to influence the policies of neighboring states and to tie them more closely to Russia. At that point, in order to stop further NATO expansion into what Russian President Dmitri Medvedev termed an area of “Russia’s privileged interest” (Medvedev, 2008) the response became more assertive and Russia has been militarily supportive of dissident groups in Georgia, Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, and Ukraine.

It was roughly around 2005 or 2006 when Russian policy toward both the “near abroad” and the West hardened for a multiplicity of reasons. (Note 19) In no particular order they included the West’s efforts to contain the reemergence of some of these states as dominant power, the West’s refusal to accept Russia as an equal player in international affairs, as had been demonstrated by the refusal to respond to Russian policy concerns about NATO’s interventions in former Yugoslavia, the continued march eastward of NATO, the development of a U.S. anti-ballistic missile program. Added to this was the regular and ongoing campaign by both the United States and the European Union to push Western governance models—especially political democracy, human rights, and related issues—in their dealings with former Soviet states. The color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the new European Eastern Partnership were viewed as attempts to undercut Russia’s friends and Russia’s influence in post-Soviet space. As viewed in Moscow, these were but barely disguised efforts of Western governments and Western NGO’s to shift the political orientation of these countries toward closer ties with the West. (Note 20) It is at this point that Russia becomes much more assertive in its relations with both its near neighbors and with the West.

6. Putin’s Eurasian Union: The Rebuilding of Greater Russia? (Note 21)

We finally reach the point in this analysis that is most relevant to current Russian policy—namely efforts by President Putin and the political elite in Moscow to strengthen the Russian state and to rebuild, in so far as possible, the multinational empire that collapsed in 1991. These efforts have culminated in the recent flurry of activity surrounding the creation of a Eurasian Union meant to mimic the European Union and to enhance the development and modernization processes of all of the member countries. However, most Western analysts emphasize the role that the Union can play in reintegrating the smaller post-Soviet states into a Russian-dominated institution.

President Putin’s (2007) wide-ranging attack on the United States and the West at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 represents a watershed in Russian foreign policy. It announced that Russia was once again major international actor and that Russia will no longer follow the lead of the West in

pursuing its foreign and security policy interests. But, it also indicated that Russia saw itself as a pole in the international system separate from and in conflict with the West. It is at roughly this time that Moscow also began to assert itself rhetorically in response to Western charges that it was corrupting or abandoning democracy. (Note 22) The Russian response was the assertion that Russia was not bound by Western definitions of democracy and that, in fact, it was in the process of establishing a superior form of “sovereign democracy” that was characterized first and foremost by independence from external standards or influences. In other words, Russian democracy is *sui generis* and will not be bound by any external criteria or rules. (Note 23) But, more than a framework for political developments in Russia, “sovereign democracy” was presented as a model for other countries and a justification of the type of top-down management that Vladimir Putin has fashioned in Russia. For authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political leaders across Eurasia, the arguments underlying “sovereign democracy” have proven to be quite attractive. (Note 24)

In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Georgia and Moscow’s formal recognition of the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, then President Dimitri Medvedev laid out the “principles” on which Russian policy was to be carried out. These principles included “protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be” and the claim that “there are regions in which Russia has privileged interests. These regions are home to countries with which we share special historical relations and are bound together as friends and good neighbours” (Medvedev, 2008). Given the continued large Russian minorities in some of the post-Soviet states and Russia’s policy of granting citizenship to large numbers of those living outside the Russian Federation, the first of these two principles *de facto* justifies intervention throughout most of former Soviet territory. The second calls for a sphere of Russian influence across Eurasia in which Russia has the right to protect its interests, including by economic coercion or military intervention. (Note 25)

By the end of 2008 all the pieces were in place for Russia’s “taking back” at least some of the area that it was contesting with the West. By then Russia had rebuilt its economy. It had effectively moved to strengthen the economic dependence of most of the post-Soviet states on Russia—primarily via energy dependence, including increasing Russian ownership of the energy infrastructure of these states (Nygren, 2007). (Note 26) Presidents Putin and Medvedev had provided the rhetorical foundations on which to base the conflict by noting the threat to regional and global peace that the United States represented (Putin, 2007) and by emphasizing Russia’s legitimate role in the affairs of neighboring states (Medvedev, 2008). The *Foreign Policy Concept* issued in 2008 focused on external, rather than internal, challenges to Russian security—with U.S. global dominance at the very top of the list. In line with the extensive discussion of “sovereign democracy” in Russia, the Concept stipulated that global competition was acquiring a civilizational dimension, which suggested competition between different value systems and development models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy principles. The new foreign policy concept maintained that the reaction to the prospect of loss by the historic West of its monopoly over global processes now found its expression, in particular, in

the continued political and psychological policy of “containing Russia.” The document emphasizes throughout Russia’s independence and sovereignty as the foundation on which all of Moscow’s relations with the outside world must be built (“Foreign Policy Concept”, 2008). (Note 27)

Moscow had already demonstrated through the use of economic pressures that the Russian leadership was quite willing to use its economic clout to achieve political goals. Finally, in Georgia it demonstrated that the use of military power was also an acceptable weapon in competing with the West for influence in the regions of “privileged” Russian interest.

It is roughly at this time that Moscow began to push a variety of potential programs aimed at integrating post-Soviet space more effectively and, thus, reducing or expelling entirely Western involvement and influence (see, for example, Russell, 2012). In addition to the call of Dimitri Medvedev for a Eurasian-wide security system, the Russians moved, as well, to develop closer economic and security ties among those members of the Commonwealth of Independent States that were willing to go this route or who succumbed to growing Russian pressures. At that time, this meant Belarus and Kazakhstan for economic integration and a slightly larger group of countries for security cooperation.

Although the Collective Security Treaty Organization was created by six post-Soviet states already in 1992, it only recently expanded its role into a military alliance among the six member states [Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan] (Note 28) and overlaps with and collaborates with the Shanghai Treaty Organization, established in the mid-1990s as a means of facilitating cooperation in security-related activities between China and Russia and several Central Asian countries. Russia is clearly the dominant actor in the CSTO, which is now touted as part of the growing set of integrative projects that are tying together the peoples of the countries that emerged two decades ago out of the Soviet Union.

Probably more important for the future of relations across Eurasia are the various aspects of President Putin’s vision of a Eurasian Union. (Note 29) This represents Moscow’s ongoing effort to knit together the disparate pieces that formerly comprised the Soviet Union and, thus, challenge what it views as Western efforts to undercut the position and role of Russia in former Soviet space, and globally. Drawing upon a proposal first made in 1994 by Kazakhstan’s then President Nazarbayev, President Putin broached the idea of an integration scheme for Eurasia based on the model of the European Union during his presidential election campaign in fall 2011. A month later Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus agreed to a framework for developing the Union over the course of the next several years. By summer and fall of 2013 the Russian president was engaged in an all-out effort to attract—or coerce—other Eurasian states to the view that their future lay with the Union and not with closer ties to the West or to a “go-it-alone” strategy.

For Moscow the EU’s Eastern Partnership (Simão, 2013), which foresees a closer relationship between the EU and six East European and Caucasian states, is seen increasingly as the West’s attempt to supplant Russian influence and to tie these countries into the Western orbit. (Note 30) In fall 2013,

when the president of Armenia announced that Armenia would abandon its negotiations with the European Union, in order to pursue membership in the Eurasian Union, it was reported that Moscow had threatened to reduce its security support for Armenia in its ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan, deny work permits to the tens of thousands of Armenian citizens working in Russia, reduce the flow of subsidized energy to Armenia, and generally make economic life more difficult for the landlocked and beleaguered country (Peter, 2013). Similar pressures were reported in the discussions between Russia and Ukraine in the run-up to President Yanukovich's announcement in November 2013 that Ukraine also would opt for membership in the Eurasian Union rather than continue to pursue closer ties with the European Union (Walker, 2013).

Russians present the Eurasian Union as the means to integrate and modernize the economies of the former Soviet republics, so that they can compete more effectively in the global economy (Lomagin, 2014). However most Western analysts see the Eurasian Union primarily as a political tool for Moscow's re-imposition of control over as broad a swath of post-Soviet territory and people as possible (Adomeit, 2014). It represents a continuation of Putin's policy initiated more than a decade ago of rebuilding Greater Russia and undercutting the attempts of the European Union, NATO and the United States to expand their ties to former Soviet areas. Moreover, it is meant to ensure that challenges to the authoritarian and semi-authoritarian leaders in neighboring states will not succeed and, thus, influence potential Russian challengers to the system of top-down political management that now characterizes the Russian Federation.

Although President Putin has experienced resistance to his proposal for a Eurasian Union, the decision by the Armenian president in fall 2013 to break off negotiations with the EU and join the Eurasian Union, (Note 30) followed little more than a month later by Ukrainian President Yanukovich's similar announcement for Ukraine, seemed to put the matter at rest. Moscow's plan for an economically and politically reintegrated Eurasia under Russian leadership seemed well on the path to realization. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and also Ukraine, along with Russia, had all apparently "signed on" to the plan. Georgia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan 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.

That was the situation in mid-February 2014, despite the ongoing challenges to the Ukrainian president's announced decision to opt for closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Union. Then came the unexpected events that toppled President Yanukovich, followed by *de facto* Russian military intervention in and annexation of Crimea—complete with propaganda about a fascist takeover in Kyiv that threatened the security of ethnic Russians in Ukraine—and the decision to hold a referendum in Crimea about union with the Russian Federation followed by incorporation of the region into the Russian Federation and paralleled the Russian recognition of and support for independence from Ukraine of regions in the east of the country. The confrontation in Ukraine has meant that, although

Russia has prevented Ukraine from pursuing membership in the European Union and/or NATO, it has also eliminated Ukraine as a realistic candidate for Eurasian Union membership (see Fedorov, 2019). Elsewhere in post-Soviet states—usually in areas with significant ethnic Russian or regional minority populations—Russia has also intervened, facilitated secession and granted some form of political recognition to the new secessionist statelets. (Note 31) In many respects, once the Russians had rebuilt their domestic economy and decided that focusing on reestablishing their dominant role in former Soviet space rather than integrating into Europe, they had clear advantages in competing with the West and for attracting other former Soviet republics into closer ties. Most important was the economic and, especially, energy dependence of most of the other states on Russia—and Moscow’s willingness to use that dependence to its advantage. Only Azerbaijan, with its energy wealth—plus several resource-rich Central Asian states—is in a position easily to resist Russian “invitations.” For countries such as Moldova and Georgia efforts to resist the Russian embrace and pursue stronger relations with the Europeans have continued and even expanded after Russian military intervention in Crimea (Secieru, 2014). As noted by Thomas Ambrosio, “Russia has sought to create near-exclusive spheres of influence within the former Soviet space, excluding the Baltics” (Ambrosio, 2019).

7. Concluding Comments

The Russia that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union was a Russia that had never existed over the course of the past millennium. Shorn of all but a small portion of the ethnic minorities that had always comprised such a large portion of the population of the country, including the fellow Slavs in Belarus and Ukraine, the Russian Federation was no longer the imposing international actor that it had been for most of the past two centuries, or more. Russia’s history had been one of continual expansion since the fourteenth century and the imposition of Russian policy domination and Russian culture on peoples usually viewed as backward and less developed. That was the history of the last century of the Tsarist regimes, as well as of the Soviet regime.

Although the Russian Federation still extended across eleven time zones, had the largest population in Europe, and possessed nuclear weapons, it was no match, in terms of global clout, for the lost Soviet state. Moreover, the West took advantage of Russia’s weakness by extending its involvement and influence into areas in Central and Eastern Europe that were viewed as an integral part of the Russian sphere of influence. This is precisely the set of developments that Vladimir Putin set out to correct in a policy termed revanchist by Matthew Sussex (2015) because it aims at undoing major geopolitical developments of the past quarter century. A central aspect of the policy that he has pursued over the course of the past decade has been the attempt to reestablish an integrated economic, political and security space in the area of the former USSR somewhat akin to “the gathering of the Russian lands” by Muscovy in the fifteenth century.

How the Eurasian Union will evolve, what the nature of Russia’s relations with the other former Soviet states and populations will be, how the crisis in Ukraine will unfold—none of these questions can be

fully answered today. Yet, it does appear clear that the intention of the current Russian leadership under Vladimir Putin is to bring together into a close economic, political and security union as much of former Soviet territory as possible in order to strengthen Russia's economic and political position as it vies for a position as one of the poles in a new multipolar world intended to replace the current international system dominated by the United States and the West. It is hard to imagine such an integrated system much different from the Greater Russia discussed by Bertil Nygren (2008) in which the smaller states and their populations are subordinated to Russia, in ways similar to the way that their ancestors once were in Tsarist and Communist Russia.

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Notes

Note 1. The argument presented here was originally developed in a course co-taught at the University of Miami in fall 2013 by the author with then doctoral candidate Dina Moulioukova entitled "From the Soviet Union to the Eurasian Union." The author is especially grateful to Dr. Moulioukova for organizing that course and for piquing his interest in the importance of integration throughout Russian history. These ideas also formed the basis for a paper presented at a conference entitled "Colonizing

and De/Re-Colonizing Nations: A Research Inquiry into Communist Practices 25 Years Later,” Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Fl., March 12-13, 2015.

Note 2. For a comprehensive discussion of the nationality complexity of the population of the Soviet Union at the time of the last official census in 1989 see Anderson and Silver (1989).

Note 3. The view of Russia’s self-perception as a great power and its impact on policy is dealt with, among others, by (Adomeit, 1995; Hopf, 2002; Kanet, 2007; Mankoff, 2009; Moulioukova, with Kanet, n.d.; and Neumann, 2008).

Note 4. The following discussion draws on Pipes (1974).

Note 5. For a superb treatment of this and later periods of Russian expansion see Serhii Plokhy (2017). He notes, for example, that by the middle of the seventeenth century it had resolved its internal problems and returned to an offensive strategy in its international relations, “of which there would be great deal more in the decades and centuries to come” (Plokhy, 2017, p. 35). See, also, Plokhy (2008).

Note 6. Plokhy points out how Russia attempted in the late nineteenth century attempted to suppress the development of languages other than Russian (Plokhy, 2017, pp. 137-156).

Note 7. For an excellent discussion of Soviet nationalities policies, including its inherent contradictions, see Carrère d’Encausse (1992).

Note 8. The noted French historian of Russia, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, states that “Stalinism, with its open hostility toward nations and the officially endorsed supremacy of the Russian people (giving rise to the myth of the Russian ‘big brother’ in relation to the USSR’s minority groups), contributed considerably to.

Note 10. When the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 the population totaled 293 million, of whom approximately 51 percent were ethnic Russians. The population of the new Russian Federation was about 148 million, with Russians making up 81 percent of the population (Andreev et al., 1993).

Note 11. This debate is discussed in detail in the work of Jeffrey Mankoff (2009), Regina Heller (2012), Andrei Tsygankov (2012, 2014), Valentina Feklyunina (2012), Stephen White and Valentina Feklyunina (2014), Dina Moulioukova-Fernandez (2012) and many other analysts of Russia. See, also, note 3, above.

Note 12. Rapprochement with and incorporation into the Western system was the focus of Russian policy until about 1995, during the period in which Andrei Kozyrev was foreign minister. The shift to a more Eurasianist orientation came in early 1996, when Evgenyi Primakov replaced Kozyrev as foreign minister. Primakov was later prime minister in 1998-1999. For a discussion of the reorientation of Russian policy, see, Kozyrev (2019), Kanet (2010) and many others.

Note 13. For this set of objectives see, also, ‘Kontseptsiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti” (2000).

Note 14. For example, journalists, such as Anna Politkovskaya, were murdered and the billionaire owner of Lukos Oil Company, Mikhail Khodorkovsky was imprisoned in 2003 and his company confiscated after he challenged the politics of President Putin. Khodorkovsky was released from prison in late 2013 as part of a public relations gesture in the run-up to the Sochi Olympic games (Oltermann

& Walker, 2013).

Note 15. However, as many analysts have argued, the revived role of Russia as a regional and global political actor is based extensively on oil and gas production and exports, despite recent improvements in other aspects of the Russian economy. See, for example, Hancock (2007); McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, 2008); Menon and Motyl (2007).

Note 16. George W. Bush brought into office with him a group of neo-conservatives who were committed to restructuring the world according to a U.S. model and to America's benefit. The backing off from existing or new treaties was part of the effort to remove limitations on the U.S. freedom to act in world affairs (Kanet, 2005).

Note 17. See, for example, Spechler and Spechler (2019), esp. pp. 81-98.

Note 18. For a discussion of the shift in Russian policy and the growing rift in Russia's relations with the West see Kanet (2015) and Kanet (2020). See, also Marten (2020).

Note 19. On Russian policy toward its near neighbors see Humphrey (2009), Adomeit (2011) and Sakwa (2017). On resistance to color revolutions see Polese and Ó Beachán (2011). On the argument that the West de facto manipulated the revolutions see Roberts (2014) and Samphir (2014). On the role of Poland in supporting democratic elements in Ukraine see Petrova (2014). On the growing ideological divide between Moscow and the West see DeBardeleben (2015).

Note 20. The following section draws on Kanet, (2015). Serhii Plokhyy treats post-Soviet Russian behavior (Plokhyy, 2017. pp. 317-51).

Note 21. As Dawisha (2014) demonstrates, Putin and his team never intended to establish a democratic political system and those who saw Russia as a flawed democracy rather than a new authoritarian state were simply incorrect.

Note 22. For an extensive discussion of the concept, first used by Vladislav Surkov in 2006, and its place in Russian policy see Herd (2009).

Note 23. For a definition of what the term competitive authoritarianism and its place in post-Soviet states see Levitsky and Way (2010).

Note 24. Both of these arguments are central to the Russian justification for its military intervention in Crimea (Putin, 2014).

Note 25. Russia systemically took over the control of the pipeline infrastructure of Belarus as a means of dominating the latter's economy (Wierzbowska-Miazga, 2013). On the broad aspects of Russian energy policy see Ehrstedt and Vahtra (2008) and Nygren (2008a, 2008b).

Note 26. For an extensive discussion of Russian criticisms of the United States and the West in general see Vladimir Shlapentokh (2008).

Note 27. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan are former members. Ukraine, Turkmenistan, and Moldova have never been members of the CSTO.

Note 28. For quite different assessments of the Eurasian Union see Lomagin (2014) and Arakelyan (2014). See, also, Adomeit (2014). The Eurasian Union is intended to build on the Customs Union of

Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia that became operational on 1 January 2010.

Note 29. The general approach that Russia has taken as it stumped for commitments to join the Union is the one outlined by Nygren (2008)—i.e., the promise of economic rewards and, more important even, the threat of and application of economic punishment. In 2012, after Moldova noted its plans to pursue an agreement with the EU, Moscow cut off the import of Moldovan wine as a health threat, much as it had banned Polish meat imports a few years earlier after a political dispute with Warsaw (Emerson & Kostanyan, 2013).

Note 30. Armenian membership was formalized in October 2014 (“Armenia Joins”, 2014).

Note 31. On Armenia see Arakelyan (2019); on Georgia see Dunlop (2012) and March (2012); on Kyrgyzstan see Herd (2012).