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The (Re)-Gathering of the Russian People?

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Eight hundred years ago, the Mongol conquest of Kievan Rus' left Russians divided among many subordinated principalities and polities. Over time, the Grand Duchy of Muscovy brought them together under its sway, laying the foundation for the Russian Empire. Over time, the Tsars extended their reach, to the marshes on which St. Petersburg was built in the north, in the south to a port at Sevastopol in the Crimea, to another on the Pacific, Vladivostok, and to the heart of Central Asia.

It is useful to remember this history, lest we imagine that recent events in the Ukraine simply point to the prospect of a renewed Cold War, and as we consider the possible effects of sanctions on Russia. Is Russia trying to dominate its surroundings? Yes, as it has done for hundreds of years, as well as the past decade. Is it trying to recoup regionally what it lost with the collapse of the USSR? Yes, but not just by a policy of annexation -- compliant neighbours may be enough (or better) in some cases, though perhaps not for the Black Sea Fleet and for strategic areas with a substantial Russian-speaking population. Will sanctions reverse this policy? Probably not. If sanctions last for decades, but Crimea remains Russian, will Russians see the price as worthwhile? Centuries-old geopolitical objectives, strengthened by a centuries-old sense of history, may trump economics.

The immediate flash point, Ukraine, presents an awkward situation. Mismanaged, corrupted, and divided since leaving the USSR, Ukraine stayed under

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Russian influence, at least informally, part of the traditional realm. Sporadic revolutions and motions toward the EU and NATO challenged Russian hopes of keeping Ukraine close. The current crisis stemmed from an abortive Russian effort to end that western challenge, which spun out of everyone's and anyone's control, fuelled by a sense of existential danger for many parties. In this crisis, Russia has combined aggressive and successful tactics, with an emotional and erratic strategy. This strategy can succeed only if all its opposition in Ukraine collapses, forever, and western states swallow a humiliation to their values and interests. Otherwise, western countries will be alarmed and rearmed and adopt policies which will hurt Russia, while Ukraine will be smaller but more anti-Russian. Western opinion is united in the belief that Russian actions are bad, and in the inability and unwillingness to do much about the matter, partly because it does not think Ukraine is a real interest. Ukrainians remain as divided as ever, and as incompetent. The Kiev government's efforts to regain control in its eastern territory will face considerable difficulties, especially given Russian backing for the separatists there. Russian warnings of the dire consequences of a crackdown, of course, are hypocritical. Western responses are symbolic, intended to deter Russia from approaching the Dniepr, which would threaten NATO. That danger remains possible, however remote. Will Russia be satisfied with a mere warning to Ukraine (and others) about the nature and strength of its interests there? Would a loosened federal structure in the Ukraine, with an eastern portion acting as a drag on western-leaning elements elsewhere satisfy it? Would the west and Ukraine gain from partition in these territories, even if accompanied by ethnic cleansing? Is the west really willing to pay to put Ukraine on its feet as an independent state, which will result in a neo-colonial state confronted by constant Russian efforts to subvert it? Are we looking at a 1950s Austrian solution, or at the prospect of a clear secession? And how shall this reminder of the nastier side of international politics be squared with principles of law? Shall we reach for our copies of Stephen Krasner's Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy? The clash between the aims of Russia, western states and local regimes is serious, but room for compromise exists—the moving finger has not yet written its indelible lines. If Russia abandons efforts to be the master, and only master, in Kiev, and accepts the existence of an independent and non-aligned Ukraine, then it and we can tolerate the internal changes needed to achieve the aim. If not, however, we have not yet begun to fight.

Compare the Ukraine to the Baltic States, which moved toward the West as fast and far as they could, precisely to gain protection while Russia was weak, and now members both of NATO and the EU. Two of them, Estonia and Latvia, include substantial Russian minorities, with less status than those in Ukraine. A west-Russia confrontation, indirect in the case of Ukraine, would become very direct if Russia pressured the Baltic States. Here, however, any Russian actions would have to be rather more circumspect than in Ukraine. The more subtle strategy would have to be to achieve a neutralization of these states, Finlandization, for example, through arousing internal pressures to disengage from the EU and from NATO. Given the different economic and political natures of these states and, one hopes, their different internal social character, and their firmer ties to the west, this is a different order of business from Ukraine. NATO and the EU may do much more to offer direct support and hold the ring, but any Russian encouragement of local elements would have to be met mainly – certainly initially – by firm and appropriate local responses. Any Russian actions risk a much faster and more serious clash with western countries than anything which yet has happened in Ukraine, and Baltic security is more stable.

We do not confront a new Cold War, but instead a conflict we thought we had won: a war of Soviet succession. Our competitor is a reborn Tsarist empire, which advocates an ingathering of Russian peoples. Today, this struggle shakes Eastern Europe; tomorrow it may do so across Eurasia where there are other former Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, with sizeable ethnic Russian minorities. If the Russian government chooses to challenge a western-dominated order, the bigger issues lie further east, amidst weak republics in Central Asia, the rise of Chinese influence, and a multiparty struggle in Afghanistan after NATO leaves. Even if Russia has a degree of success with Ukraine, it will be at the cost of increased wariness in Europe and the US, on top of already-existing European concern about dependence on Russian energy. Given the importance of energy exports to the Russian economy and government, a European shift to greater reliance on other – including indigenous – sources of energy will be a major long-term penalty for Russia.

What are Russia's choices in the long term, where the greater issue is how Russia will fit into a changing world system – an issue important for no one more than the Russians themselves? What feasible vision does the Russian government have for the

place of its country in the world? Russia wishes to be an independent Great Power, a traditional view of its place, rather than seeking a friendlier, but what might well be seen as a subordinate, position in the West. If it is uncomfortable at the thought of being a junior to the West, would it be any more acceptable to be a junior to China, weak in everything except its nuclear arsenal? It is unlikely to retreat into a regional sulk, but would it be able to do more – and do more constructively – on the world stage than court a handful of scattered local friends on an opportunistic basis?

As Bette Davis, playing Margo Channing, said just before the climactic scene in All About Eve: "Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night".