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Ukraine: Putin's Lunge for USSR 2.0?



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An Estonian diplomat recently asked someone from the inner circle of Putin ideologues where all this latest Russian aggressive posturing and behaviour were going to end. *"It ends when you stop us"*.

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The key features of the current situation come down to these.

Geopsychology

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is not an issue of 'geopolitics'. It's an issue of geopsychology. Which rules count these days? Who sets them? Who's ready to enforce them? And thereby on to even deeper attitudes and instincts. Who is *strong* - and who is *weak*? Who *wants to win*? Who is prepared to *do what it takes to win*?

When Putin looks at the current group of Western leaders and their intelligence agencies vaunting their diverse openness to new pronouns, does he feel that any of them have the nerves and resolve needed for a serious confrontation with Moscow? Do any of them *want to win*, or even now understand *what's at stake*?

Russia's underlying negotiation posture is explicitly psychological, and based on these key ideas:

- *We can take more pain that than you can imagine*
- *We can take more pain that you're prepared to inflict*
- *Whatever you do to us, we'll do worse to you*

Western leaders dimly sense this. Hence their uncertainty on how to respond to the Ukraine invasion. Shutting Russia off from the SWIFT banking system for cross-border payments will be a heavyweight financial sanction, and do real damage to the Russian economy. But what if Russia then launches massive cyber-attacks that (if only for some time) cripple Western banks and hospitals and power-stations? What price are Western governments and voters willing to pay to stand up for their own principles?

Access. Engagement. Resolution.

Keeping What's Ours

Back in 2003 I read an interview with Vladimir Putin in which he was asked what we saw as the core of his policy. His laconic yet profound reply: *"To keep what's ours"*.

He of course won't say precisely what Russia sees as 'its' or to explain what he means by 'keep'. That would limit Moscow's freedom of action.

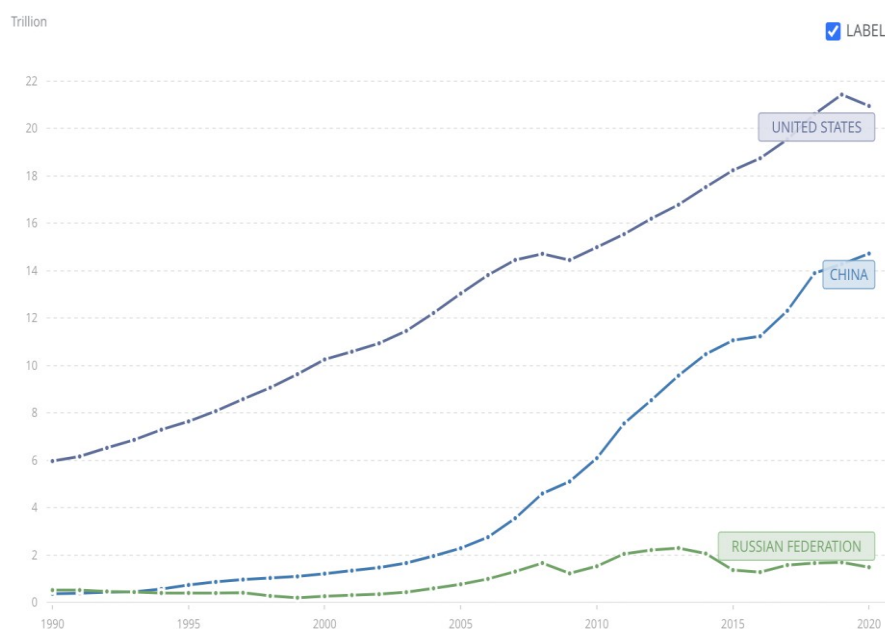
Instead the rest of us are left to ponder the many possibilities of what that ambition covers:

- anywhere conquered by the Tsars or Stalin (including the three small Baltic states plus the rest of the former USSR as well as large areas of Poland and Finland)
- anywhere (eg Latvia or Ukraine or Kazakhstan) where non-trivial numbers of Russian-speakers or Russian citizens live outside Russia's current borders
- any Slav-language populations (so down to Serbia and Bulgaria)
- anywhere featuring the Cyrillic language, or a branch of the Orthodox Church
- anywhere within Russia's 'natural sphere of influence'

Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and its now full-on military assaults elsewhere in Ukraine show this Putin Doctrine in its most drastic operational form.

The Sheer Cost of Putinism

Since Russia started its aggression against Ukraine a decade ago, the economies of China and the USA have each grown by over four *trillion* dollars. Russia's far punier economy has slipped back to where it was in 2008. Had Russia kept growing at a reasonable pace from 2012 onwards it would now be a couple of *trillion* dollars better off. World Bank data:



In other words, the opportunity cost to Russia of Vladimir Putin's policies is already at a giddy height. It's set to grow much faster. But Putin doesn't care.

Note too the huge and growing gap between Russia and China. It's no wonder that Beijing gives Moscow diplomatic cover at the United Nations. From Beijing's point of view Vladimir Putin is a classic Leninist 'useful idiot' who unsettles the West while making his own country weaker.

What does Putin Really Want?

It's not a stretch to argue that insofar as Putin has any clear end-goal in mind, it's to restore a sort of Soviet Union 2.0 by bringing back under explicit Moscow control Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and as many other former Soviet republics as he can be bothered to oppress.

In this scheme Ukraine has a special importance. The most dangerous threat to the neo-KGB cliques running Russia now is a Ukraine with a respectable and growing place in modern Europe. A Ukraine operating towards something like reasonable European standards of democratic transparency. That will set a horrible example to the Russian population, and to many people in the Russian elite: something else other than Putin's increasingly oppressive and dangerous policies is imaginable - and achievable.

So, for Moscow under current management, smashing Ukraine by brute force makes sense. It 'punishes' Ukraine and Ukrainians for the temerity of wanting to step away from Moscow's tutelage. And it warns all the other former Soviet republics that they'll do much better if they avoid being smashed and glumly submit to Moscow rule again.

The Russian Empire

The wider historic point here is that the last century has seen the end of almost all the nineteenth century European empires. British, French, Austro-Hungarian, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Ottoman empires: all gone.

But one empire remains: the Tsarist empire. Russia itself is not a country. It's still an empire, a patchwork quilt of territories and nationalities sprawling across eleven time-zones. Moscow claims to be defending the rights to self-determination of Russian-speakers in Ukraine (incidentally wrecking their own arguments for not recognising the right of Kosovo's Albanian majority to leave Serbia). Yet Moscow passes law after repressive law to stop any communities in Russia from pursuing their self-determination.

Any Russian leader now faces a ghastly problem. What to make of the seven decades of Communist rule in the greater sweep of Russian history? Back in 2005 President Putin proclaimed that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century". Most sane people would reply that that greatest catastrophe was the very creation of the Soviet Union - and the ensuing massive communist killings of millions of Soviet citizens needed to keep it staggering on.

This explains why Putin uses the bizarre language of the 'de-Nazification of Ukraine' to justify his policies. He knows that invading Ukraine and killing countless Ukrainians (and Russians) in the process will not be popular in Russia. He aims to brazen it out by wrapping this aggression in the

banner of Soviet junk-populism. This in turn rests on the lie that by the Russian people making huge sacrifices to help defeat Nazi Germany, Soviet communism was shown to be respectable and legitimate.

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In the end, when we try to work out why all this is happening, all roads lead to Red Square and Lenin's Tomb.

Imagine that Hitler had been embalmed and left for public gawping in Berlin. We might have a rather different Germany now.

Not only is Lenin still mouldering in Red Square. Plenty of other Soviet villains up to and including Stalin who helped murder millions of Russians are lying in or by the Kremlin Wall.

So when you see a Russian diplomat on TV defending Putin and the onslaught against Ukraine, or when you see a Russian military officer strutting through the rubble of a Ukrainian city, remember that s/he is promoting policies and values that come in a direct ideological and moral line from the communist regime *that probably murdered some people in that diplomat's or officer's own extended family*. And that those appalling leaders are still accorded Russia's highest honours.

This level of mental disassociation isn't normal. It doesn't fit into any category of rational analysis that mere policymakers can identify.

No wonder it's not easy to work out a coherent response.

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