



Reviving Greater Russia

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In the last days of 2001, with little fanfare or public opposition, a remarkable new law went into effect in Russia. Enacted by President Vladimir Putin and key parliamentary supporters, this legislation officially codifies the procedures for peacefully expanding Russia's borders. It is no less than a blueprint for enlarging the Russian Federation, and one that could foreshadow a major push for "Greater Russia" on the part of the Kremlin.

Ideologically, such a move has much backing in Moscow. Back in 1990, Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn publicly urged the creation of a "Greater Slavic State" made up of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and northern Kazakhstan to replace the U.S.S.R. The Soviet Union's subsequent dissolution did nothing to mute these yearnings.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn himself repeated the call for Slavic unity on the floor of the Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, in February 1995. That he was given such a forum to call for expanding the Russian Federation was a sure sign of serious political support for the idea.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn is hardly alone. Seven years on, the concept of a "Greater Russia" continues to hold great currency among Russian nationalists of all stripes — for good reason. Much of the territory of the former Soviet Union, separated from Moscow with the U.S.S.R.'s collapse, remains deeply oriented toward Russia.

In Kazakhstan, the country's 5.7 million Russians make up fully one-third of the population. Their political disenfranchisement at the hands of the ruling regime in Astana has prompted stirrings toward reunification. This is particularly true in the north, where ethnic Slavs make up some 80 percent of the population.

Belarus and Russia have been drifting toward a lasting merger for years. The latest, ambitious plan for Moscow-Minsk integration, aired publicly by President Putin as recently as this August, calls for the de facto reabsorption of Belarus into Russia and the creation of a "single state in the full sense of the word."

A part of Ukraine is similarly under pressure. Nikita Khrushchev's controversial 1954 administrative reshuffling of the U.S.S.R. may have given the Soviet Republic of Ukraine control of Crimea, but many today still deem the Russian-speaking enclave to rightly belong to Russia. To hear prominent Russian politicians like Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov tell it, Crimea's return to the Russian fold is simply a matter of time, notwithstanding the existence of a formal border settlement.

Two ethnically distinct areas of Georgia also seem ripe for reunification.

The first, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, has long had a tumultuous relationship with Tbilisi. Georgia's 1991 civil war was, in fact, sparked by the South Ossetian parliament's vote to leave the fledgling republic in favor of union with Russia. The second, the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, is fiercely nationalistic and has made no secret of its desire to belong to Russia. In 1992, its parliament took a concrete step by opting to revert to the region's 1925 constitution — a move that effectively would have meant a separation from Georgia. This was prevented only by the outbreak of hostilities with Georgia, the outcome of which has ensconced a virtually permanent Russian military detachment in the enclave, in turn fueling further talk of separation.

And in the Moldovan enclave of Trans-Dniester, pro-Moscow sentiment runs deep. The region's 1991-1995 conflict was spurred in large part by ethnic Russian and Ukrainian fears of becoming a minority within the Moldovan state. Now, having acquired de facto independence, there are signs that Trans-Dniester could be contemplating a reunion with the Kremlin, notwithstanding the planned withdrawal of Russian troops.

All this makes Russian territorial expansion a distinct possibility, and one with monumental implications. An ethnically based expansion has the potential to swell Russia's population by more than 20 million, while the corresponding rise in Russian nationalism would likely encourage further territorial ambitions on Moscow's part — most probably in the direction of Ukraine. And even a modest territorial expansion could have far-reaching regional effects, breathing new life into the ethnically based border problems of other countries.

Practically speaking, the Kremlin's vision of expanding the Russian Federation might never become a reality. Economic limitations, the difficulty of domestic consensus, and divergent foreign policy priorities all remain political constraints to the concept of a "Greater Russia." But the legal basis for just such a move has now been laid by Moscow. The West would do well to take notice.