



Ukraine is the Graveyard of Europe's Last Empire

June 19, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman** *The Washington Times*

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In recent years, imperial thinking has made a major comeback in Russia.

Buoyed by visions of a revived “greater Russia” and egged on by ideological fellow travelers, President Vladimir Putin has championed an increasingly aggressive foreign policy designed to reassert his country’s primacy in its traditional geopolitical sphere of influence — and beyond. Mr. Putin’s fateful decision to launch a “special military operation” in February 2022 with the goal of fomenting regime change in Kyiv was the logical consequence of this revived impulse.

Yet today, Russia’s actual imperial potential is declining, and the war in Ukraine is a big reason why. Across Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Baltic states, Russia’s reputation has taken a massive hit as more and more countries question the prudence of aligning too closely with Moscow. This shift is neatly captured in a new Gallup survey highlighting a number of key regional changes the Kremlin’s ill-fated war of choice has wrought.

The first is that, over the past year, approval of Russia’s leadership declined dramatically among nearly all of its neighbors. And while in places such as Ukraine and the Baltics, which already had extensive experience with Moscow’s predations, trust was already low, it has dipped significantly over the past year in countries like Armenia, Moldova, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, which have historically been more or less “sympathetic to Russian leadership.”

Specifically, between 2021 and 2022, approval of Russia slipped from 45% to 32% in Armenia, from 43% to 30% in Moldova, and from 55% to 29% in Kazakhstan. In Azerbaijan, meanwhile, support for Russia plummeted from 60% in 2019 to just 23% last year.

Second, Russia’s current offensive against Ukraine has had a much more marked impact on regional perceptions than its earlier 2014 invasion ever did. Back then, thinking about Russia experienced a marked negative shift in the Baltics and Ukraine but far less so in other post-Soviet states. Now, however, Russia’s renewed aggression against Ukraine has significantly shifted regional public opinion because “the thin justification for the land grab, and the magnitude of violence are fertile grounds for concern, particularly in countries with their own ethnic divisions.”

Third, the concept of a *Russkiy mir* (“Russian world”) championed by the Kremlin is declining in appeal. In recent years, Mr. Putin and company have made a point of extensively courting the “compatriots” — Russian speakers and ethnic Russians who they believe should contribute to the country’s greatness. But precisely those constituencies are increasingly rejecting Russia’s vision. In fact, fewer people residing in countries with large Russian diasporas (such as Kazakhstan, Latvia and Estonia) are today “identifying as Russian,” the Gallup study found. Last year, just 15% of Kazakhs, 19% of Latvians and 21% of Estonians did, a major decline over statistics a decade earlier.

The implications of these changes are potentially profound. As Gallup notes, Russia’s receding influence in the “post-Soviet space” may create an opening for another superpowers (like China) to gain ground in the region. The United States, too, potentially stands to gain from Russia’s ideological retreat — provided it seizes the moment to embrace a more robust policy of engagement in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The biggest change, however, is taking place in Russia itself. Russia’s misadventure in Ukraine, Gallup concludes, has “seriously eroded its status and prestige,” leading to a “seismic shift in public opinion [that] may signal the twilight of Europe’s last empire.” In other words, in his efforts to revive a Russian empire, Mr. Putin may have decisively doomed his country’s chances of ever being one again. For that, Russia’s president has no one but himself to blame.

Ilan Berman is senior vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.