
Maximalist Rhetoric and the Realities of the Region

Samuel Charap, International Institute for Strategic Studies, August 2014

| U.S. FOREIGN POLICY |

U.S. perceptions of Russian objectives in post-Soviet Eurasia are distorted due to a pervasive failure to differentiate between maximalist rhetoric and the realities of the region almost 25 years after the Soviet collapse. Washington tends to seize on hyperbolic statements by Russian officials (e.g., President Vladimir Putin’s line about the Soviet collapse being the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”) that create an impression of a neo-imperialist Russia bent on subjugating its neighbors at all costs.

[E]ven if some in Moscow may dream of a new Soviet Union, that means very little in practical terms since its neighbors have no interest in giving up their political independence.

But even if some in Moscow may dream of a new Soviet Union, that means very little in practical terms since its neighbors have no interest in giving up their political independence. In other words, more relevant for U.S. policy is not what

Moscow wants in its ideal scenario; it's what Moscow can feasibly achieve in reality— and what kind of compromise both sides can find through negotiation and dialogue. The United States has often shunned such dialogue precisely because of a focus on Russia's— often disturbing— maximalist desires. This is understandable but unfortunate. We have never tested the proposition that there are compromise solutions for the region that both sides can live with.

One idea in this context that has been obscured by hardening of attitudes in recent months is that most Russians— within the elite and beyond it— do not seek to “break” Ukraine. The current policy of support for the armed insurgents in eastern Ukraine is a means to an end (achieving a deal about Ukraine's future); it is not an end in itself. Even today, despite months of relentless propaganda on Russian television demonizing the Ukrainian government, over 60 percent of Russians oppose war with Ukraine. If an overt invasion were to occur, it would most likely happen because the Russian leadership felt it had no other choice.

Printable PDF





Add a comment...

Comment using...



Jack Matlock · Duke University

Wise words and a timely reminder about the error that stems from taking maximalist comments out of context. Those who quote President Putin's comment about the collapse of the Soviet Union being a geopolitical disaster seem to forget his earlier comment that anyone who does not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart but that anyone who would wish to reassemble it has no brain.

[Reply](#) · [Like](#) · August 27 at 3:20pm

Facebook social plugin

[Terms & Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Site Credits](#)

| [Photo Credits](#)

© Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2014



The views expressed on this site are the sole opinions of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Carnegie Corporation of New York.