

Czar Vladimir is changing the rules of the game

Jeffrey Simpson, The Globe and Mail

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Czar Vladimir wants to change the map of Eastern Europe, and perhaps other areas contiguous to Russia.

His actions challenge the assumption that Great Power rivalry in Europe was dead. Even during the Cold War, neither the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nor the United States and NATO sought to change the borders of Europe. And when the Soviet Union imploded and became a shrunken Russia, the assumption remained that Great Power rivalries were a thing of the past. Europe had learned from its history, or so we thought.

The Russian economy shrank in the first three months of this year, and Russian money has fled abroad due to the Ukraine crisis. As Joanna Partridge reports, Russia is looking to spend at home rather than abroad due to geopolitical risks.

The borders of Europe were also sacrosanct, after being restructured in the east after the war, because countries did not align with ethnicities. Hungarians lived in Romania, Russians in Latvia, Ukrainians in Poland, and Yugoslavia, as it then was, had people of different ethnicities living in various parts of the polyglot country. Among the factors that did in Yugoslavia was the assertion by people in one part of the federation that they had to intervene to protect their ethnic fellows in another. That way, as we know, led to bloodshed and dismemberment.

Today, like the czars of the 19th century, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserts the right to decide unilaterally how to protect Russian-speakers in countries other than Russia, as in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, parts of Moldova, and to try to create a ring of states or parts of states dependent upon Mother Russia for their economic livelihood and political direction. Russia does not have to incorporate these territories into the mother country, although it could take the kind of action it did in the 19th century when the country expanded. It will at the very least demand fealty from its neighbours, as empires do.

This return to a much older, and very deeply grounded, sense of Great Russian chauvinism changes the rules for at least Europe and for much of the Eurasian land mass. Borders are no longer necessarily inviolate, and the weak can fall prey to the strong. The Western assumption – or shall we now say hope or illusion – that Russia is fundamentally a Western country has been shattered, as it had so often been in the past. The Russian sense of defiance of the West, oppressor and belittler of Russia, has returned with a nasty vengeance, if it ever truly disappeared. Russia does not wish to be part of the Western community of nations, because it cannot lead that group; indeed, it

sees the group as inimical to its own values and ambitions to control directly or indirectly contiguous territories.

The framework of Western institutions erected in Russia in the post-Soviet era is like the Potemkin village of old: facades such as a free press now largely under government edict; a Duma controlled by the President; a free-market economy ruled by oligarchs and state-owned enterprises. As in the 19th century, Russia is a country resting on interlocking interests of state, oligarchs and the Orthodox Church, bound together by mutual preservation of allotted powers, cemented by assertive nationalism and rooted by a sense of grievance that Russia has been put upon by others that neither appreciated her special virtues nor respected her legitimate interests.

Russia's retreat to the past – that is, into itself – poses very profound challenges to the international order, and to Russia itself. Chauvinism usually begets a nationalist reaction, and Russia is full of non-Russian nationalities whose members will be more restless than ever, just as Tibetans and Uyghurs chafe under Han Chinese chauvinism.

It will not go unnoticed within Russia that what Czar Vladimir demands for Ukraine – a very loose federation because of ethnic differences within Ukraine – will not be offered by Great Russians within their own country to ethnic and linguistic minorities. Federalism will apparently be for others, but not within Russia, where Mr. Putin has appointed the local governors.

Russia is too big to be ignored, and too strong to be lectured to with any hope of results – not when it has retreated into itself. It will remain an important player in world affairs however the Ukrainian drama plays out. But the way in which at least the West, and eventually other countries, deal with Russia will have to change, because of how Russia now remembers its past and is shaping its future accordingly.