

# Minority Rights and Imperial Reintegration

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Russia is a revisionist power. The objective of Russian foreign policy remains expansion. Its aim is to reassemble all the lands that used to belong to the USSR. It is now strong enough militarily to achieve a reintegration. However, the Kremlin leadership is aware that crude military power is insufficient to execute the task successfully. As yet, Russia has not elucidated a universal ideological narrative to attract other nationalities back into its fold or, more precisely, to make its future aggression appear plausibly legitimate for the West. Paradoxically, the Kremlin may employ to this end the rhetoric of human rights or, more precisely, minority rights. Moscow can become their self-styled protector to achieve its nationalist and imperialist goals.

In Georgia, Russia has just employed rather successfully the model of aggression justified by a human rights paradigm that the West can relate to. It attacked Georgia avowedly to save the South Ossetian minority from the tyranny of the Georgian majority. The Kremlin thus successfully employed the rhetoric of coming to the rescue of a national minority which was putatively suffering at the hands of the majority. At least some in the West have found the Kremlin propaganda palatable and believable because the Georgians indeed were at the loggerheads with their minorities, including the Ossetians and Abkhazians.

The claim of protecting the minorities is not an innovative one. Moscow did exactly the same thing when, jointly with Berlin, it attacked Poland in September 1939. Just as the Nazis claimed they were marching in to halt the alleged atrocities against the local ethnic German minority, the Soviets announced to the world that they were “liberating” Poland’s persecuted Ukrainian and Belorussian minorities.

Military, Russia’s Georgian operation is also a test. Moscow is not ready for an all out offensive to reconquer all former Soviet lands. In fact, Russia could have captured the whole of Georgia but it decided not to. Instead, it not only controls South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but also some strategic areas of Georgia proper.

This tactic likewise has a historical precedent. Before the full take-over of the Baltic states in 1940, the Kremlin forced Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia to accept Soviet military bases and security zones for “protection.” They thus became the protectorates of the USSR. Soon, protection turned into imperial integration. Georgia now is reduced to a similar state. It can be the first step to gobbling it up.

There are of course some differences between Stalin’s aggression and Putin’s offensive. But they are only apparent. The Baltic States became Soviet Socialist Republics of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia, putatively “independent” within the “great family” of Soviet component nations. A similar model has now been tried on Georgia’s secessionist provinces. After years of treating them as de facto parts of the Russian Federation, the Kremlin now recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as “independent” nations. The novelty in this operation consists mainly in the fact that the Kremlin has taken a leaf from the book on Serbia’s Kosovo. This could pave the way to Moscow’s sponsorship of irredentism, real and imagined, throughout the former USSR, or the Commonwealth of Independent States. The possibilities seem endless.

First, there are sizable Russian minorities in each of the USSR's successor states. In the Baltics, most notably, they are vocally quite an unhappy lot, having been demoted from the colonial master-class to mere citizens with equal rights and obligations, from the alleged "liberators" to true occupiers. Moscow has already been acting on their behalf in a way eerily reminiscent of the way that Berlin had for the Sudeten Germans in the 1930s. The Kremlin can apply the same tackle to the Russian minority in central Asia, including Kazakhstan, and, most importantly in Ukraine, where at least half the population consists of Russian-only speakers, some of whom also have a Russian national identity.

Second, therefore, we can certainly expect Moscow to deploy the language of minority rights to "benefit" the non-Russian minorities contained in the successor states. The Kremlin can blackmail the Kazakhs with the Uighur. It can foster Transnistrian irredentism in Moldova. In Crimea, the Russian Federation can back not only the local Russians but also the Tatar minority against the Ukrainian majority.

Even where the Russian minority is truly negligible, the Kremlin can either invent it or support another minority against the majority. This could develop into a brilliant exercise in integrated strategy. For example, it is conceivable that Moscow will continue to assist Armenia against Azerbaijan, if Erevan distances itself even further from Tbilisi. Next, the Kremlin will support the Armenian minority in Azerbaijan, including principally in the autonomous region of Upper Karabachia (Nagorno Karabakh), where the Armenians enjoy a clear majority. Further, however, Moscow will keep the Armenians on their toes by sponsoring a "Russian minority" (perhaps just Russian speakers) there. The Russian Federation can certainly perform a similar operation in the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan, where the minority/majority roles are reversed between the Armenians and Azeris. Last but not least, Russia will additionally undermine Azerbaijan by becoming even more chummy with Iran, which contains a large Azeri minority, thus reassuring Teheran against Baku's irredentist claims.

Now, all hinges on the response of the West, or, more precisely, the United States. If the Russian aggression is opposed resolutely by sanctions and propaganda, and if the United States refuses to recognize "independence" of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, then the Kremlin will have to re-evaluate its plans. It is not yet ready for a full scale confrontation like during the Cold War. Acting firmly, Washington will prevent a return to confrontation and a bi-polar world. It will save the captive people of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire from returning to the cage. Lastly, it may relieve hundreds of persecuted national minority groups within the Russian Federation and maybe even the Russian people themselves, who are bearing the brunt of the Kremlin's resurrection of the imperial paradigm.

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