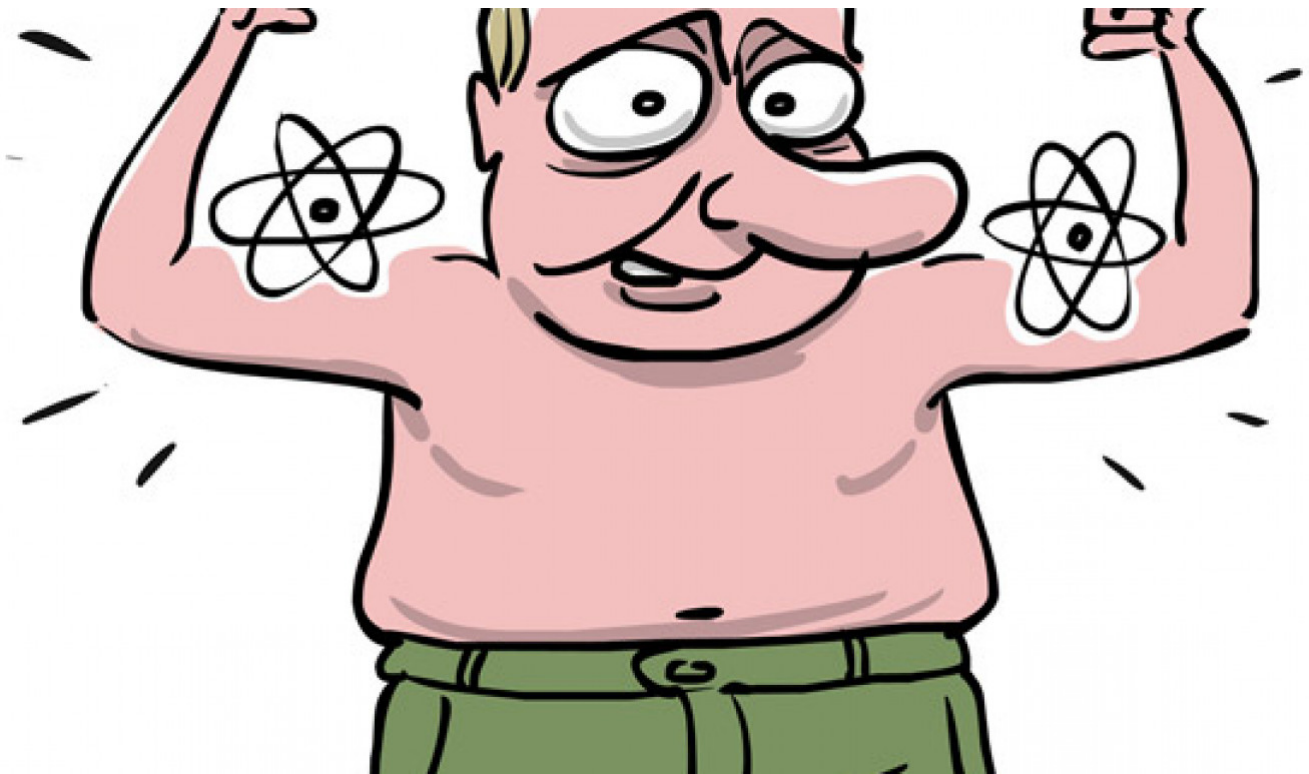


# Russian Imperialism Will Unleash New Yugoslavia

By [Vladimir Ryzhkov](#)

March 24, 2015



The annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, the recent large-scale military maneuvers by the Russian armed forces, the continuing increase in military outlays despite the deepening economic crisis, President Vladimir Putin's stated readiness to use nuclear weapons — and all of this against the backdrop of record approval ratings for the president — make it increasingly likely that a Yugoslavia-like scenario will play out on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

That is, the world might soon witness a proliferation of armed conflicts between former Soviet republics based on ethnic and separatist sentiments.

In that analogy, Moscow would play the role of Belgrade and the Russian people would play the role of the Serbs. The substantial Russian-speaking communities in many of the former Soviet republics could serve as breeding grounds for movements demanding protection for the special rights of minorities — such as official status for the Russian language.

In the next step, newly established political movements would demand autonomy in the form of federalization, push their demands to the point of open conflict with the central authorities and, finally, declare the independence of new, internationally unrecognized republics — and all, of course, with support from Moscow.

In some cases, the Kremlin might opt to back not ethnic Russians, but pro-Moscow regions and peoples, as it did with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. And now there are indications that, with Chisinau actively seeking closer ties with the European Union, the Kremlin is set to retaliate by playing this same game with the Gagauzia community in Moldova.

By annexing Crimea primarily with Russian special forces and paratroopers and providing large-scale military support for the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia has radically changed its policy toward the former Soviet republics.

Russia managed to avoid a Yugoslavia-style scenario in the early 1990s primarily because former President Boris Yeltsin was firmly committed to honoring Russia's agreements with its neighbors, recognizing the new borders, concluding treaties that finalized those borders once and for all, and respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia's neighbors.

After the settlement or freezing of local conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Fergana Valley and Tajikistan in the early 1990s, Russia stopped intervening in the internal affairs of neighboring states.

Although Moscow did criticize the violation of the rights of Russian minorities in Baltic states, raise the question of the status of the Russian language in Ukraine and provide assistance to the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic, it generally avoided accusations during that period that it was interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.

Communists and advocates of reviving the Russian Empire leveled withering criticisms at Yeltsin for this policy throughout his entire presidency.

Observers have rightly concluded that Boris Yeltsin and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's greatest achievement was preventing Russia from lapsing into a Yugoslavia-style meltdown with its inevitable massive bloodshed, destruction of cities, ethnic cleansing and hundreds of thousands of refugees.

Now Vladimir Putin is actually siding with those who opposed his patron, Boris Yeltsin. He has thrown in his lot with the imperialists and communists — that were one and the same thing in the Soviet era.

His decision to annex Crimea, provide military support to the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk and use the "Russian question" as ideological justification for interfering in Ukrainian affairs mean that Russia decisively rejects its former policy of respecting the sovereignty and integrity of its neighbors and has, in fact, already unleashed a Yugoslavia-style scenario on former Soviet territory.

The nightmare that Russian leaders managed to avoid in the early 1990s has suddenly taken form 20 years later.

In deciding one year ago to annex Crimea, Putin knew he had three things to fear. First, that

the Russian people might not support the Kremlin's policy of territorial expansion and might refuse to fight in Ukraine. Second, that the West might make a strong and strategic response, forcing the Kremlin to retreat and make peace. Third, that an economic crisis could undermine his and the government's popularity and force them to redirect more resources from the war effort to saving the economy and the suffering population.

However, not one of those threats materialized and the Kremlin has emerged stronger than ever. Almost 90 percent of the population supports the Kremlin's vindictive and neo-imperialist policies. And according to the latest VTsIOM poll, 46 percent of Russians are even ready to send their loved ones to fight in the Donbass.

The West's reaction was not only weak, but is growing weaker by the day. It only reluctantly and belatedly imposed sanctions, without imposing an oil or gas embargo or disconnecting Russia from the SWIFT banking system — moves that would have threatened the survival of Putin's regime. What's more, after less than a year of sanctions, a growing number of Western states are already clamoring to weaken or repeal them.

The Kremlin has little to fear from its own people because it has sufficient financial reserves to mitigate the hardships they are suffering for another two years. Moreover, the average Russian is very undemanding and is willing to endure even greater hardships by simply planting a few more potatoes at their dachas. In fact, polls indicate that the Russian people even support increased military spending at the expense of funding for schools and hospitals.

The Kremlin currently sees no threat to its position as a consequence of its neo-imperialist policies. What's more, this past year has convinced Putin that he can earn major dividends of public support by playing on the population's nostalgia for empire.

Society's strong "post-imperial syndrome" is pushing Putin toward the path earlier tread by former President of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic: a winding political road from communist to socialist, then Serbian nationalist and finally to imperialist.

Milosevic was able to hold onto power by skillfully exploiting the trauma Serbs felt over the collapse of the great Yugoslavia. And unlike Milosevic, the Kremlin has the additional temptation to use nuclear blackmail to advance its aggressive policy, a trump card it has already played in the current crisis.

Russia's neighbors might be in real danger today. Any conflict or movement toward the West that Moscow does not like might trigger the next "special operation": a sudden "Russian rebellion" demanding freedom and independence. Moscow daily demonstrates that it is willing and able to use its armed forces to achieve its goals, and it spares no expense in doing so.

Of course, Ukraine faces the greatest danger as Moscow administers a stress test to its ability to survive as a state. Moldova is next on the Kremlin's agenda. Georgia has already lost one-third of its territory and Putin just recently signed new alliance agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko are worried: They know that the slightest sign of disloyalty from them could prompt Moscow

to destabilize their countries. Moscow could conduct a hybrid — meaning carefully disguised — campaign to destabilize the three Baltic states as well.

In the absence of any factors that would seriously limit the Kremlin's ability to expand its military and political zone of control among the former Soviet republics and to destabilize them at will, the likelihood is higher than ever that Russia and its neighbors will become drawn into a Yugoslavia-like scenario.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, a State Duma deputy from 1993 to 2007, is a political analyst.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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