

Novorossiya and the Transnationalism of Unrecognized Post-Soviet Nations

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This article is dedicated to the Novorossiyan political myth among the populations of Southeastern Ukraine, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The author analyzes this myth in terms of the peculiar transnationalism and political imagination that led to the formation of a utopian alternative to the existing East European order. The author argues that the Novorossiyan myth is the separatists' response to the needs and demands of groups that feel excluded from post-Soviet title nations. Also, the myth is a response to needs and demands of the populations of unrecognized states—the "invisible nations" that are now seeking a new "international order".

1. Introduction

On 20 September 2015, a conference entitled "A Dialogue of Nations: the Right to Self-Determination and the Construction of a Multipolar World" was held in Moscow.¹ The conference brought together distinguished separatists from around the world. As reports from the conference indicate, one of the key issues discussed was "Novorossiya", a term used to describe a hypothetical union of oblasts in southeastern Ukraine and a region of Moldova that would exist either as an independent state or as a part of the Russian Federation. The conference's most important participants were pro-separatist intellectuals from Russia, the "DNR" and the "LNR" (Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic, two separatist polities in the eastern part of the Donetsk Oblast), southeastern Ukraine, Transnistria, and Abkhazia. The discussions about Novorossiya at the conference suggest that some now regard the project to be as legitimate as separatist movements in Puerto Rico, Catalonia, the Basque Country, and elsewhere.

How did Novorossiya, a Russian imperial project dating back to Catherine the Great, become so influential in contemporary Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Georgia? What motivated Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian citizens to support the "Novorossiya project" beginning in 2014? Was it the brainwashing effects of prop-

aganda and financial incentives that brought droves of men and women to polling stations in the Donbas oblasts to vote in referenda on the creation of DNR/LNR? Why did a Russian imperial phenomenon play such an important role in the symbolism of the anti-Ukrainian uprisings?

Politicians, experts, and activists who share the Russian national perspective have offered two explanations. In contemporary Russian propaganda and the political imaginations of certain populations in the northern Black Sea lands (in which there are strong elements of conservative, imperial, and colonial thinking), the "Novorossiia project" is a legitimate answer to the unjust nation-building processes taking place in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have deprived local populations of their cultural and political rights.ⁱⁱ The state-building models in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are presented as having favored their "titular nations" at the expense of ethnic minority groups.ⁱⁱⁱ In the context of these models, Novorossiian separatism is seen as the result of either Russian nationalist/imperialist propaganda (which has made Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian citizens question their loyalty to their respective states), or as the result of separatists being paid by Russia to revolt against their existing governments.^{iv}

However, both explanations disregard the ideas and motivations of the local populations that supported or still support the separatist movements in the northern Black Sea lands. People in these regions were not, by and large, active participants in separatist military activities. Yet, they eagerly gave money and other resources to separatist leaders and fighters. These populations participated in the "referenda" on the creation of local peoples' republics in several regions of eastern Ukraine in 2014. They also attended mass gatherings in support of the so-called "peoples' republics" (the DNR and the LNR) that were held in southeastern Ukrainian cities from March to May 2014.

In this article, I analyze the peculiar transnationalism and political imagination that led to the formation of a utopian alternative to the existing Eastern European order. I argue that the "Novorossiian myth" is the separatists' response to the needs and demands of groups that feel excluded from post-Soviet nations, and it is also a response to the needs and demands of the populations of unrecognized states—the "invisible nations" that are now seeking a new "international order".

2. Transnational Perspective on Novorossiya

A transnational perspective is necessary to understand the interests, motivations, and practices of those involved in Novorossiyan separatism. I use the term "transnationalism" for activities and processes "that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants" (Portes 1999: 464). I follow the methodology proposed by Timm Beichelt and Susann Worschech in the introduction to this book by looking at transnationalist practices with a focus on the construction of symbols. In this article, the transnational community is defined as a group of people characterized by its participation in cross-border activities and/or networks with common aims, practices, and symbols (Kastoryano 2000). This essay describes the transnational community that shares a utopian—and hence symbolic—ideology shaped by the Novorossiyan myth.

Another important starting point for my study is the differentiation between political and ideological thinking. I accept the distinction proposed by Michael Freeden (2008: 1). From his perspective, political thinking aims at the implementation of a goal once power has been assumed. Ideological thinking is thinking "about politics" as well as the "central issues and problems... and [the] meaning of words" in which those problems are articulated. The political leaders of the separatist movements, as well as their foreign allies and national rivals, do think and act politically. In contrast, the supporters of these movements have created an ideological substrate that helps legitimize their leaders' political actions; these supporters think ideologically, thereby excluding themselves from political action.

The ideological thinking in question is of a utopian character. Support for the Novorossiyan project does not require active participation in the political construction of the DNR/LNR state, nor does it require active service in separatist forces. The utopian quality is connected with a specific element of the Novorossiyan myth: it demands political and social change here and now while simultaneously denying and/or ignoring political realities in Ukraine, Russia, the separatist republics, and the international legal framework.^v

The utopian disregard for political reality is connected to the phenomenon of political imagination. As Chiara Bottici (2014: 60) notes, "imaginal politics" is a term that means collective irrational thinking (a mixture of conscious and unconscious processes). This imagination denies past experiences and is based on re-

sentment and the visualization of difficult ideological issues, thus avoiding discursive thinking. Perhaps most importantly, it makes a future collective project possible.

In 2014–15, Donbas was not only a war-torn region but also a post-Soviet laboratory of political ideologies. One of the most visible products of separatist political imagination was the Novorossiyan myth. Its utopian ideas created an environment that facilitated the political and military actions of the separatists. As will be shown below, an analysis of the transnational aspects of this ideological construction sheds light on some post-Soviet political phenomena that easily escape our attention if we stick to a national approach. In particular, a transnational analysis can provide insight into the ideas, visions, and hopes shared among the populations living in the separatist republics and the unrecognized post-Soviet nations (Transnistria and Abkhazia).

To understand the functioning of the Novorossiyan myth during the war in Donbas (April 2014 to the present), I studied political and ideological statements made on social networks by those who support the Novorossiya project (1) for non-economic reasons (they are not mercenaries) and/or (2) for non-institutional reasons (they are not officers in the Russian Army or representatives of other foreign agencies). I studied web-based communities whose members excluded people who openly declared themselves to be mercenaries, as well as officers and soldiers in the Russian Army or any official security agency. To find adequate sources of data, I narrowed my focus to the motivations and beliefs held by pro-Novorossiya populations. In particular, I focused on the use of the history of Novorossiya for political and/or mobilization purposes by pro-separatist activists living in Abkhazia, Transnistria, Crimea, Donbas, and in other regions in southeastern Ukraine.

Because the war is ongoing and I have no direct access to the target group, I further narrowed this group to include only those who actively use social networks (namely, VKontakte and Facebook), publish blogs, or comment on web-sites specifically dedicated to the War in Donbas and/or the Novorossiya project. As a result of this filtering, I identified a set of web resources and internet groups whose participants were eager to openly discuss their beliefs, motivations, experiences, and fantasies about Novorossiya as a political entity, Ukraine as a rival state, and Russia in a multitude of roles (see details in Annex 1).

3. Brief History of Novorossiya

To better understand the speech acts I analyze below, a short discussion of the history of the idea and concept of Novorossiya seems appropriate. Novorossiya was one of many names for the lands between the Danube and the Don from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. The history of the region known as Novorossiya was well documented in imperial times: Apollon Skalkovskii, Petr Shibalskyi, Gavriil Rozanov, Dmitrii Bagalei, and Dmitrii Miller wrote a number of historical works dedicated to the study of the colonization of Novorossiya.^{vi} However, the same lands have also been studied by Dmytro Iavornitskyi (Evornitskyi 1897),^{vii} Yakov Novytskyi (1905), and other historians of Ukraine. In a way, imperial historiographies were quite flexible in their understandings of these territories and their cultural-historical contexts.

Soviet historiography, in contrast, was rather limited in its use of the word 'Novorossiya'. Instead, the region was predominantly known as 'southern Ukraine'. However, one important study did use Novorossiya in its title: *Settling into Novorossiya* by Vladimir Kabuzan (1976). Yet, it needed a sub-heading to explain what exactly the author meant by Novorossiya: the Iekaterinoslavskaia and Kherkonskaia regions.

In contemporary post-Soviet and Western studies of imperial Russia and Ukraine, Novorossiya is used alongside a large number of other terms, including southern Russia, southern Ukraine, the northern Black Sea lands, Iekaterinoslavskaia guberniia, Khersonskaia guberniia, Novorossiiskaia guberniia, and southern Bessarabia, all of which are used to describe the region to the north and east of the Black Sea from the late 18th to the early 20th century (ibid.).

As a result of the centuries-long wars and armistices between the Ottoman and Russian Empires, the people living between the fortress of Chyhyryn and the slave market of Kaffa, between the pastures of Budzhak and the Azov steppes, lived in a unique environment. Many ethnic and religious groups, including the hordes of Budzhak, Ochakov, and Nogai, had to flee to the territories of the shrinking Ottoman Empire to survive. Turkish and Crimean Tatar towns and fortresses were either deserted or transformed into settlements occupied by different peoples. Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs and other Christian groups in the Ottoman Empire moved northwards to the emerging cities of Novorossiya. Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, Germans, and other Christian groups came from the north and the west.

Between the 1750s and 1850s, life in the northern Black Sea lands underwent tremendous cultural changes. Many political organizations that had existed between the 15th and early 18th centuries were destroyed, including the *Niz* (or *Viisko Zaporizke*, lands controlled by the organization of Zaporozhian Cossacks), the polities of the Black Sea nomads, the Crimean Tatar Khanate, and the Ottoman imperial trade and security structures. Instead, new Russian Imperial sites emerged. By the middle of the 19th century, people had begun moving to the new cities and towns where economic and cultural life was booming. They were located in the following areas:

- Novaya Serbiia and Slavyanoserbiia (1750–1760);
- Novorossiia (stretching from the city of Taganrog to the Odessa region and the town of Ismail);^{viii}
 - Novorossiiskaya guberniia (1764–1775, 1796–1803);
 - Novorossiisko-Bessarabskoye general-gubernatorstvo (1805–1874); and
 - The city of Novorossiisk in the eastern Black Sea region.
- Tavria/Tavrida (whose geography changed considerably between 1730 and 1920);
- The steppes of Kherson (Khersonskiie stepi, 1770-present); and
- The South (Yug) and/or South-West (Yugo-Zapad), a term from the vocabulary of the Empire's administration and the White Movement (1830–1921).

The local population began to develop a modern culture in the 19th century. The cities of Odesa, Nikolayev (later Mykolayiv, in Ukrainian spelling), Kherson, Yekaterinoslav (later Dnipropetrovs'k), Aleksandrovsk (later Zaporizhzhia), and other cities had populations ranging from 75,000 to 300,000 inhabitants by the end of the 19th century.

The desire to live in and dominate the northern Black Sea and Azov lands was based on Christian, Greek, and imperial political and historical myths. According to the Christian myth, Novorossiia was connected to the "source" of Russian Christendom because Vladimir the Great was baptized in Chersonese. This myth also legitimized the "reconquista" of these lands from the Moslems. According to the Greek myth, because the Novorossiian lands once belonged to Ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire, it was only "natural" that the Russian Empire, which saw itself as the heir to Byzantium, returned to rule them. Finally, the imperial

myth was based on the idea that the construction of Novorossiia was necessary for civilization to triumph over barbarism.

Russian literature in the 19th and early 20th centuries incorporated these lands into Russian cultural geography. Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, and Gorky wrote stories that take place in Novorossiia or mention it by name. Odesa became one of the major centers of Russian cultural production. Here, colonial normalization took place alongside the glorification of local heroes, including Field-Marshal Alexander Suvorov, the heroes of the defense of Sevastopol during the Crimean War, Admiral Pavel Nakhimov, sailors in the Russian Black Sea Fleet, and others.

In addition to Russian Imperial literature, there was also a local literary focus on Novorossiia. There is some little-known literature that specifically describes these lands. For example, Russian writer Grigorii Danilevskii's *Beglyie v Novorossii* (1862), *Beglyie vorotilis* (1863), and *Novyie mesta* (1867) describe everyday life in Novorossiia and the specific roles that the people in the region played vis-à-vis the imperial center. Ivan Nechui-Levytskyi's novel *Mykola Dzheria* (1878) included Novorossiia in the context of Ukrainian culture and described the transformation of the Niz in Ukrainian symbolic geography.

For the purposes of this study I will briefly outline the major issues with which Novorossiia was associated in the Russian cultural context of the 19th century. First, Novorossiia was viewed as a place of new beginnings. It was in Novorossiia that Russian capitalism was concentrated and where entrepreneurship flourished in the 19th century. Second, Novorossiia was regarded as a place that lacked order but promised opportunities for daring people. Suvorov, for example, is seen as something of a military entrepreneur, the Duke de Richelieu (governor of Novorossiia and Bessarabia in 1804–15) as an administrative entrepreneur, the Rallie family as economic entrepreneurs, and Gogolian Chichikov as a criminal entrepreneur. Finally, Novorossiia was appreciated as a hideaway for migrants, a relatively free land compared to the northern regions. Thousands of urban losers, sectarians, adventurers, and revolting serfs fled there to start a new life.

Among the cities of the northern Black Sea and the Azov lands, there was a real competition for administrative, economic, and symbolic superiority. Kherson and Nikolayev, Odesa and Yekaterinoslav, Taganrog and Mariupol competed for administrative and economic supremacy. By the beginning of the 20th century, Odesa had emerged as a leader on most of these fronts. Odesa was home to No-

vorossiia's university (established in 1863) and the region's most important port, and it had become a center for science and the arts. Odesa was the jewel of the Novorossiian *krai*.

In the Soviet period, the term Novorossiia disappeared from public discourse. Between 1917 and 1924, the northern Black Sea and Azov lands survived many political projects, including "The South", which was a White Army stronghold, and the anarchic republic of Nestor Makhno. By the end of 1918, the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) included the region in its maps; UNR forces controlled many cities in the region between 1918 and 1921. The Bolsheviks' projects in the region ultimately led to the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), which included contemporary Transnistria and parts of Moldova.

With the Bolshevik victory and the creation of the USSR in 1922, the northern Black Sea territories were divided among the Russian Socialist Federation, the Ukrainian Socialist Republic and, later, the Moldovan Socialist Republic. The Soviet nationalization project in Ukraine (*korenizatsia*, 1923–33), in combination with the promotion of the Soviet Marxist ideology, turned the northern Black Sea lands into integral parts of proletarian Russia and Ukraine. During those times, the term Novorossiia was mainly to be found in Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899). By this time, the Black Sea territories were no longer seen as one land with a common name.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, and Odesa took on symbolic significance in Soviet culture. The industrial utopias of Donbas and DneproGES^{ix} were dissociated from their imperial past. Odesa's literature, cinema, and visual arts groups promoted the Soviet avant-garde (partially associated with Russian culture and partially with Ukrainian culture) with no reference to the colonization of the region. From the 1930s to the 1960s, the northern Black Sea and Azov lands had no single name. Still, many images and stories that were important for Soviet ideology focused on the urban and industrial centers in the region. However, these were images of the Soviet political and cultural community and did not reflect any regional identity.

Only during Perestroika did some memories of Novorossiia return, mainly among those interested in Russian Imperial history. Several books dedicated to Novorossiia or to the colonial wars in those lands were re-printed.^x At the same time, however, the renaming of these lands in the late Soviet period was closely tied to the Ukrainian Soviet tradition of oblast names: Odessa oblast as *Odeschyna*,

Kherson oblast as *Khersonshchyna*, etc. In local historical literature printed between 1979 and 1989, the northern Black Sea and Azov lands were called either "Southern Ukraine" or "Southeastern Ukraine".

Crimea's experience during this period was unique. At the end of the 1980s, some members of the local "Slav" population contested the Crimean Tatars' repatriation from their Stalinist exile. The Novorossiyan myth was revitalized in 1989–91, when Crimean Slavs and Tatars tried to portray themselves as locals while shunning the so-called "newcomers". Conservative leaders of the Slavic Crimean population invoked the legacy of Novorossiya—despite the fact that Crimea had never been part of any administrative division related to Novorossiya. This historical argument was one of the ideological reasons that people supported the referendum on Crimean autonomy held on January 20, 1991. In the 1990s, the Novorossiyan myth played an active role in Crimean secessionist ideology.

Independent Ukraine's nation-building efforts have also revised collective memories and created and redistributed identities.^{xi} Local histories became invisible as narratives about a national Ukrainian identity began to take hold. However, during the 1990s, regional identities became an important factor in local and national political development. During this time, voting patterns changed: whereas there had once been a cleavage between regions that voted predominantly for communists and those that supported nationalists, a new cleavage developed between the Ukrainian-speaking northwest and the Russian-speaking southeast.

The Ukrainian east-west cleavage was not limited to voting patterns. Regional elites were united by the Party of Regions into a single network; different local political organizations joined together, creating a strong network of local elites, mainly in the southeastern oblasts. During the first separatist outbreak in southeastern Ukraine—the Siveronets'k Congress in November 2004—Novorossiyan symbols were on display, as were other ideologically charged separatist expressions (e.g., the slogan "solidarity with the fathers who brought civilization here under Catherine the Great" or St. Andrew's Black Sea flag, etc.). However, the government quashed this movement after the Orange Revolution.

The slogans of the Siverodonets'k Congress were given a second life in the anti-Maidan movements in southeastern Ukraine during the Euromaidan Revolution. However, there was a difference: the new slogans were less connected with local elites and were shared by anti-Maidan activists instead. When the Euromaidan protests turned violent in January 2014, the social networks of anti-Maidan groups

teemed with allegations of "American involvement". As one activist wrote in the "Novorossiia" Facebook group in February 2014, it was time "to ask for Russia's defense".

Between the end of February and April 2014, the Novorossiia myth became accepted as one of several guiding ideas behind the separatist movement in southeastern Ukraine. Other ideas included the "Russian Spring" myth and local "people's republics" projects (in Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolaiiv, and Odesa). Unlike the "Russian Spring", which took an ethnic-based approach to nationhood, the Novorossiia myth was supported by a variety of different peoples and ethnic groups, namely the pro-separatist inhabitants of southeastern Ukraine, Transnistria, and Abkhazia (see below).^{xii}

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation of the Novorossiian Myth: Between Social Reality and Historical Justice

The following section presents the results of the empirical study. To enquire into the functioning of the Novorossiian myth during the Donbas War (beginning in April 2014), I focused on the use of a complex of beliefs connected to the Novorossiian myth as outlined in Section II. It has become obvious that the myth rests on both geographic and historic symbols that are open to a wide variety of interpretations. I identified uses of the myth for mobilization purposes by pro-separatist activists living in Crimea, Donbas, and other regions in southeastern Ukraine, as well as in Abkhazia and Transnistria. To understand the ideological motivations of the people supporting the revolt and the war against Ukraine, I looked for sources in web-based pro-separatist communities. I identified a set of web resources and groups on social networks, which are displayed in Annex I (Tables 1–3). The material I used is open-source. I gathered over 1,500 texts and discussions about issues related to the Novorossiia myth co-written by approximately 25,000 people.^{xiii}

By using content analysis and intention analysis, I was able to identify major ideas as well as specific terms, metaphors, and value-expressions used by pro-separatist activists that supported the basic ideas of the Novorossiian myth. Through the analysis of a large number of texts (words, sentences and other verbal expressions constituting discussions among the groups on social networks), I was able to identify the following:

- The basic *keywords* of the discussion;
- The meaning of prominently used *terms*, their alleged *intentions*, and the *values* associated with them;
- The major *trends in the usage of key terms* that led to the redefinition of meanings and values; and
- The major issues and *audiences* associated with the dominant trends.

The keywords that were used by participants to provoke and sustain lengthy and popular discussions included "Novorossiya/Novorossiyan", "Ukraine/Ukrainian", "Russia/Russian", "war", "justice", "enemy", "Slavs/Slavic", and "West/Europe/US" (see Annex II, Table 4). In this table, I have provided a description of the most-used words and their meanings. For example, the term "Novorossiya/Novorossiyan" was used at least 1120 times per month in the selected groups. There were at least three meanings ascribed to the word. Above all, it was a name used for the Kharkiv, Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhya, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolayiv and Odesa oblasts of Ukraine. In fewer cases, it was the name given to the aforementioned territories *plus* Crimea and Transnistria. Finally, in several cases this name was used to refer to an even larger region that included Abkhazia and parts of southern Russia. In this table, I also outline some other characteristics of the way the term is used. For example, "Novorossiya" was used more for territories than for peoples, and the term had an outright positive meaning in the first half of 2014, whereas it has had a predominantly neutral connotation since September 2014. In this way, the table describes the content and intent of the use of key terms by those who adhered to the Novorossiyan myth.

The analysis of these data made it possible to identify the groups involved in the discussions. Although populations with pro-separatist attitudes seem to be homogenous at first sight, online discussions about key topics reveal differences in how different groups imagine Novorossiya's future status and its relationship with Russia. Two distinct groups can be identified: (1) a group with "imperialist" views (approximately 60% of participants) and (2) groups that have "transnationalist" agendas (approximately 40% of participants).

Among the imperialist group, the most influential collective voice was the one that supported the unification of Russia and Novorossiya. The reason given for this unification was usually the common imperial past of the populations in Russia and the southern oblasts of Ukraine. This agenda was actively promoted by a core

group of activists and intellectuals around Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian oligarch and one of Putin's champions of imperialism. The two major figures in this group are Igor Strelkov and Aleksander Borodai. Their Novorossiia is based on images of the past—mainly Soviet and imperial. For them, the dominant context for Novorossiia is the "Russian Spring". The symbolic geography of this group puts Russia and Moscow at the center of the project, with Ukraine's southern oblasts as a part of the Russian Federation.

While this group has received the most media attention, they face opposition in the communities they actually refer to. In some situations, people in the separatist republics, as well as in other oblasts in southeastern Ukraine and Transnistria and Abkhazia, express opinions that differ from those promoted by the imperialists. A sizeable number of people discuss the Novorossiia project as the "people's own" local business, and the locality they refer to does not respect existing national borders. Instead, they talk about a solidarity that can be described as neither imperial/colonial nor ethnic.

This transnationalist group has certain characteristics. First of all, it views Novorossiia as a separate country with very vaguely defined borders. In most discussions, this imagined country includes the southern Ukrainian oblasts, Crimea, and Transnistria. However, as I noted in Table 4, there were several discussions concluding that oblasts in southern Russia, Abkhazia, and even Southern Ossetia should be included in Novorossiia. Group participants pointed more to a common Soviet legacy (twenty-three separate discussions), and less so to an imperial past (eleven discussions) in their arguments for the legitimacy of this constellation of lands. It is important to note here that their Soviet arguments were less "historical" or "temporal" (related to the past). Instead, members of this online separatist community refer to the Soviet Union's social safety net, to a higher quality of life and to the feeling of belonging to a non- or supra-ethnic society.

The power structure of the transnationalist group is much more horizontal and decentralized than its imperialist counterpart. It does not have a core group of leading personalities. Instead, traditionalist views of Novorossiia are shared by participants who refer to themselves as "simple people", "grass-root activists", and "supporters" rather than leaders or intellectuals. They identify themselves as "those living" (*zhyyushchiie, naseleniie*) in southern Ukraine, Transnistria, and Abkhazia.

This transnationalist group has become more visible as the intensity of the war and war-driven mobilization have decreased. In these situations, the "imperial-

ist" group has declared that "Moscow betrayed Novorossiya", lamenting "the closure of the project". However, the transnationalist group saw Novorossiya as their "own project" whose future did not depend on Moscow. I counted at least nine significant discussions that led to a consensus that the Transnistrian and Abkhazian experiences as non-recognized states were models for the separatist republics and/or for a future Novorossiya.

Furthermore, the transnationalist group is less inclined to use militarist symbols. Instead, theirs is a moderate aesthetic: for them, St. Andrew's flag and St. George's ribbon are the major symbols of Novorossiya. The "imperialist" groups, in contrast, have a much richer variety of symbols that often include a mixture of current Russian official and military symbols, Russian Imperial symbols, symbols of the DNR and LNR, and stylized weaponry.

This review of debates among supporters of the "Novorossiyan project" has shown that the "Novorossiyan identity" has been used not only in opposition to the Ukrainian, Moldovan, and Georgian national perspectives but also, to a lesser extent, by moderates opposing the "imperialist" group. The identity in question has clear transnational character. First of all, it links marginalized and/or isolated groups in Georgia, Moldova, and southeastern Ukraine to a cross-border network of people who share certain attitudes towards their national majorities, national governments, and the global order. Second, it provides these activists with an ideological justification for their separatist projects and creates a kind of historical, regional, and ideological solidarity. It also establishes common ground for solidarity across borders in Eastern Europe. Finally, this identity is connected to—but also opposed to—neo-imperialist and ethno-nationalist perspectives in the region.

In studying the aforementioned texts, I found that the word "Novorossiya" is associated with ideological meanings that have legitimized political separatism in the region, as well as with military mobilization and solidarity among populations in the unrecognized polities. When mentioning "Novorossiya", supporters of separatist ideas tended to espouse nativist, anti-Western, and anti-globalist attitudes, as well as to describe the need to "restore historical justice."

- Whenever *nativism* came up, internet users stressed that they have their own "native" and "common" history that is distinct from the nationalized histories of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Nativist metaphors often contained "blood and soil" arguments, which contrasted with the "foreign" or "alien" histories of the nations of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. While for sepa-

ratists from Transnistria and the southern Ukrainian oblasts, nativism was based on their Slavic origin, speakers from Abkhazia or South Ossetia referred to "Soviet-era internationalism", which motivated them to oppose Georgia. According to some forum users, Abkhazia's Novorossiyan identity stems from the threat that the Abkhaz population, which "flourished in Soviet times", faces from pro-Western Georgia.

- *Anti-Western motives* are strong and stable among both the imperialist and transnationalist groups. The West, Europe, and the U.S. are seen as presenting an existential threat to the collective identities, values and memories of the Novorossiyan populations. Sometimes, however, "Europe" is used positively, especially when referring to "EU welfare" or to "European allies" in far-right groups and political parties in France, Italy, Austria, and Hungary.
- The issue of "historical justice" for all unrecognized nations—particularly for Russophones in Ukraine—is among the most popular topics. The populations of Donbas, Transnistria, and Crimea are seen as groups whose statehood is historically justified: "we have our own political culture" based on a "non-ethnic statehood" uniting "representatives of all ethnic groups", they say. Russian-speakers are said to be "excluded from state-building" processes and treated as "second-class citizens" in Ukraine and Moldova. This argument is mostly used in debates focusing on the Ukrainian, Georgian, and Moldovan right to statehood. Russian Imperial and Soviet history provide unrecognized nations and pro-separatist activists with the "historical foundation" for new polities in the region. This historical argument is employed to oppose belonging to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

The Novorossiyan myth refers to the past as a series of events that provides both imperialists and transnationalists with their justifications for their respective visions. Unsurprisingly, the "Golden Age" of Imperial Russia is equally important for both groups. However, there are differences between the visions. The imperialists tend to focus on military history, while the transnationalists are more attentive to the economic and cultural boom of 19th century as well as to the peaceful co-existence of different ethnic and religious groups together with the Russian Orthodox Church. The socialist experience in the construction of the Donbas-Krivorizhzhya Republic stresses that social fairness was important to the transnationalists, too. In contrast, imperialist groups focus more on the Civil War of 1917–1924.

The lost paradise of the Soviet Union is equally relevant to both groups' debates. However, transnationalist discussants focus more on social security and the cultural rights of Russian speakers during the Soviet period. The glory of "the Vic-

tory in the Great Patriotic War (Second World War)" is also equally important to both groups. However, the imperialists use this issue in reference to the military confrontation with the West, whereas the transnationalists focus more on the experience of "Heroic Cities" such as Odesa, Sevastopol, and Kerch. Transnationalists are also more inclined to distance themselves from the supposed glorification of Nazis in mainland Ukraine and "Romania Mare" (Great Romania) in Moldova. Following the passage of Ukraine's "de-communization" laws in April 2015, the number of anti-Kyiv comments doubled among residents of Odesa, Mykolayiv, Kher-son, Zaporizhzhya, and Dnipropetrovsk. Thus, even though historical arguments are important for all supporters of Novorossiya, they deploy transnationalist and imperialist elements differently. While imperialists tend to focus on unity with Russia, transnationalists focus on the local populations' right to self-determination. Furthermore, they emphasize the extent to which their separatist "nations" are different from Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Finally, some general comments on the attitudes of members of the transnationalist group should be made. Unlike the imperialists, many transnationalists have experienced life in unrecognized states and are often critical of it. This means that they have different historical reference points when they write about Novorossiya. Transnistrians and Abkhazians often complain about living in unrecognized states. Their anti-Western sentiment is less utopian and more focused on the limitations placed on them by nation-states and international organizations. Often, they criticize their own leaders and political regimes as unjust and corrupt. Those living in the DNR and LNR also increasingly criticize their leadership for ignoring the interests and rights of their citizens. Still, they criticize their own states in different ways than they criticize the political order in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Here, local "bad orders" are seen as home-grown; discussants often joke that "these are bandits, but they're our bandits". In Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, however, corrupt elites are denounced as "foreign exploiters". Although the current situation is predominantly described in negative terms, the emergence of positive reference points is plausible. Particularly among transnationalists, the Soviet past is seen as the only just way of life these populations have ever experienced. Their hopes for improvement are connected with an imagined Novorossiyan polity that strongly resembles an idealized Soviet past.

For Ukrainian supporters of the Novorossiyan project, comparisons to Halychyna are quite common; it was mentioned in at least fifteen discussions.

Halychyna is a western Ukrainian region that has its own history of national movements in the Polish and Habsburg Empires. Interestingly, by the end of 2014 and throughout 2015, there were many cases in which discussants compared Novorossiia with Halychyna and today's separatist fighters with Ukrainian Insurgent Army fighters (*povstantsi UPA*). The comparison with Halychyna is based on (1) linguistic, cultural, and historical differences with the rest of the country; (2) the ability to bring civilization to the rest of the country (federalism is seen as a sign of a "higher political urban culture" than the "Ukrainian agricultural oligarchy"); and (3) a specific regional identity based on a colonial and imperial past.

For supporters of Novorossiia living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, appeals to history are also unique and local. They commonly compare the Novorossiyan project with the idea of the "Caucasian Confederation" project, which, during the Chechen Wars in the 1990s, was seen as a possible way of organizing the populations of Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Abkhazia, Cherkessia, and other lands in the North Caucasus. The Caucasian Confederation was imagined as a transnational polity of nationalities living in the Caucasian regions of Russia, Georgia, and even Azerbaijan.

In all cases, the transnationalist group compares their past and present experiences to an imagined Novorossiyan future. In these comparisons, which their imperialist peers rarely understand, the political imagination and vision of the transnationalist group is based on a politically and socially just order.

5. Conclusions

The contemporary Novorossiyan myth is a complex ideological construction shared by two groups that can be identified vis-à-vis their attitudes toward the West as well as towards Russia's imperial and Soviet past. One of the groups can be termed "imperialist" and the other "transnationalist". My analysis suggests that the Novorossiyan myth refers to—and is endorsed by—some communities living in territories that are today ruled by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Supporters of the Novorossiyan myth usually feel excluded from political, social, and cultural life in their respective countries.

In both groups, the Novorossiyan myth lives from elements of conservatism, imperialism, and revanchist neo-Sovietism. Novorossiyan *conservatism* refers to historical justice and a seemingly glorious past as sources of legitimacy for a separate political entity in the northern Black Sea lands. In many ways, this conserva-

tism coincides with the ideology of Vladimir Putin, seeking to provide a "traditionalist alternative" to ideas and policies based on human rights, the rule of law, and the international legal order. Supporters of the Novorossiyan project reject the inclusion of lands between Izmail and Lugansk in Ukraine; of Transnistria in Moldova; and of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. In their opinion, historical justice can only be achieved by letting the local populations in these regions create their own legitimate state (or states).

Non-ethnic Russian *imperial* and supra-ethnic Soviet identities create frameworks of collective solidarity that are supported by adherents to the Novorossiya idea. This identity, which is usually not ethnically coded, refers to the experience and memory of these populations under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Although there are clear social similarities among those who call for Novorossiyan solidarity, they rarely refer to any social class or social justice issue. Their calls for solidarity are grounded in historical, collectivist, and conservative terms. Quite often the Soviet social and political experience is portrayed as the ideal order for the future. The current period of Georgian, Moldovan, and Ukrainian independence, in contrast, is seen as highly unjust. *Revanchist* neo-sovietism is thus an important part of the Novorossiyan myth.

Another common feature of the Novorossiyan myth is that all of its supporters share anti-Western and pro-Russian attitudes and have a negative assessment of Ukrainian and Moldovan rule over Russophone populations. However, those supporting strict pro-Russian attitudes make up the group of "imperialists", who claim that Novorossiya can exist only as a part of the Russian Federation. They focus on Soviet and Imperial military glory, and they see the future of Novorossiya connected to the Russian government's foreign and defense policies. The "transnational" group, by contrast, is more focused on social and economic issues of the past. Its members have a negative attitude towards the national majorities of their states, but they see Novorossiya's future as either an independent state or as an autonomous region within Russia. This group is more inclusive in terms of who can be regarded as "Novorossiyan": Russians and Ukrainians in southern Ukraine and Transnistria, as well as Abkhazians and South Ossetians, are seen as legitimate members of a future Novorossiyan polity.

The members of the transnationalist group constitute a transnational community that shares utopian, non-military ideas. They picture themselves as survivors living under the rule of illegitimate national and separatist governments. The politi-

cal and social change they want is distant and utopian. However, the tensions between their utopian aims and the realities on the ground are not strong enough to make this group try to escape its self-isolation. Their survival is predicated on the increased relevance of conservative values. These are shared by most group members, which in turn increases their ability to associate with other marginalized social groups within Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. Furthermore, the orientation towards conservatism and self-isolation diminishes support for left-wing parties that could react to some of this group's preferences.

The transnationalist group may ultimately have an impact on medium-term political outcomes in Georgia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine. If these states implement inclusive cultural and socio-economic policies, Novorossiyan could one day be incorporated into national politics. It is important to remember that this group is not eager to take military action, which provides national governments with a limited opportunity to look for common understanding with its members. However, the transnationalist group may also be a source of renewed separatist mobilization; transnationalist Novorossiyan can be seen as objects of contestation, with Chisinau, Kyiv, and Tbilisi on one side and Moscow on the other.

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7. Annexes

Annex I

Table 1: VKontakte Sources

| Name and hyperlink (in original language) | Type | Number of participants |
|---|--|------------------------|
| # Новороссия [https://vk.com/soutukraine] | Miscellaneous (discussions, news, other) | 314,192 |
| РЕСПУБЛИКА НОВОРОССИЯ [https://vk.com/the_republic_of_new_russia] | Discussion group | 152,205 |
| Новороссия [https://vk.com/novorossia_su] | VK mirror of the Novorossiia website | 81,740 |
| НОВОСТИ НОВОРОССИИ [https://vk.com/novnews] | News community | 75,347 |
| Сводки ДНР ЛНР Новороссия [https://vk.com/ety_strany] | Discussion group | 68,087 |
| Вестник Новороссии [https://vk.com/novoros_news] | News community | 34,734 |
| НОВОРОССИЯ SaveDonbassPeople Антимайдан [https://vk.com/novorossia_today] | Discussion group | 32,930 |
| Спротивление Новороссии [https://vk.com/revolutioneast] | News community | 29,700 |
| ДОБРОВОЛЕЦ.ОРГ ОБОРОНА НОВОРОССИИ [https://vk.com/dobrovolecorg] | NGO network | 25,831 |
| Родное Приднестровье [https://vk.com/rodnoepridnestrovie] | Miscellaneous (discussions, news, other) | 23,117 |
| Антимайдан Одесса Новороссия [https://vk.com/novorossiaaaa] | Discussion group | 22,102 |

The following criteria were used in the selection of the VKontakte groups: (1) had over 20,000 participants,¹ (2) was active for more than six months during the Donbas War; and (3) covered Novorossiyan issues frequently.

¹ This quantitative threshold provided me with the ability to analyze discussions in long-living groups (at least six months); the fewer participants the group had, the shorter the debates tended to last. The groups that existed for a longer time also provided interesting data showing how attitudes among pro-Novorossiia activists and their opponents changed over time.

Table 2: Facebook Sources

| Name and hyperlink (in original language) | Type | Number of participants |
|---|---------------------|------------------------|
| Новороссия [https://www.facebook.com/novorossia/?ref=br_rs] | Media and news | 9,396 |
| Новороссия - актуальное [https://www.facebook.com/groups/novorossia.actual/?ref=br_rs] | Discussion group | 5,991 |
| Приднестровье [https://www.facebook.com/groups/pridnestrovie/?ref=br_rs] | Miscellaneous | 5,002 |
| Novorossia.today [https://www.facebook.com/Novorossiatoday-1452392635033241/?ref=br_rs] | Media and news | 4,951 |
| Новороссия = ДНР + ЛНР [https://www.facebook.com/groups/24Novorossiya/?ref=br_rs] | Discussion group | 4,009 |
| Novorossia-INFO English [https://www.facebook.com/groups/300259383483318/?ref=br_rs] | Discussion group | 2,264 |
| Абхазия 24 [https://www.facebook.com/abkhazia24/?ref=br_rs] | News and discussion | 1,894 |

The following criteria were used in the selection of the Facebook groups: (1) had over 1,000 participants²; (2) was active for more than six months during the Donbas War; and (3) covered Novorossiyan issues frequently.

Table 3: Sources from Internet Web-sites³

| Name and hyperlink (in original language) | Type |
|---|----------------------|
| Novorossia , [http://novorossia.su/] | Media and discussion |
| Novorossia Information Agency , [http://www.novorosinform.org/] | News site |
| Ruskaia Vesna – Novorossia , [http://rusvesna.su/tags/novorossiya] | Media and discussion |
| Novorossiia , [http://novorossiia.name/] | News site |

The following criteria were used for the selection of web sites: (1) often cited by VK and FB groups⁴; (2) was active for more than six months during the Donbas War; and (3) covered Novorossiyan issues frequently.

2 This quantitative threshold for Facebook-based communities also provided access to long-lasting discussion groups. VKontakte was much more popular among Russophone populations than Facebook; this is why there is a difference between the thresholds.

3 Only those materials that had more than 100 comments were analyzed.

Annex II**Table 4: Key Words and Their Use by Pro-Separatist Populations**

| Key words | Average number of use per month | Frequency in use | Meaning, contested meanings |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Novorossiya/ Novorossiyan | Not less than 1,120 times per month | Stable frequency | <p>1. Most frequent use: the name used to refer to the Kharkivska, Luhanska, Donetska, Zaporizka, Dnipropetrovska, Khersonska, Mykolayivska and Odeska oblasts of Ukraine.</p> <p>2. Less frequent use: all of the above plus Crimea and Transnistria.</p> <p>3. Least frequent use: two southern oblasts in Russia and Abkhazia.</p> <p>Note 1: This term is used mostly for territories; rarely used to describe a population. "Novorossiyan people" or similar terms were used in 2014 but had almost disappeared by the end of 2015.</p> <p>Note 2: The term had a positive meaning in the first half of 2014; since September 2014, the term has had a more neutral connotation</p> |
| Ukraine/ Ukrainian | Not less than 1000 times per month | Used more frequently in 2015 (1100) than in 2014 (1000) | <p>1. The state of Ukraine that is now at war with Novorossiya/Russia/the peoples' republics</p> <p>2. Less used: territories to the north of the Novorossiyan oblasts.</p> <p>Note: The use of the term is predominantly negative. Some "neutralization" of the term arose by end of 2015 (approximately 20% of all uses).</p> |
| Russia/ Russian | Not less than 950 times per month | Stable frequency | <p>1. The state of that is the only ally of the supporters of Novorossiya.</p> <p>2. Less used: a state that should accept/defend/introduce its army into Novorossiya.</p> <p>3. A positive adjective (Russian world, for example), associated with the past and future.</p> <p>Note: in March 2015 and continuously since September 2015, there has been growing concern with the betrayal of pro-Novorossiyan forces. However, this concern is expressed in terms of the betrayal of Moscow, the Kremlin or Putin himself.</p> |

4 Here I list those web resources that provided groups with material for discussions at least once per month. By doing this I narrowed down the data sources to those that constantly influenced discussions as well as those that shed light on the changes in topics and attitudes of those participating in the discussions.

| | | | |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| War | Not less than 940 times per month | Stable frequency | <p>1. War between the people's republics (representing Novorossiya) and Ukraine.</p> <p>2. Less used: War of Ukrainians against Russians in the "Novorossiyan oblasts."</p> <p>3. Less used: Humanitarian catastrophe, individual tragedy.</p> <p>Note: Even though many discussants personally experienced war, they predominantly describe it in the terms of a collective experience.</p> |
| Justice | Not less than 400 times per month | Used more frequently in 2014 (800) than in 2015 (400) | <p>1. Predominantly used either in reference to the past (historical justice leading to the separation of Novorossiya from Ukraine), or the future (joining Russia or creating of some sort of independent republic).</p> <p>2. Less often: as a characteristic of a future Novorossiyan organization.</p> <p>Note: With several rare exceptions, justice is discussed in collectivist, not individualist terms. It is up to groups to establish justice, not courts.</p> |
| Enemy | Not less than 400 times per month | Stable frequency (with two peaks in August 2014 and February 2015, when use exceeded 1000 cases per month) | <p>1. Enemies to the populations of the peoples' republics and/or Novorossiya.</p> <p>2. Ukraine and the West planning to continue exercising control over Russophone populations in the Novorossiyan oblasts.</p> <p>Note: The "West" is constantly used as synonymous with enemy. However, "Europe" is sometimes used in a more neutral way.</p> |
| Slavs/Slavic | Not less than 200 times per month | Stable frequency | <p>1. A common racial denominator for Russians and Ukrainians, the grounds for some sort of political and "genetic" unity, used as a reason for the unification of a Russian-Ukrainian state and for destruction of the independent Ukrainian state.</p> <p>2. A term for pan-Slavic unity extending beyond Russia and Novorossiya. An alternative to the West.</p> |
| West/Europe/U.S. | Not less than 200 times per month | Stable frequency | <p>1. Although these words are used synonymously, in particular the "West" and the "U.S." (as well as visual symbols associated with them, including the American and NATO flags) are seen as existential and historic enemies.</p> <p>2. Europe has two contrasting meanings: enemy and possible friend. The values associated with Europe vary frequently in the discussions of the future for Novorossiya.</p> |

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- i Information on the conference can be found at [<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2015/09/16/a-congress-of-separatist-rascals>] or [<https://kauilapele.wordpress.com/2015/09/27/international-expert-conference-9-20-15-dialogue-of-nations-the-right-to-self-determination-part-2-of-3-conference-report/>].
 - ii An articulate example of this type of thinking appeared in Zakhar Prilepin's blogs [<http://novorossia.su/>] in 2014–15.
 - iii Kasianov (2009: 11), for example, analyzes the Ukrainian national model in the following terms: "Nationalized history began to fulfill important instrumental functions: legitimize the newly established state and its attendant elite; establish territorial and chronological conceptions of the Ukrainian nation; and confirm the appropriateness of that nation's existence as a legal successor in the consciousness of its citizens and neighbors alike".
 - iv The official Ukrainian press, for instance, calls the supporters of separatist projects "mercenaries" and "brainwashed" people. See, for example, publications in the most popular Ukrainian media outlets: Censor.net [<https://censor.net.ua/>] and Ukrainska Pravda [<http://pravda.com.ua>].
 - v This idea of utopian ideological thinking was proposed by Mannheim and Buber (Mannheim 1960: 175–6; Buber 1958: 16ff).
 - vi The most-cited of their books include: Skalkovskii (1836), Gavriil (1853, 1857), Shebalskii (1869), Bagalei (1889), Miller (1901).
 - vii Iavornytskyi is the Ukrainian transliteration whereas Evornitskyi refers to the author's book which was written in Russian.
 - viii In 1910, the most expansive description of Novorossiia was given: a land including governances of Bessarabia, Kherson, Tavria, Yekaterinoslav, Stavropol and the lands of Don Cossacks Regiment (Semenov 1910).
 - ix A popular name of a major hydroelectric station on the Dnieper River in Zaporizhzhya.
 - x Namely 19th century historical books by Brikner, Soloviov, Bagalei, Iavornytskyi and many others.
 - xi An analysis of these processes can be found in Kasianov & Ther (2009).
 - xii The case of Abkhazia is especially interesting, as Abkhazia is neither "Slavic" nor a historically Novorossiian land. Yet, the involvement of Abkhaz mercenaries in the Donbas War was supported by parts of the local population that saw the Novorossiia project as one that might change their own situation for the better.
 - xiii This number excludes the outright "web discussion bots", participants paid to disseminate special ideas or attitudes in the web-based discussions. I used the criteria outlined at [<http://ain.ua/2014/01/23/509984>] to identify bots.