Teil III: **Imaginationen**

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"Novorossiya" in Russian spatial imaginaries from Catherine II to Putin

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has again drawn attention to the geopolitical aims of President Vladimir Putin in the states of the former Soviet Union, the "Near Abroad" as it is defined in Russian political discourse. Most significantly, a number of scholars has tried to answer the reasons of Russian military interference in Ukraine. The first wave of overviews was provoked by the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014.[1] The full-scale invasion in February 2022 provoked the second wave of publications mainly examining the outcome of the war on international relations and global (dis)order.[2] Works on the war's origins have stressed different themes such as

1 Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll (eds.), *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Paul J. D'Anieri, "Geopolitics Against Democracy: Ukraine's Democratization and Russian Great Power Aspirations," in *Krytyka* 22, 9–10 (2018): 2–12, https://krytyka.com/en/articles/geopolitics-against-democracy-ukraines; Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); David R. Marples (ed.), *The War in Ukraine's Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the Future* (CEU Press, 2022); Kimitaka Matsuzato, "The Donbass war: outbreak and deadlock," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, 2 (2017): 175–201; Mitchell Orenstein, *The Lands in Between: Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Russia's Hybrid War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2016); Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2014); Elizabeth A. Wood et al. (eds.), *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016).

2 Stuart Gottlieb, "Ukraine and the end of the 'New world order'", *Journal of International Affairs* 75, 2 (2023): 265–276; Elias Götz and Jørgen Staun, "Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, 3 (2022), 482–497; David R. Marples, "Russia's war goals in Ukraine," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64, 2–3 (2022): 207–219; Michael McFaul and Robert Person, "What Putin Fears Most," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 21 (2022): 28–39; William E. Pomeranz, "Putin's imperial dream. Putin's motivations, and the long term consequences," *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2022, https://www.wilsonquarterly.com/quarterly/ripples-of-war/putins-imperial-dream; A. Potočňák and M. Mares, "Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, 4 (2023): 341–351; Richard Sakwa, *The Lost Peace: How the West Failed to Prevent a Second Cold War* (Yale University Press, 2023); Johann David Wadephul, "The War against Ukraine and the

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the clash of *civilizational choices*,[3] Russia's perception of its geopolitical situation, *status* and *rightful place*,[4] Russian *imperial* and *existential nationalism*,[5] *neo-imperialism*,[6] as well as *postcolonial* approaches.[7] The main question posed by aforementioned scholars was *why* Russia invaded Ukraine. However, the spatial dimension and spatial imaginaries are rather absent from the picture and another set of no less important questions is left unanswered: To what extent does the rediscovery and reinvention of "Novorossiya" reflect a *spatial turn* in Russian neo-imperial renaissance? How did historical legacy influence contemporary notions of space? Did Russian strategy in south-eastern Ukraine – frequently referred to as *hybrid warfare* – reflect Russia's reportedly new foreign policy doctrine or is Russian leadership rather following the centuries-old model of Russian territorial expansion in the Black Sea region? And how were these recently annexed territories reimagined and appropriated into contemporary Russian mental geography?

The very concept of "Novorossiya" in Russian neo-imperial policy in the "near abroad" is still understudied. In this field research is still limited to the excellent works on political imaginaries of Russian far-right by Marlene Laruelle, and on Putin's "Novorossiya" as "a geopolitical fantasy project" by Mikhail Suslov.[8] However, historical perspectives are totally absent despite the

World Order," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 21 (2022): 106–115.

3 E. Wayne Merry, "The Origins of Russia's War in Ukraine: The Clash of Russian and European 'Civilizational Choices' for Ukraine," in *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Wood et al. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016), 27–50.

4 Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs* 95, 3 (May–June 2016): 2–9; Fyodor Lukyanov, "Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place," *Foreign Affairs* 95, 3 (2016): 30–37; Elizabeth A. Wood, "Introduction," in *Roots of Russia's War in Ukraine*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Wood et al. (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2016): 3–6.

5 Eleanor Knott, "Existential nationalism: Russia's war against Ukraine," *Nations and Nationalism* 29, 1 (2023): 45–52; Taras Kuzio, "Imperial nationalism as the driver behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Nations and Nationalism* 29, 1 (2023): 30–38.

6 Gwendolyn Sasse, "Russian Neo-Imperialism: Official Discourse and Domestic Legitimation," *Europe-Asia Studies* (2022), 1–4.

7 Maria Mälksoo, "The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, 3–4 (2023): 471–481.

8 Marlene Laruelle, "The three colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian nationalist mythmaking of the Ukrainian crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 3, 1 (2016): 55–74; Marlene Laruelle, *Russian nationalism. Imaginaries, doctrines, and political battlefields* (London: Routledge, 2020); Mikhail Suslov, "The Production of 'Novorossiya': A Territorial Brand in Public Debates," *Europe-Asia Studies* 69, 2 (2017): 202–221; Mikhail Suslov, *Geopolitical Imagination: Ideology and Utopia in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2020).

fact that "Novorossiya" has existed as a territorial unit since 1764. In what follows, I will first describe the historical origins, contexts, and meanings of "Novorossiya" in the eighteenth century. In a second step I will sketch out how these meanings changed through the nineteenth century. Third, I will describe how the idea of "Novorossiya" has been rediscovered and reinvented in the context of Putin's wars against Ukraine.

Novorossiya as movable borderland in the spatial imaginaries of Catherine II's enlightened absolutism

The notion of "Novorossiya," frequently referred to by President Putin these days, has a history that stretches back some 250 years – the "Novorossiya governorate" was established in 1764. The new province was formed out in the context of Russian-Ottoman relations and Russia's expansion into the region around the Black Sea. In 1695–1696, Peter I (reigned 1687–1725) – who westernized Russia's nobility and army[9] and promoted expansion – besieged and conquered the Ottoman fortress Azak (Azov), and in 1698 founded a new port town initially called "Trinity Fortress on Tagan Rog" (Троицк-на-Таганьем Роге), later known as Taganrog.[10] A few years later, in 1708, the Tsar established a new province – the Azov governorate. At the same time, Peter I severely restricted the autonomy of the buffer Cossack polities while the Cossack uprisings – Bulavin's uprising of the Don Cossack Host (1707), and Mazepa's uprising in the Ukrainian Hetmanate (1708–1709) – were fiercely oppressed. With the development of the Russian regular army the military significance of the Cossacks declined. Their loyalty was seen from Petersburg as highly questionable. In 1752–1753, new provinces were established in the borderland – New Serbia (*Novaya Serbia*) and SlavyanoSerbia populated with Serbian military colonists in order to strengthen the Russian *Militärgrenze* and state control over the ambiguous Cossacks. The potential for independent action in the "Wild Field" (the Pon-

9 Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2004).

10 Brian J. Boeck. "When Peter I Was Forced to Settle for Less: Coerced Labor and Resistance in a Failed Russian Colony (1695–1711)," *Journal of Modern History* 80, 3 (2008): 485–514; Andrei G. Guskov, Kirill A. Kochegarov, and Stepan M. Shamin, "Russko-turetskaia voina 1686–1700 gg.," *Rossiiskaia istoriia* 6 (2020): 30–49.

tic steppe) buffer zone running from the lower Dniestr to the lower Don was steadily reduced throughout the establishment of quarantines, customs houses and military outposts. Delimitation of the Russian-Ottoman border by joint border commissions and outposts constituted a part of this process.

The accession to power of the Empress Catherine II (1729–1796) brought more radical changes to the region. The new province – "Novorossiya governorate" – was established by Catherine II in 1764. Initially it occupied a long but narrow belt of the borderland in present-day central Ukraine. However, the purpose of this province was different from others in the Empire. Novorossiya gradually incorporated and absorbed all new territorial acquisitions in the region Russia made under the rule of Catherine II. Russia conquered the Ottoman provinces during the Russian-Ottoman wars in 1768–1774 and 1787–1791, abolished the Zaporozhian Cossack Host, incorporated its lands (1775), and annexed the Crimean Khanate (1783). Under Catherine II the Russian Empire thus spread its borders to the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. These new territorial acquisitions were incorporated into the Novorossiya governorate. In 1802, Novorossiya was divided into the provinces of Kherson, Taurida, and Yekaterinoslav (the latter name means in Russian: "Glory to Catherine").

Constantly changing its borders, "Novorossiya" was seen and understood as Russia's *movable borderland*. A *movable borderland* can be defined as a territory recently conquered and formally incorporated into the victorious state but not fully absorbed. It is an area in transition with special legal status and some provisional institutes frequently combining military and civil features. A movable borderland receives resources necessary to colonise this area and defend the hinterland from alien incursions. Movable borderlands can serve as buffer zones that give populations living in them a certain degree of autonomy, but over time they may also be fully incorporated and absorbed into the territory of a state or empire. Thus, we can think of them as in-between areas that exist until they have been fully incorporated and absorbed.

Initially, Novorossiya was seen as a new sort of buffer zone between old provinces and the lands of enemies, the Ottomans and Tatars. However, especially the buffer status of the Crimea disturbed the Russian leadership as it expected a new military escalation with the Ottomans. In 1782, in a private letter to the Empress Catherine II (r. 1762–1796), Russian general Prince Grigory Potemkin (1739–1791) compared the Crimea with a "wart on a nose." Doubtless, he chose this comparison to impact the political imagination of the Empress: as any woman in a political position busy with her beauty, Catherine II could easily imagine the horror of seeing in the looking-glass a nose uglified with wart. The choice of the rather corporal metaphor in the correspondence was of no surprise: Potemkin and Catherine II were lovers for many years and secretly

Fig. 1: Map of Novorossiya governorate from Rossiiskii atlas iz soroka trekh kart sostoiashchii i na sorok odnu guberniiu imperiiu razdeliaiushchii. Sankt Petersburg: Izdan pri geograficheskom departamente, 1800, page 38. Drafted by Alexander Vilbrekht.

married since 1774. However, the main reason why Potemkin compared the Crimea with a "wart on a nose" was the buffer status of the Crimean Khanate at that time. In accordance with the Küçük Kaynarca peace treaty of 1774, following Russia's victory over the Ottomans in the war of 1768–1774, the Crimean Khanate was declared "independent" of the Ottoman sultan and transformed into Russia's protectorate. Potemkin's concern was that the Crimean Khanate could be used by the Ottomans for making military incursions into Russia's southern domains under the Tatar name. At the same time, using the Crimean Khanate territory for troubling Russia, the Ottomans were able to avoid a big war if they didn't want it. Potemkin therefore suggested an incorporation of the Khanate into the Russian Empire: "Please take decision now to make Crimea yours and remove this wart out of nose – it will make our border much safer: the border along the Bug river is directly with the Turks, therefore, [in case of a war] they would fight directly with us by themselves, not under the name of

others. We see their every move there."[11] In 1783, the Crimean Khanate was incorporated into the Russian Empire as the Taurida province (*Tavricheskaya oblast*), part of the Novorossiya governorate. Since then, Russian-Ottoman relations in the Pontic steppe were based on the idea of territorial sovereignty without buffer zones.

Potemkin's and Catherine II's geopolitical concerns framed the transition of Novorossiya from a movable borderland to a fully incorporated territory and were deeply shaped by territorial understandings of sovereignty typical of the time of absolutism. According to these understandings, the supremacy of the monarch within its lands required the reduction of diverse legal systems within a territory to one comprehending a singular national space. In addition, territorial understandings of sovereignty involved the idea that territorial forms of sovereignty had to be projected into what were apprehended as spaces devoid of pre-existing law, the new colonies. Both Catherine II and Potemkin saw the "Novorossiya governorate" as such a new colony. Over the years, Russian imperial legislation and bureaucracy were formally introduced in the newly conquered lands of Novorossiya. To resolve the great number of simultaneous challenges – of defence and conquest, colonization and development – new industrious personalities, military and civilian leaders, Russians and foreigners in Russian service, were brought in as new functional elites. Due to his unofficial but well-known status of the Empress' favourite, Potemkin concentrated in his hands a huge amount of power and resources, and ruled Novorossiya as viceroy. At the same time, most of the local population – the Cossacks, Tatars, and Nogais – was expelled, removed, or fled, and was replaced with new settlers of various ethnic backgrounds.[12]

"Novorossiya" was imagined, developed, and promoted as an Enlightenment project by the Empress Catherine II (1762–1796) whose plans reached as far as the reconquest of Constantinople and restoration of the Byzantine Empire.[13] Through appropriating the legacy of ancient civilization, a key goal for

11 Ekaterina II i G. A. Potemkin: *Lichnaia perepiska, 1769–1791*, ed. by Viacheslav S. Lopatin (Moscow: Nauka, 1997), 154.

12 James A. Duran, Jr., "Catherine II, Potemkin, and Colonization Policy in Southern Russia," *Russian Review* 28, 1 (1969): 23–36; Roger P. Bartlett, *Human Capital: The Settlement of Foreigners in Russia, 1762–1804* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 109–142.

13 Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), chapter two: Enlightened Colonization, 55–95; John P. LeDonne, "The Southern Borderlands," in *Ruling Russia: Politics and Administration in the Age of Absolutism, 1762–1796*, ed. by John P. LeDonne (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 291–315; Emily Bryant, "A Third Rome?: Catherine the Great's 'Greek Project'", *The Crimson Historical Review* (2004): 54–63; Olga I. Eliseeva, *Geopoliticheskie proekty G. A. Potemkina*

Catherine II was to join and find recognition within the cohort of European powers. Thus, though Novorossiya was conquered from the Ottoman Empire, Russian colonisation of Novorossiya was imagined as restoration of the periphery of ancient civilisation. Since the seventh century BCE there had been prosperous Greek colonies along the shore of the Black Sea – Olbia, Tyras, Theodosia, Panticapaeum, Nymphaion, Myrmekion, Chersonesus (Chersonesus of Tauris), Kerkinitis, and numerous rural settlements.[14] The ancient civilisation there was gradually destroyed by the Goths and the Huns in the third-fifth centuries CE. Under Catherine II, the newly colonised space was shaped through replacing the Tatar and Ottoman placenames with "ancient" Greek ones. The key element in a new name was the ending *polis* (Greek: city) – Russian *pol'* (поль) – which ultimately turned any placename into a Greek one: Mariupol (1778), Nikopol (1780), Olviopol (1781), Sevastopol (1783), Simferopol (1784), to mention only a few. Russian officials did not care if the "recovered" Greek placenames correlated with the real name of an ancient town. In some cases, Greek names were given to new towns with no ancient legacy. For instance, the city of Kherson (Херсон) got its name after the ancient Greek city of Chersonesus (Russian: Херсонес), despite the fact that Chersonesus was in Crimea while Kherson was founded in 1778 in the estuary of the Dnipro river. The Crimean peninsula – Tatar "Qirim" – was renamed "Taurida," thus making reference to the ancient Greek name of the peninsula "Tauris" and province of "Taurica" in the Byzantine Empire.

It is instructive to compare these politics of renaming with the politics of territorial expansion under Russian Tsar Peter I (1687–1725). When Peter I besieged and conquered the Ottoman fortress Azak (Azov), he did not rename the fortress though it was located where the ancient Greek city of *Tanais* had been. Peter I also did not rename the Sea of Azov despite its well-known ancient Latin name *Palus Maeotis*. Furthermore, when in 1698 Peter I founded the new port town "Trinity Fortress on Tagan Rog" (Троицк-на-Таганьем Роге), later known as Taganrog, he drew from a Tatar name of the cape (Taganrog).[15] Thus, the full

(Moskva: RAN Institut rossiiskoi istorii, 2000); Hugh Ragsdale, "Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project," *Slavonic and East European Review* 66, 1 (January 1988): 91–117.

14 Thomas S. Noonan, "The Grain Trade of the Northern Black Sea in Antiquity," *American Journal of Philology* 94, 3 (1973): 231–242; Alfonso Moreno, *Feeding the Democracy: The Athenian Grain Supply in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

15 Brian J. Boeck, "When Peter I Was Forced to Settle for Less: Coerced Labor and Resistance in a Failed Russian Colony (1695–1711)," *Journal of Modern History* 80, 3 (2008): 485–514; Andrei G. Guskov, Kirill A. Kochegarov, and Stepan M. Shamin, "Russko-turetskaia voina 1686–1700 gg.," *Rossiiskaia istoriia* 6 (2020): 30–49.

original name of the city was a combination of the Tatar name of the cape and the Russian word Troitsk related to the religious fest of Trinity (Троица). Though there were numerous western officers and engineers on the Russian service, the Turkish/Tatar place-names were not replaced with Russian or ancient Greek/Roman ones. Thus, the conquered space was not reimagined or reinvented. Under Catherine II, in contrast, re-namings were an important means to create a spatial imaginary in which Novorossiya served as emblematic for an enlightened Russian Empire. In addition, through appropriating the legacy of ancient civilization Catherine II also sought to join the cohort of European powers.

Catherine II's solemn journey to her new domains in January-July 1787, organized by Potemkin, greatly contributed to the foundation myth of "Novorossiya," the narrative of "enlightened power" reclaiming back this space after the "dark ages of barbarianism."[16] Among the most important goals of the voyage was the international legitimation of Russia's recent territorial acquisitions. Catherine II's court was accompanied by diplomatic fellow-travellers: Austrian ambassador Johann Ludwig Joseph von Cobenzl, British ambassador Alleyne FitzHerbert, French ambassador Louis Philippe, comte de Ségur, and Prince Charles-Joseph de Ligne. In addition, several European monarchs were engaged into the journey at several important points. In the town of Kaniv on the Russian-Polish border Catherine II was greeted by Stanisław August, the last king of Poland (r. 1764–1795). There, an obelisk was erected on the hilltop. At night, fireworks lit up the picturesque landscape of the Dnipro river. The Empress and her court continued their journey on galleys down the river. In the vicinity of the recently founded town of Yekaterinoslav, Catherine II was joined by the Emperor Joseph II (r. 1765–1790) who travelled under the name "Comte Falkenstein."[17] Together they visited the most important locations in Crimea.[18]

Along the Empress' path, monuments were erected and theatrical events took place referring to the imagined ancient past. A triumphal arch was built in the city of Novhorod-Siverskyi symbolising the transit from "Great Russia" (*Velikorossiya*) to "Little Russia" (*Malorossiya* – the former Ukrainian Hetmanate

16 Aleksandr V. Khrapovitskii, *Zhurnal vysochaishego puteshestviia ee velichestva gosudaryni imperatritsy Ekateriny II, samoderzhitsy vserossiiskoi v poludennye strany Rossii v 1787 godu* (Moscow: v Univ. tipografii u Novikova, 1787).

17 Andrii Portnov, *Dnipro: An Entangled History of a European City* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 36.

18 Andreas Schönle, "Garden of the Empire: Catherine's Appropriation of the Crimea," *Slavic Review* 60, 1 (2001): 1–23; David M. Griffiths, "Catherine II Discovers the Crimea," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge 56, 3 (2008): 339–348.

Fig. 2: "Catherine II's journey in her own country in 1787". Engraving by Jean-Jaques Avril based on painting by Ferdinand de Meys. State Hermitage, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.

abolished by the Empress in 1763). Catherine's so-called milestones, an imitation of the ancient Roman milestones, were erected along the road from Kherson to the Crimean cities. In Balaklava, Crimea, Catherine II and Joseph II were greeted by a company of notorious Amazons, a troop of Greek women whom the governor Potemkin smartly dressed in raspberry velvet skirts edged with golden fringe, green velvet jackets, and white gauze turbans with ostrich feathers, each armed with a rifle and three cartridges, all of it meant as the costume of the ancient Amazons. Thus, reference was made to the ancient Amazons who, according to Herodotus, inhabited Scythia and Sarmatia to the north of the Black Sea.

Visions of Novorossiya in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

In the nineteenth century, "Novorossiya" was reimagined by Russian men-of-letters as promised land for adventurous businessmen, industrious landowners, runaway serfs, or even as a foreshadow of the communist utopia. The area served as a migration magnet for Russian runaway serfs. Contemporary Russian writer Grigory Danilevsky (1829–1890) in his novel "Fugitives in Novorossiya" (1862) spoke of Novorossiya as the new Kentucky and Massachusetts, honoring its exceptional state of social mobility with narratives of the American frontier and of progress, which stood in stark contrast to the rest of the empire where serfdom was at its peak.[19]

Russian novelist and socialist philosopher Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) in his novel "What is to be done?" (1863) developed the notion of New Russia as egalitarian society in the foreseeable future. The chief character of the novel is Vera Pavlovna, a woman who escapes the control of her family. She has four dreams throughout the course of the novel. In her last prophetic dream, Vera's "dream-guide" (a version of herself) shows her a utopian society – agrarian communities of Russian settlers cultivating the desert lands on the Arabian Peninsula: "However, you have in the south a particular land whither go main mass of you [Russians]. This land is called New Russia." "Is it the land with Odessa and Kherson?" "It was in your time but now [in the future] – look – here is New Russia." "... the mountainous part of the peninsula is still covered with sand, it is barren land as the whole peninsula was in your time; every year, you, Russians, are moving the edge of a desert further to the south."[20] Thus, Chernyshevsky's utopia has a spatial dimension. Despite all his criticism of contemporary Russian society and its political regime, Chernyshevsky thought in the spatial categories of Russian imperialism. For him, New Russia is a movable borderland as it was since its foundation in the late eighteenth century. In Chernyhevsky's time, Russia's southernmost domains in the Middle East were limited to Eastern Armenia. This means, that in order to let Russian settlers in the future cultivate the desert in the Arabian Peninsula, the lands of Western Armenia, Syria, Jordan, and perhaps Iraq had to be incorporated into the Russian civilizational space – real or imagined/utopian. In the late nineteenth century, "Novorossiya" was gradually replaced with other spatial imagi-

19 Grigory Danilevsky, *Beglye v Novorossii* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2022), 58.
20 Nikolai Chernyshevsky, "Chto delat? Iz rasskazov o novykh liudiakh," *Sovremennik* 5 (1863): 148.

naries, "South Russia" and its industrial heartland of Donbas. Finally, "Novorossiya" was put into oblivion in the USSR and independent Ukraine.

In the late Russian Empire the original names of non-Russian provinces were officially replaced with new ones. After the unsuccessful Polish uprising of 1863, Poland was renamed the Vistula Land (*Privislensky krai*). Belarussian lands were renamed Western Russia (*Zapadnaia Rossiia*). The lands of abolished Hetmanate were officially called *Malorossiya* ("Little Russia"). However, even this name was considered suspicious by Russian officials. Finally, Malorossiya was replaced with two names – South-Western Russia (*Yugo-Zapadnaia Rossiia*) for Podolia, Volhynia, and Kyiv governorates, and Southern Russia (*Yuzhnaia Rossiia*) which included Chernihiv, Poltava, Kharkiv governorates along with former Novorossiya and the Lands of the Don Cossack Host. After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, both Bolsheviks who came to power in Russia (RSFSR) and the Ukrainian People's Republic refused these place names as imperial and chauvinistic.

In 1920, when the Ukrainian People's Republic was defeated by the Red Army and transformed into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic ruled by Bolsheviks lands of former Novorossiya governorate officially became part of the Ukrainian SSR, because ethnic Ukrainians constituted the majority in rural areas there. Yet another unofficial reason was to increase the Communist/Bolshevik's social base in the Ukrainian SSR. Former "Novorossiya" and particularly the Donbas – which now became south-eastern Ukraine – had numerous industrial cities with Russian-speaking workers who supported the Bolshevik party while the rural population of central Ukraine (former *Malorossiya*) had recently supported the left-wing Ukrainian parties and took part in the anti-Bolshevik armed resistance. In the 1920s and 1930s the Bolsheviks were afraid of the counter-revolutionary conspiracies, mutinies, and foreign military intervention. Thus, pro-Bolshevik industrial workers should counter-balance the ambiguous or openly anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian peasants in case of expected political turmoil. In the official discourse in the Ukrainian SSR as well as in the RSFSR, the term of "Novorossiya" was abandoned and put into oblivion over the subsequent decades.

After the collapse of the USSR and the declaration of Ukraine's independence, the Soviet narrative of Ukrainian history – as a younger brother of Russia – was declared false and abandoned. In official Ukrainian memory politics and history school books it was replaced with the new historical narrative glorifying those who struggled for Ukraine's independence or, at least, fought against the enemies of Ukrainians. The new narrative was readily internalized in western and central parts of Ukraine because most of the heroes and martyrs of the new pantheon originated from these parts of country. However, south-

eastern regions of Ukraine lacked such heroes. The fierce economic and social crisis of 1990s disillusioned many in south-eastern regions who had expected a better life in the post-Soviet Ukraine. In eastern Ukraine, particularly in Donbas, these disillusionments caused the growing nostalgia for the "lost golden age" of the socialist industrialization. In southern Ukraine, more attention was given to the founding-fathers of the cities mainly founded in the late eighteenth century. Thus, Potemkin and Catherine II came out of the shadow.

In the cultural memories of Russians and Ukrainians "Novorossiya" is strongly connected to Catherine II and Potemkin. In the early years of the Communist rule, the cities named after Catherine II – Yekaterinoslav, Yekaterinodar, Yekaterinburg – were renamed as Dnipropetrovsk (after Bolshevik Petrovsky), Krasnodar (after the red colour of the Soviet flag), and Sverdlovsk (after Bolshevik Sverdlov) respectively. However, in the late USSR both the Empress and her powerful favourite were rehabilitated to a certain degree as winners of new areas after the Russo-Turkish wars. Catherine II's rule was evaluated through the prism of Russian victories over the Ottomans by generals Suvorov and Kutuzov, and admirals Ushakov and Seniavin. In Ukrainian cultural memory, in contrast, Catherine II has a very negative image due to the abolition of the Hetmanate – Ukrainian autonomous polity – in 1763, the destruction of the Zaporozhian Cossack Host in 1775, and the legislative reintroduction of the serfdom in 1783. Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) – declared "the national prophet" in the post-1991 Ukraine – fiercely criticised Catherine II. Many generations of Ukrainians internalized Shevchenko's attitude due to the studying of his poems – a mandatory reading in the secondary school curriculum in the Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine.

Buffer zones, borders, and territorial expansion: Reinventing "Novorossiya" since 2014

Since the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia has considered the new independent states as its buffer zone with limited sovereignty – the "near abroad."[21] In this conceptual framework, the post-Soviet Ukraine is considered by Russia as its source of strategic depth (against NATO), respectively – as a buffer state in

21 Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Elias Götz, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, 9 (2022): 1529–1550.

the Russian sphere of influence.[22] Predictably, Russia made deliberate efforts to keep Ukraine weak and dependent. Western analysts and politicians preferred to define post-Soviet states including Ukraine as "grey zone" between the West and Russia.[23] Only after the annexation of Crimea and, mainly, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine did the understanding settle in that in Russian strategic culture a buffer status of the "near abroad" has different meanings than in western political culture.[24] President Putin's talks of "neutralization" and "demilitarization" are aimed on creating a weak Russian puppet with a satellite government in Ukraine. However, usual Western concepts of neutrality are different from Putin's notion – the predominant form of neutrality is well-armed nonalignment as it was for decades in case of Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland.[25]

Russia's revanchist neo-imperial policy in its "near abroad"[26] largely tapped into postmodernist revisionism of concepts of borders and sovereignty, and

22 Dominique Arel, "A War Within the 'Russian World'", in *Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022*, ed. by Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 11–12.

23 Roy Allison, "Russia, Ukraine and state survival through neutrality," *International Affairs* 98, 6 (2022): 1849–72; John Mearsheimer, "Don't arm Ukraine," *New York Times*, February 8, 2015; Brandon Valeriano, "Yes, Ukraine is still in crisis: would becoming a 'buffer state' help?," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2015; J. E. Herbst, "Forsaken Territories? The Emergence of Europe's Grey Zone and Western Policy," in *The Eastern Question: Russia, the West, and Europe's Grey Zone*, ed. by D. S. Hamilton and S. Meister (Washington, DC: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2016), 190–191; Thomas Graham, Rajan Menon, and Jack Snyder, "Ukraine between Russia and the West: Buffer or Flashpoint?" *World Policy Journal* 34, 1 (2017): 107–118; Mitchell Orenstein, *The Lands in Between: Russia vs. the West and the New Politics of Russia's Hybrid War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

24 Daniel Drezner, "Why Ukraine cannot be a buffer state," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2015; Anne Applebaum, "The New Cold War. It will take much more than weapons to save Ukraine – and keep Russia at bay," *Slate*, February 8, 2015; Nathalie Tocci, "Europe's New Frontier: We thought there were buffer states in Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has revealed they are frontier ones," *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2023.

25 Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Could Ukraine become neutral, like Switzerland? Five things to know," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2022.

26 Chris Arkenberg, "How Russia is shaping a new world of non-linear war and post-modern geopolitics," *Medium*, August 29, 2017, https://medium.com/@chris23/non-linear-war-postmodern-geopolitics-380daacfd1d3 (Last accessed on September 21, 2022); Dominic Cardy, "Postmodernism with Russian Characteristics. Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: A Review," *The Canadian Journal of Opinion* 42 (2018); Sanshiro Hosaka, "Welcome to Surkov's theater: Russian political technology in the Donbas war," *Nationalities Papers* 47, 5 (2019): 750–773; Whitney Milam, "Who is Vladislav Surkov? The many faces and farces of Putin's most notorious political operative," *Medium*, July 14, 2018, https://medium.com/@wmilam/the-theater-director-who-is-vladislav-surkov-9dd8a15e0efb (Last accessed on September 25,

benefitted from the processes of globalization and deterritorialization.[27] Since the end of the Cold War, western scholars have repeatedly observed that the modernist meaning of sovereignty has come under challenge or has even been replaced by a new conception in which the right to freedom from external intervention is conditional upon the performance of sovereign responsibilities, in particular the protection of human rights.[28] In contrast to the Cold War era, there was broad acceptance in 1991–2021 – from the Yugoslav wars to Russian invasion of Ukraine – that states are answerable to international society for the protection of their populations. It was widely held that sovereignty is no longer a shield to international scrutiny, condemnation, the imposition of sanctions, or even the use of military force.[29] Post-Soviet Russia consistently developed the concepts of the "compatriots" (*sootechestvenniki*) and the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*) in order to use them as pretext for political and military intervention in the "near abroad." Russian leadership tried to legitimize the annexation

2022); Peter Pomerantsev, "The Hidden Author of Putinism. How Vladislav Surkov invented the new Russia," *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2014; Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

27 A large body of scholarly work reconsidered "sovereignty" in the last three decades: Luis E. Lugo (ed.), *Sovereignty at the Crossroads? Morality and International Politics in the Post-Cold War Era* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996); Thomas J. Bierksteker and Cynthia Weber (eds.), *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Christopher J. Bickerton, Philip Cunliffe, and Alexander Gourevitch (eds.), *Politics without Sovereignty: A Critique of Contemporary International Relations* (New York: UCL Press, 2007); Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Luke Glanville, "The Myth of 'Traditional' Sovereignty," *International Studies Quarterly* 57, 1 (2013): 79–90. For more details on the aspect of globalization and territorialization see: Stuart Elden, "Missing the point about globalization. Globalization, deterritorialization and the space of the world," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, 1 (2005): 8–19; Stuart Elden, "Governmentality, Calculation, Territory," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, 3 (2007a): 562–580; Stuart Elden, "Rethinking governmentality," *Political Geography* 26, 1 (2007b): 29–33; Stuart Elden, "Thinking territory historically," *Geopolitics* 14, 4 (2010): 757–761; Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013); Richard Schofield, "Back to the barrier function: Where next for international boundary and territorial disputes in political geography?" *Geography* 100, 3 (2015): 133–143.

28 Luke Glanville, *Sovereignty and Responsibility to Protect: A New History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Luke Glanville, *Sharing responsibility: The History and Future of Protection from Atrocities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

29 Jarat Chopra and Thomas G. Weiss, "Sovereignty Is No Longer Sacrosanct: Codifying Humanitarian Intervention," *Ethics and International Affairs* 6 (1992): 95–117; Christian Reus-Smit, "Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty," *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): 519–538.

of Crimea in 2014 and military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 through false declarations of responsibility to protect its "endangered compatriots."[30] For instance, Putin justified the annexation of Crimea in his speech on March 18, 2014 through Russia's obligation to protect the ethnic Russians from persecution by new Ukrainian authorities. He also pointed to the violation of Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo by Western powers under pretext of right to protect the Kosovars.[31] According to Putin, NATO's military intervention of Serbia and unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independence regardless of Serbia's position created a precedent for Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 as well as its unilateral recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk independence on February 21, 2022.[32] When preparing the ground for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in winter 2022, Putin and Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs pointed to the "genocide" allegedly perpetrated in Donbas by Ukrainian armed forces. On February 15, 2022, at the press-conference after the Germany-Russia negotiations, Putin again made statements on the "genocide" in Donbas with reference to the Kosovo precedent which German chancellor Olaf Scholz defined as "ridiculous."[33] Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately blamed Scholz and made reference to the Germany's Nazi past.[34]

Generally, the state border is considered one of the main signs of territorial sovereignty.[35] Modernist narratives on boundary-making have been nuanced and even dismantled at some points, particularly when it comes to the widely

30 Eleanor Knott, "Identity in Crimea before annexation: A bottom-up perspective," in *Russia Before and After Crimea: Nationalism and Identity, 2010–17*, ed. by Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 282–305.

31 Obrashchenie Presidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Vladimir Putin vystupil v Kremle pered deputatami Gosudarstvennoi Dumy,chlenami Soveta Federatsii, rukovoditeliamiregionov Rossii i predstaviteliami grazhdanskogo obshchestva. Kremlin.ru, March 18, 2014, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603.

32 Obrashchenie Presidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Kremlin.ru, February 21, 2022, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828.

33 "Scholz: Schlagabtausch mit Putin – Kein Völkermord in der Ostukraine," RND, February 15, 2022, accessed on May 19, 2025. https://www.rnd.de/politik/scholz-schlagabtausch-mit-putin-kein-voelkermord-in-der-ostukraine-X6FUR6RVQMBHYEBVAAB3MDO4ZA.html.

34 Daria Klester, "Kantsler FRG i MID Rossii posporili o slovakh Putina o genotside v Donbasse. V MID Rossii nazvali nepriemlemymi slova Sholtsa o genotside v Donbasse," *gazeta.ru*, February 19, 2022, accessed May 14, 2025. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2022/02/19/14555581.shtml.

35 Christopher Rudolph, "Sovereignty and Territorial Borders in a Global Age," *International Studies Review* 7, 1 (March 2005): 1–20; David Storey, "States, Territory and Sovereignty," *Geography* 102, 3 (Autumn 2017): 116–121; Kerry Goettlich, "The rise of linear borders," *European Journal of International Relations* 25, 1 (2019): 203–228.

assumed idea of the boundary line as the mere imposition of central state agencies on passive local populations. Modernist border studies understand borders as the static, material, and linear outcome of political decisions taken by state governments and international actors. In contrast, postmodern approaches focus predominantly on a conception of borders as social constructs, *i.e.* on how the border is socially constructed. Accordingly, Russia questioned the legal status of Ukraine's state borders (claims to "give back" Sevastopol and Crimea), then tested Ukraine's ability to defend its borders (Tuzla island conflict in 2003), finally "gave voice" to the "local population" (actually, to the pro-Russian marginals) through organizing illegal "referendums" in Crimea (March 2014) and Donbas (May 11, 2014), Kherson and Zaporizhzhia (September 2022).

According to the *Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation* signed on May 31, 1997, both sides recognized the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each other.[36] However, for many years Russia postponed the delimitation of its border with Ukraine.[37] *The Treaty between the Russian Federation and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border* was signed on January 28, 2003.[38] The actual demarcation of the border was not carried out at the time the Treaty was concluded. Since 2010, the Russian-Ukrainian Commission on the Border Demarcation has met 18 times, and only one border post was placed on the Russian side of the border. Ukraine has placed about 235 border signs thus far; as for December 2014 from 7,000 to 10,000 additional signs need to be erected.[39] It was important for Russia to keep the border non-demarcated, porous, and penetrable, and in this way

36 "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, registration number 52240," accessed May 14, 2025. https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002803e6fae.

37 "'Nado govorit o vykhode na granitsy Ukrainy ne 1991-go, a 2003 goda.' Ukrainskii diplomat Leonid Osavoliuk obiasniaet, chto ne tak s obshchepriniatymi tseliami Kieva v voine," *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*, August 10, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2023/08/10/nado-govorit-o-vykhode-na-granitsy-ukrainy-ne-1991-go-a-2003-goda.

38 "Treaty between Ukraine and the Russian Federation on the Ukrainian-Russian State border, registration number 54132," https://treaties.un.org/Pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=08000002803fe18a (Last accessed on September 27, 2022); "President Vladimir Putin and President Leonid Kuchma held negotiations in the Ukrainian capital," January 28, 2003, accessed May 14, 2025. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/28060.; "President Vladimir Putin signed a law ratifying the Treaty between Russia and Ukraine on the Russian-Ukrainian State Border," April 23, 2004, accessed May 14, 2025. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/30820.

39 "Ukraine: Demarcation of Border with Russia," *Library of Congress*, December 2, 2014, accessed may 14, 2025. https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2014-12-02/ukraine-demarcation-of-border-with-russia/.

to question the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and the very existence of a Ukrainian nation; ideas clearly expressed by Putin in his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."[40]

For the first time, Russia tested Ukraine's territorial sovereignty a few months after the Treaty was signed. On September 30, 2003, without any preliminary consultations with the Ukrainian side, the Russian side started to build a dam from the Taman Peninsula towards the Ukrainian island of Tuzla in the Kerch Strait connecting the Black Sea with the Sea of Azov. In response, Leonid Kuchma, the president of Ukraine (1994–2004), interrupted his official visit to Brazil and visited Tuzla in order to confirm Ukraine's sovereignty over the island. On October 23, the construction of the 3.8 km Russian dam was suspended exactly at the Russian-Ukrainian border in the strait.

After the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Russia faced multiple problems in sustaining the peninsula: transport connections, food, gas, electricity, and water supply. In early April 2014, Russia attempted to trigger the series of secessionist insurgencies in south-eastern Ukraine. In this part of Ukraine, the Party of Regions – the party of the ousted president Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014) – dominated the regional and municipal councils. However, the pro-Russian insurgency – the so-called "Russian spring," inspired and backed by Russia in south-eastern Ukraine – had mainly failed by the late spring of 2014. Local political and business elites did not support the insurgency, while local pro-Russian groups were not numerous and entirely marginal. It was only in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that the insurgents succeeded in taking some administrative buildings and police stations, thereby obtaining arms and establishing their militia and quasi-mayors, who co-existed with local authorities responsible for municipal issues. However, in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the local political and business elites did not take part in the insurgency, and instead preferred to escape to Kyiv. Local pro-Russian secessionist groups were marginal and unpopular prior to the 2014 turmoil. The main reason for the initial success of the insurgency was the mass infiltration of Russian commandos, Cossacks, nationalists, and adventurers conducting Russia's proxy war in the Donbas and pretending to speak on behalf of local residents.[41] Nevertheless,

40 Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, accessed May 14, 2025. http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

41 Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion: Russia's War in the Donbass," *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* 1, 1 (2015): 219–249; Tor Bukkvoll, "Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 46, 2 (2016): 13–21; Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Private Military Contractors in the Donbas: Rehearsing Future Voyages," in *The War in Ukraine's Donbas: Origins, Contexts, and the*

due to the advance by the Ukrainian armed forces in early July, the military defeat of the insurgents was unavoidable. In order to save the remnants of the defeated insurgents, the regular detachments of the Russian Army invaded Ukraine's east in mid-July and late August 2014.

The annexation of Crimea and the subsequent Russian intervention in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions framed the historical context in which the idea of "Novorossiya" had its major comeback. In a question-and-answer session with Russians in a TV broadcast on April 17, 2014, President Putin referred to southeastern Ukraine as "Novorossiya" – a term that had been out of use for almost a hundred years. Putin claimed that these territories had never belonged to Ukraine and had been incorporated into it by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s.[42] "I would like to remind you," he stressed, "that what was called Novorossiya (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows. They were won by Potemkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars."[43]

At that time, the Russian leadership and mass media demanded a federalization of Ukraine with more autonomy for southern and eastern Ukraine – Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipropetrovsk, Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv regions constituting the industrial powerhouse of Ukraine. Putin's promoting of the idea of "Novorossiya" reflects the electoral geography of post-Soviet Ukraine. Putin included into Novorossiya those regions which in 2002–2012 voted for the Party of Regions and its leader Viktor Yanukovych.[44] Of particular importance for Russia are the military and aerospace industries in Dnipropetrovsk and Kharkiv. Connecting Crimea with mainland Russia via the areas of a "Novorossiya" protectorate would make it much easier for Russia to move goods and people to and from Crimea. Furthermore, turning these areas into Russia's protectorate would allow Russia to establish control over all coastal lines with sea ports and to reduce Ukraine to a landlocked agrarian country. The main aim

Future, ed. by David R. Marples (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022), 181–204; "Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine," in: *Crisis Group Europe Report 254*, July 16, 2019; "Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia," in: *Crisis Group Europe Report* 251, July 4, 2018, 18–21.

42 "Transcript: Vladimir Putin's April 17 Q&A," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2014.

43 "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," Kremlin.ru, April 17, 2014, accessed May 14, 2025. http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7034.

44 Alexandr Osipian and Ararat Osipian, "Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010," *East European Politics and Societies* 26, 3 (2012): 616–642.

of this plan was to turn Ukraine into a fragile confederation of Ukraine proper and "Novorossiya" without annexed Crimea. Russia's plan was modelled on Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was reshaped in accordance with the Dayton Agreement of 1995.[45] From 2014, Russia acted as a patron state of the two breakaway territories of Donetsk and Luhansk, frequently defined under the umbrella-term of "Novorossiya". These two statelets were established in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 as an outcome of secessionist insurgency and Russia's multifarious interference.[46]

Putin mentioned "Novorossiya" for the second time on August 29, 2014 in the context of the battle of Ilovaisk in Donbas when he issued a statement addressed to the "Militia of Novorossiya" calling upon it to show humanitarian compassion and allow surrounded Ukrainian soldiers to withdraw and reunite with their families.[47] At that time, however, it became evident that the initial project of establishing a Russian protectorate of "Novorossiya" from Odesa to Kharkiv was failing. Instead, the Russian leadership focused on the two statelets in Donbas trying to use them as a "Trojan Horse" to block Ukraine's democratic development.[48] Since May 2015, "Novorossiya" was absent from official rhetoric[49] – and survived only in the right-wing narratives.

Yet, Putin turned to "Novorossiya" again in his essay "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published online on July 12, 2021 and addressed to pro-Russian Ukrainians as well as to those Ukrainians ready to make

45 Richard Caplan, "Assessing the Dayton Accord: The Structural Weaknesses of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 11, 2 (2000): 213–32; Derek Chollet, *The Road to the Dayton Accords* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Matthew Parish, "The Demise of the Dayton protectorate. Inside the Bosnian Crisis: Documents and Analysis," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 1 (2007): 11–23; Susan L. Woodward, *Implementing Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Post-Dayton Primer and Memorandum of Warning* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. Foreign Policy Studies Program, 1996).

46 "Rebels without a Cause: Russia's Proxies in Eastern Ukraine", in: *Crisis Group Europe Report* 254, July 16, 2019; "Patriotic Mobilisation in Russia," in: *Crisis Group Europe Report* 251, July 4, 2018, 18–21.

47 "President of Russia Vladimir Putin Addressed Novorossiya Militia," August 29, 2014, accessed May 14, 2025. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46506.

48 Adam Potočňák and Miroslav Mares, "Donbas Conflict: How Russia's Trojan Horse Failed and Forced Moscow to Alter Its Strategy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 70, 4 (2023): 341–351.

49 Vladimir Dergachev and Dmitrii Kirillov, "Proekt 'Novorossiya' zakryt: Samoprovozglashennye respubliki obiavili o zakrytii proekta 'Novorossiya'", *Gazeta.ru*, May 5, 2015, accessed May 14, 2025. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2015/05/19_a_6694441.shtml.; Viktor Loshak, "Okonchanie proekta 'Novorossiya' – eto kuda bolee iavnyi shag k uregulirovaniiu krizisa," *Kommersant*, May 22, 2015, accessed May 14, 2025. https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2731226.

significant concessions in order to stop Russia's proxy war in Donbas. Putin emphasized Russia's historical rights to "Novorossiya": "In the second half of the eighteenth century, following the wars with the Ottoman Empire, Russia incorporated Crimea and the lands of the Black Sea region, which became known as Novorossiya."[50] The essay also questioned Ukraine's rights on south-eastern lands because of their multi-ethnic population: "The south-western lands of the Russian Empire, Malorussia and Novorossiya, and the Crimea developed as ethnically and religiously diverse entities."[51]

In his speech declaring the "special military operation" in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Putin did not mention "Novorossiya." Putin blamed the USA for "creating the hostile anti-Russia on our historical lands" and declared that "we have no plans to occupy Ukrainian territories."[52] But "Novorossiya" returned again in Putin's public speeches in late September 2022 when he took the decision to annex four regions of Ukraine partly occupied by Russian armed forces. When he announced the mobilization of hundreds of thousands Russian conscripts into the armed forces on September 21, 2022, Putin justified this unpopular measure through talking about "the big historical Russia" and "historical lands of Novorossiya."[53] On September 30, 2022, on the occasion of the official ceremony of incorporation of "the new regions" into Russia, Putin turned to "Novorossiya" twice. First, when talking on Russia's historical rights on these lands: "Here, in Novorossiya fought Rumiantsev, Suvorov, and Ushakov, new cities were founded by Catherine II and Potemkin."[54] The second time, when addressing Russian soldiers as well as the "warriors of Donbas and Novorossiya" – local collaborators who joined Russian armed forces.[55] He also mentioned "the big historical Russia." Thus, "Novorossiya" became part of a revanchist neo-imperial narrative that promoted the renaissance of "the big historical Russia" without clearly defined borders.

50 Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," July 12, 2021, accessed May 14, 2025. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181.

51 Putin, "On the Historical Unity".

52 "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii," February 24, 2022, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843.

53 "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii," September 21, 2022, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69390.

54 Piotr Rumiantsev (1725–1796), Russian general and governor of Malorossiya. Alexander Suvorov (1729–1800), Russian generalissimos. Fiodor Ushakov (1745–1817), Russian admiral.

55 "Podpisanie dogovorov o priniatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoi i Khersonskoi oblastei v sostav Rossii," September 30, 2022, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465.

Since February 2022, the Russian Federation has largely followed Russia's imperial playbook from the late eighteenth century when the proxy agents in the buffer zone – the Cossacks – were replaced with state institutions, Russian regular army and navy, military and civil administrations. In a similar way, the recently annexed four regions in south-east Ukraine are used as a buffer zone to defend Crimea – Russia's main asset in the Black Sea region.[56] These four regions are named in Russia's official sources as "new territories," "new regions" or "new federal units" while in Russian right-wing political discourse they are defined as "Novorossiya." On the one hand, the "new territories" are used as Russia's land bridge to supply Russian troops with ammunition and military personnel. On the other hand, they are used to supply Crimea with Russian tourists as it was in summer 2023 when the Crimean bridge in the Kerch strait was damaged (on July 17) by Ukrainian forces and the connection between the mainland Russia and annexed peninsula was interrupted.[57] Construction of a new railway in the "new regions" started in November 2023 to firmly connect Crimea with Russia.[58] On May 29, 2023 Russian prime minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order №1404-p to establish the new federal state company "Novorossiya railways" in order to operate the railways in the annexed territories.[59]

Finally, with high probability the "new territories" will be used for further territorial expansion in case of Russia's next successful offensive in Ukraine.[60] This scenario is quite predictable. This idea was launched by Russia's most publicly hawkish official – former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, now deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council. On March 24, 2023, Medvedev declared that Russia wanted to create demilitarised buffer zones inside Ukraine around areas it has annexed: "a buffer zone which would not allow the use of any types of weapons that work at medium and short distances, that is 70–100 kilo-

56 Alexandr Osipian, "Straits, Bridges, and Canals: The Black Sea Region and Russo–Ukrainian Conflict, 2014–2022," in *Handbook on the Culture and History of the Black Sea Region*, ed. by Ninja Bumann et al (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024).

57 Dmitrii Steshin, "Doroga k moriu cherez 'Azovskii koridor': kak na samom dele vygliadit put v Krym po novym regionam Rossii," *Komsomolskaia pravda*, July 20, 2023, https://www.kp.ru/daily/27531/4796531/ (Last accessed July 25, 2023).

58 Nikolai Grishchenko and Evgenii Rakul, "V Donbasse nachalos stroitelstvo novoi zheleznoi dorogi v Krym," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, November 12, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://rg.ru/2023/11/12/korotkij-nadezhnyj-bezopasnyj.html.

59 "Pravitelstvo utverdilo rasporiazhenie o sozdanii predpriiatiia 'Zheleznye dorogi Novorossii'", May 31, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. http://government.ru/news/48604/.; "V Rossii sozdali predpriiatie 'Zheleznye dorogi Novorossii'", *TASS*, May 30, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://tass.ru/ekonomika/17886959.

60 "Mehr Land! Das ist Putins Kriegsplan für die nächsten drei Jahre," *Bild*, December 14, 2023.

metres."[61] On June 13, 2023, president Putin said that Russian leadership is considering creating a buffer zone within Ukraine – a cordon sanitaire to prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching Russian territory.[62] The next day Putin was echoed by Medvedev: "these would be the new, secure borders of what used to be called 'Country 404'."[63] Finally, on December 30, 2023 Vasily Nebenzya, Russia's envoy to the UN, said at a meeting of the UN Security Council: "one of the goals of our special military operation that pursues the demilitarization of Ukraine is to eliminate threats emanating from the territories bordering Russian regions, including those that became part of Russia after the start of the operation."[64]

Conclusion

A comparison of Russian spatial imaginaries and territorial expansion in the Black Sea region in times of Catherine II and Putin reveals some common features as well as differences. Russian territorial expansion in the late eighteenth century was justified through narratives of Enlightenment: Russia incorporated the ill-populated or empty areas – "the Wild Field" or "no man's land". Russians began to cultivate these virgin lands, built cities and seaports there to develop the overseas trade. These narratives claimed that after centuries of barbarianism – the Ottoman and Tatar rule – Russia brought back civilization to the former periphery of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Putin's justification of the annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2014 and 2022, in contrast, is based on such statements as: Ukraine is a failed state; after a *coup d'état* of 2014, Ukraine is ruled by a junta and lost legitimacy over its territories; Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, thereby borders are artificial since they are not separating two nations but people of the same culture and historical legacy. Thus, every border line is temporary – Russia will return its former territories one by one. It is only a question of time.

61 "Russia wants demilitarised buffer zones in Ukraine, says Putin ally," *Reuters*, March 24, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-wants-demilitarised-buffer-zones-ukraine-says-putin-ally-2023-03-24.

62 "V Kremle sostoialas vstrecha Prezidenta s voennymi korrespondentami," *Kremlin.ru*, June 13, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71391.

63 "'Cordon sanitaire' in Ukraine to protect Russia should run along Lvov borders – Medvedev," *TASS*, June 14, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://tass.com/politics/1631859.

64 "Russia's UN envoy warns Moscow could raise the severity of its response to threats," *TASS*, December 31, 2023, accessed May 14, 2025. https://tass.com/politics/1728371.

In some cases, Putin's justification follows the same arguments of Catherine II, however. For instance, through juxtaposition of "development" and "decline." Three decades of Ukraine's independence brought decline to its industrial backbone – the south-east regions. Thus, the deindustrialization of south-east Ukraine allegedly gives Putin the same "right" to annex these areas as failure of the Tatars and Ottomans to develop the "Wild Field" gave Catherine II the "right" to annex the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman provinces.[65] In the Russian official narrative the Ukrainian government and Ukrainian forces are frequently dehumanized, thereby equated to the "barbarians" of Catherine II, while Russians are conducting a civilizational mission (as most colonial empires did in nineteenth and twentieth centuries).

Overall, Putin's "Novorossiya" of 2014 has nothing in common with Catherine II's cosmopolitan project and its Greco-Roman background. In the early narrative of the "Russian spring" developed by Russian far-rights in 2014, "Novorossiya" was represented as the promised land for ethnic Russian nationalists and Cossacks blessed by the Russian Orthodox Church. In Putin's revanchist imperial narrative two parts of an artificially divided Russian nation are reunited, and residents of restored "Novorossiya" are liberated from "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" and "decadent western values" like "same sex marriage," "LGBT propaganda," "parent 1 and parent 2" instead of "traditional family." Finally, the bureaucratic practices are rather different from nationalist and neo-imperial narratives – after annexation in 2022, the old imperial place names were replaced with formerly Soviet ones – the occupied town of Bakhmut was renamed Artiomovsk, Oleshky – Tsyurupinsk after two Bolsheviks – Artem and Tsyurupa. Both of them as well as other Bolsheviks had destroyed the Russian Empire, persecuted the Russian Orthodox Church, and challenged "traditional values" with "class struggle," "internationalism," and "communist society". However, the neo-imperial spatial imaginary in Putin's Russia is so eclectic that the legacy of Catherine II and Potemkin can peacefully coexist with Bolsheviks and Stalinist modernization.

65 "Today, high-tech industrial giants that were once the pride of Ukraine and the entire Union, are sinking. Engineering output has dropped by 42 per cent over ten years. The scale of deindustrialization and overall economic degradation is visible in Ukraine's electricity production, which has seen a nearly two-time decrease in 30 years. Finally, according to IMF reports, in 2019, before the coronavirus pandemic broke out, Ukraine's GDP per capita had been below USD 4 thousand." Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity".