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Russkiy Mir Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Ukraine and Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This thesis analyses how Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined within Russkiy Mir discourse and attempts to answer the question how and why Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined differently. As Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has illustrated, the Russian narrative does have implications for the post-Soviet space. This thesis seeks to answer the question how and why Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined differently within Russkiy Mir discourse through a critical discourse analysis and by using the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics. Ukraine is imagined as being at the core of the Russkiy Mir and therefore being Russian in essence. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is imagined as belonging to the Russkiy Mir because it owes its existence to the Russians and Soviets. The findings of these thesis foster a better understanding of Russian post-imperial discourse and consequence foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

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Introduction

"Представьте себе, что в один прекрасный момент люди проснулись и узнали, что они с этого дня, оказывается, живут не в общем государстве, а оказались за границами Российской Федерации, хотя всегда идентифицировали себя как часть русского народа."¹

-Vladimir Putin, 2005

Context

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that the government in Kyiv was a Nazi government, and that Moscow came to protect the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. The objective of the *военная операция*, as Putin called Russia's invasion, was "*the protection of people who for eight years have been subjected to abuse, genocide by the Kyiv [Kiev] regime*". Russia sought to realize a "*demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine*".² Interestingly, Putin's language on fighting Nazi's in Ukraine prompted historians to think of Hitler's speeches and Nazi-Germany's occupation of Sudetenland in 1938.³

Only half a year earlier, in July 2021, Putin published an article in which he elaborated on his view of Russo-Ukrainian relations. The title of the article speaks volumes: '*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians (2021) (Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев)*.' According to Putin, Russians and Ukrainians are one people – a single whole.⁴ The Soviets, with their policy of *коренизация* in the 1920s and 1930s, are to blame for the idea that there are three separate eastern Slavic peoples – the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians. Subsequently, Putin concluded that modern Ukraine is "*entirely the product of the Soviet era*".⁵

¹English translation: "*Imagine that at one point people woke up and found out that from that day on, it turns out, they do not live in a common state, but found themselves outside the borders of the Russian Federation, although they always identified themselves as part of the Russian people.*"

"Путин считает, что распад СССР стал трагедией для миллионов," РИА Новости, last modified May 5, 2005, <https://ria.ru/20050505/39937603.html>.

² Egbert Fortuin, "Ukraine commits genocide on Russians: the term "genocide" in Russian propaganda," *Russian Linguistics*, no. 46 (2022): 314.

³ Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe and Bastiaan Willems, "Putin's Abuse of History: Ukrainian 'Nazis', 'Genocide', and a Fake Threat Scenario," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1.

⁴ Владимир Путин, "Статья Владимира Путина «Об историческом единстве русских и украинцев»," Президент России, last modified July 12, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵ Путин, "Статья Владимира Путина."

Further elaborating on his conviction, Putin told the world community in his aggressive address just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that: *"Now grateful descendants have demolished monuments to Lenin in Ukraine. This is what they call decommunization. Do you want decommunization? Well, that suits us just fine. But it is unnecessary, as they say, to stop halfway. We are ready to show you what real decommunization means for Ukraine."*⁶

Real decommunization meant for Putin the destruction of Ukrainian statehood as he believes that Ukraine is the product of the Soviet era. The Russian invasion of Ukraine illustrates that what Putin believes can have serious consequences. Many experts have argued that February 24 can be added to the list of historical changes such as the Fall of the Berlin Wall 1989 and the end of the Cold War. What does this mean for the broader post-Soviet space that still carries the legacy of Soviet nation-building and border shaping? In the past, Putin has shared his view on Kazakhstan's development as a state.

Putin has published no essays on his view on Kazakhstan or Kazakh statehood. In August 2014, Putin praised Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who: *"Has performed a unique feat"* because *"he has created a state on a territory where there has never been a state. The Kazakhs never had a state of their own, and he created it. In this sense, he is a unique person on the post-Soviet space and in Kazakhstan."*⁷ These words can be interpreted as both a questioning of Kazakhstan's legitimacy as an independent state rather than being a product of Russia or a genuinely compliment towards Nazarbayev.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the tone of Russian political discourse on Kazakhstan has changed. In September 2022, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev warned that northern Kazakhstan could be next in line after Ukraine was quickly taken down.⁸ Moreover, the 'issue' of Kazakhstan has been discussed on state-controlled Russian TV as well. In November 2022, Russian propagandists claimed at the programme 'An Evening with Vladimir Solovyov' on the Russian state-owned television channel Russia-1, that Kazakhstan is the next problem after Ukraine, *"because the same Nazi processes that were happening in Ukraine could begin there."* Adding that in Kazakhstan *"there are also many Russians."*⁹ According to the Kremlin's propaganda logic, the 'problem' of Kazakhstan is the changing

⁶ "Extracts from Putin's speech from Ukraine," Reuters, last modified February 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21/>.

⁷ Marlene Laruelle, "Why no Kazakh Novorossiya? Kazakhstan's Russian Minority in a Post-Crimea World," *Problems of Post-Communism* 65, no. 1 (2018): 65.

⁸ Temur Umarov, "After Ukraine, is Kazakhstan Next in the Kremlin's Sights?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, last modified August 10, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87652>.

⁹ Канат Алтынбаев, "Российские пропагандисты угрожают, что Казахстан — следующий после Украины," Каравансарай, last modified November 30, 2022, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2022/11/30/feature-02.

position of the Russian language and the Russian community in a country that seeks to Kazakhify itself and move away from its Russian and Soviet past. Therewith, the Russian propagandists could hint at expanding Russia's 'Special Military Operation' to Kazakhstan.

As the war in Ukraine has proven, the Kremlin's rhetoric can interlude – and attempt to justify – military interventions. If the Kremlin argues that 'its Russian compatriots' are being oppressed, it can decide to come to 'liberate' its citizens. This thesis argues that understanding the position of Ukraine and Kazakhstan within the larger Russian narrative fosters a better understanding of Russian foreign policy within the post-Soviet space.

Objectives and Research Question

The objective of this thesis is to conduct comparative research on how the Kremlin perceives Ukraine and Kazakhstan through the concept of the *Russkiy Mir*. *Russkiy Mir*, which means Russian World, is a concept and political ideology that defines Russia as a civilization that is bigger than the contemporary Russian Federation. This thesis seeks to combine theory critical geopolitics from international relations with knowledge from the region and the Russian language to get a better understanding of Russia's foreign policy's main drivers in Kazakhstan and Ukraine and compare the two post-Soviet republics. As the Danish associate professor at the Royal Danish Defence college Elias Götz has argued, too often researchers from international relations on the one side, and area specialists on the other side, talk past each other, rather than to each other.¹⁰ Hubert Smeets, a Dutch journalist specialised in Russia, has argued that the 'realist' school of thought in the field of international relations did not pay enough attention to dynamics in Ukraine and therewith failed to explain why the government in Kyiv did not fall in the end after Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2024.¹¹ The Ukrainian scholar Taras Kuzio argues that not only scholars of international relations failed to understand Ukrainian politics and society, but that the Russian Novorossiia project in Ukraine also failed, because of Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians.¹² This thesis' research aims to understand what position Ukraine and Kazakhstan take within the Russian imagination of *Russkiy Mir*.

¹⁰ Elias Götz, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1530.

¹¹ Hubert Smeets, "Eén jaar oorlog: de realistische school moet eens in de spiegel kijken," RAAM OP Rusland, Oekraïne, Belarus, last modified 13 februari, 2023, <https://www.raamoprusland.nl/dossiers/oekraïne/2296-eeen-jaar-oorlog-de-realistische-school-moet-eens-in-de-spiegel-kijken>.

¹² Taras Kuzio, "Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiia failed," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 52 (2019): 297.

Russia acts within the international arena – either diplomatically or military – based on its own understandings of its perceived ‘sphere of influence’. Therefore, by researching the ideational factor of Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet space through the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics, this thesis attempts to understand why Russia’s foreign policy towards Ukraine has been of such a different nature than towards Kazakhstan. This thesis will contribute to the existing literature by comparing the Russian narrative of *Russkiy Mir* on Ukraine and Kazakhstan and understand why Putin decided to engage in a full-scale war in Ukraine, whereas there is no military conflict with Kazakhstan.

The research question of this thesis is as follows:

“How and why are Kazakhstan and Ukraine imagined differently within the concept of the Russkiy Mir?”

Sub questions are:

“What are the differences between Kazakhstan and Ukraine within the Kremlin’s concept of the Russkiy Mir?”

“Why is Russian foreign policy and geopolitics of a different nature towards Kazakhstan than towards Ukraine?”

“How do Kazakhstan and Ukraine position themselves in relation to the Russian Russkiy Mir concept?”

Case Selection and Research Puzzle

The rationale for a comparative analysis of Ukraine and Kazakhstan stems from several similarities: Both countries share a border with Russia and both countries have a shared history with Moscow through the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Russia considers both countries to be part of its ‘sphere of influence.’ There are significant Russian communities in Ukraine and Kazakhstan and the Russian language was omnipresent in both countries, until this has changed in Ukraine as a result of Russia’s brutal full-scale invasion. Many ethnic Kazakhs and Ukrainians speak Russian as their first language. As observers argued, Kazakhstan and Ukraine are the two former Soviet countries with the highest number of people

who identify as Russians. In 2015, 21 percent (3.5 million) of the population of Kazakhstan and 17 percent (8.2 million) of the population of Ukraine identified themselves as Russians.¹³

Ukraine and Kazakhstan also share black pages of Soviet history. Both countries have suffered most from the famines that raged in the Soviet Union during the late 1920s and early 1930s under Stalin's leadership. Some 6.5 to 7 million people perished as a result, and this includes an estimated 4.2 million in Ukraine and the Kuban and 1.3 to 1.5 million in Kazakhstan.¹⁴ Russian historiography displays similarities on how Ukraine and Kazakhstan became part of the Russian Empire: Ukraine and Kazakhstan voluntarily chose to align with Moscow. In Moscow, the Ukrainian Hetman Bogdan Khmelnytsky is seen by both academics and people on the streets as the one who brought together Russia and Ukraine through the Pereyaslav Agreement of 1654 after the Mongol-Tatar Yoke.¹⁵ However, Russian historiography – and propaganda – does not limit itself to Russia. In Kazakh schools, the start of the relationship with Russia in the early 18th century is framed as an alliance, rather than colonization.¹⁶ Such a narrative of voluntary alignments serves Russia's interests of having influence in Kazakh domestic affairs and legitimizes its presence in both countries.

There are also important differences between Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is politically much closer to Russia and is considered Moscow's second closest ally after Belarus.¹⁷ In 2002, Kazakhstan was mobilised to reinvigorate the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization, which was used in January 2022 to suppress the uprising in Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Kazakhstan is also a member of the Moscow-led integrationist project the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Additionally, both Russia and Kazakhstan are members of the Shanghai Treaty Organization. This indicates the intensive cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan in the fields of economics and security. However, the scholar Thomas Ambrosio argues that Kazakhstan increasingly perceives Russia as a threat to Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its confrontation with the West.¹⁹

¹³ Laruelle, "Why No Kazakh Novorossiia?" 66.

¹⁴ Nicolas Werth, "Food Shortages, Hunger, and Famines in the USSR, 1928-1933," in *Communism and Hunger: The Ukrainian, Chinese, Kazakh and Soviet Famines in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Sysyn (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 2016), 13.

¹⁵ Serhii Plokhyy, "The Ghost of Pereyaslav: Russo-Ukrainian Historical Debates in the Post-Soviet Era," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (2001): 489.

¹⁶ Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows. Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan* (Bloomsbury: London, 2018) 126.

¹⁷ Umarov, "After Ukraine, is Kazakhstan Next in the Kremlin's Sights?"

¹⁸ Trine Flockhart and Elena A. Korosteleva, "War in Ukraine: Putin and the multi-order world," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 473.

¹⁹ Thomas Ambrosio, "Belarus, Kazakhstan and Alliance Security Dilemmas in the Former Soviet Union: Intra-Alliance Threat and Entrapment after the Ukraine Crisis," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1701.

Whereas Kazakhstan is strongly tied to Russia through political cooperation, Ukraine has cut many ties with its former ruler since 2014 and this has only intensified since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine of February 24, 2022. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree that turns May 9 – the Soviet and Russian holiday Victory Day commemorating victory of Nazi Germany – into Europe Day on May 8, 2023. Zelensky proposed to celebrate the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in the Second World War on May 8 – like most European countries.²⁰ In contrast, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev travelled to Moscow to celebrate Victory Day together with Putin.²¹ Moreover, the Ukrainian political elite acknowledges and utilizes the Ukrainian famine as a tool for nation-building, resulting in the establishment of a memorial, museum, and institute with the aim of drawing attention to the genocide claim. The Kazakh political elite, instead, is more hesitant in employing such a narrative, because it seeks to not undermine its relations with Russia and to not stir up ethnic tensions within its own borders.

Nowadays, perhaps the most important difference is that Kazakhstan has not been invaded by Russia. This thesis seeks to explore to what extent this can be explained by comparing Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's position within Moscow's understanding of the Russkiy Mir.

The research puzzle consists of an *explanatory few-N case study* which enables the thesis to analyse the position of Ukraine and Kazakhstan within the wider Russian framework of the Russkiy Mir. Publications of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, speeches of Putin and other Russian politicians loyal to the Kremlin will be critically analysed, together with Russian academia and journalism. It is an *empirical research puzzle (divergence)* because the relationships between Ukraine and Russia on the one hand, and Kazakhstan and Russia on the other hand, are significantly different despite both countries being understood within the concept as the Russkiy Mir as belonging to the Russkiy Mir.

²⁰ The Kyiv Independent news desk, "Zelensky signs decree making May 9 Europe Day, proposes to celebrate Victory Day on May 8," The Kyiv Independent, last modified May 8, 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/zelensky-signs-decree-making-may-9-europe-day-proposes-to-celebrate-victory-day-on-may-8/>.

²¹ "Flanked by leaders of ex-Soviet allies, Putin blasts the West," Al Jazeera, last modified May 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/9/flanked-by-leaders-of-ex-soviet-allies-putin-blasts-the-west>.

Relevance

The Russian Nobel Prize Laureate, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, published an article in the last days of the Soviet Union in which he criticized the border policies of the Soviet authorities. The Soviets had carved up the traditional ‘Rus’. He stood for a ‘Russian Union’ (*Russkiy Soyuz*) encompassing the three Eastern Slavic countries Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia and the ethnically Russian parts of Kazakhstan’s north.²² Thus, Putin stands in a longer tradition of Russian claims of the unity of the medieval lands of ‘Rus’ and this does not stand or fall with the current Russian President. President Putin has formalized its desire to have strong ties with Russians abroad through the Russian Federation’s Concept of Foreign Policy of 2016. In paragraph 45, point E, it is written that the objective of Russian diplomatic efforts is to promote the consolidation of compatriots living abroad and to promote the preservation of identity of the Russian (*Российской*) diaspora and here relationship with the historical motherland.²³

In Putin’s Russia, history is a weapon. History is abused to legitimize contemporary actions and to appeal to the emotions of ordinary citizens who identify with historic events. In Putin’s article from July 2021 on his perceived “unity” of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, he notes that “*Чтобы лучше понять настоящее и заглянуть в будущее, мы должны обратиться к истории.*”²⁴ Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe and Bastiaan Willems argue that in spite of many statements coming from the Russian authorities are either false, detached from their context or oversimplified, they nevertheless should be taken seriously and analysed as Putin’s politics of history.²⁵ Putin’s interpretation of Russian history is a driver of Russia’s foreign policy. Moreover, according to the scholars Trine Flockhart and Elena Korosteleva, Putin’s propaganda machine has secured genuine followers among the Russian population – and even beyond.²⁶ There is a support base for Putin’s narrative in Russian society. An analysis of Russian political discourse is relevant because the discourse influences public opinion in Russia which in turn legitimises the Kremlin’s foreign policy.

²² Robert Coalson, “How a Famous Soviet Dissident Foreshadowed Putin’s Plan—in 1990,” *The Atlantic*, last modified September 2, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/how-a-famous-soviet-dissident-foreshadowed-putins-plan-in-1990-russia-ukraine/379467/>.

²³ И. В. Михайлин, “РОССИЯ СВОИХ НЕ БРОСАЕТ (о формах поддержки соотечественников) в странах Центральной Азии как части «Русского мира»),” *Вестник МГЛУ. Общественные науки* 845, вып. 4 (2021): 210.

²⁴ English translation: “*In order to better understand the now and look towards the future, we have to turn towards history.*”

Путин, “Статья Владимира Путина.”

²⁵ Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe and Bastiaan Willems, “Putin’s Abuse of History: Ukrainian ‘Nazis’, ‘Genocide’, and a Fake Threat Scenario,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 35, no. 1 (2022): 2.

²⁶ Trine Flockhart and Elena A. Korosteleva, “War in Ukraine: Putin and the multi-order world,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 475.

Olga Brusylovska and Iryna Maksymenko argue that a thorough examination of new and old media narratives that the Kremlin disseminates to legitimize its actions can help to foster adequate policies to weapon Russia's neighbours against its propaganda.²⁷ By critically analysing Russia's political discourse, Russia's main drivers for its foreign policy might be discovered in what it perceives as its 'Near Abroad' (*ближнее зарубежье*) – the former republics of the Soviet Union – which might foster better resistance against Russian aggression.

According to the academic Vladislav Inozemtsev, Putin seeks to undo the humiliating defeats of the 1990s after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.²⁸ In Putin's view, Russia has the right to be a great power and have a dominant position within the post-Soviet space. This idea is articulated through the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* – Russia being a world civilization that transcends the borders of the contemporary Russian Federation. In his Victory Day speech on May 9, 2023, Putin referred to post-Soviet countries when he noted that: "*certain countries they ruthlessly and cold-bloodedly destroy memorials to Soviet soldiers, demolish monuments to great commanders, create a real cult of the Nazis and their proxies, erase and demonise the memory of true heroes.*" Continuing, Putin claimed that: "*Their goal – and there is nothing new about it – is to break apart and destroy our country, to make null and void the outcomes of World War II, to completely break down the system of global security and international law, to choke off any sovereign centres of development.*"²⁹ Here, Putin means the West and those former communist countries who seek to move away from Moscow politically, historically, and culturally. However, those countries belong to the Russian World Putin believes – and therefore, he has the right to act accordingly. Putin's political rhetoric has a distinctly tone of revanchism.

There is a research gap in the literature concerning a comparative study of Ukraine and Kazakhstan within the context of the *Russkiy Mir* and what consequences their differences have had on Russian foreign policy. This thesis attempts to contribute to the literature by analysing how Ukraine and Kazakhstan are perceived within *Russkiy Mir* ideology and how those convictions are translated into Russian foreign policy in the context of the war in Ukraine.

²⁷ Olga Brusylovska and Iryna Maksymenko, "Analysis of the media discourse on the 2022 war in Ukraine: The case of Russia," *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 15, no. 1 (2022): 3.

²⁸ Vladislav Inozemtsev, "From Muscovy to Russia and Back: The Aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2022): 188-189.

²⁹ "Victory Parade on Red Square," President of Russia, last modified May 9, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71104>.

Methods and Limitations

The methodological approach of this thesis encompasses qualitative literature analysis and a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of political discourse from Russian officials and pro-Russian media. CDA enables researchers to develop awareness of language and ideology. Discourse is understood here as a power mechanism in society and a controlling force which is used to persuade and manipulate both individuals and social groups.³⁰ Power is held by both institutions and individuals and in Russia this is evident in the personification of Putin and the institute of the Kremlin. Moscow attempts to control the way Russian society lives and thinks through language, but also how the international community sees Russia.

Discourse manifests itself through different forms. For this thesis, the focus will lay on the linguistic part of discourse, because the Russian geopolitical imaginary is mostly communicated by the Kremlin through speeches and references regarding history, international relations, language, religion, and identity. However, there will also be attention devoted to the use of maps for the social goal of imaging a space and controlling that space. By choosing a qualitative approach, this research will focus on how the Kremlin imagines Ukraine and Kazakhstan and which linguistic or visual tools are utilized. This will be done through the deconstruction of the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* to its fundamental components and indicators and Russian political discourse on the *Russkiy Mir* in relation to Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

We can speak of the Kremlin and actors loyal to the Kremlin as a discourse community. According to the scholars Meriel Bloor and Thomas Bloor, a discourse community is a community of people that may meet frequently, rarely, or sometimes not at all, but still communicate and develop specific discourses. Mostly, these have been professional, business, or academic communities, who read the same reports or journals and maintain correspondence among each other.³¹

The data used for this thesis include academic literature, official documents, media sources and online sources. Because of obvious limitations, no Russian politicians, scholars, or journalists have been interviewed by the author of this thesis.

The thesis will focus on the media outlets that directly or indirectly reflect the position of the Kremlin and speeches or written publications of the Russian President Vladimir Putin on his official website *Kremlin.ru*. Especially Putin's essay '*On the Historical Unity of*

³⁰ Meriel Bloor and Thomas Bloor, *The Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis: An Introduction* (Routledge: New York, 2007) 1.

³¹ Bloor and Bloor, *The Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 9.

Russians and Ukrainians’ is considered a highly important source. The time frame spans from the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, until most recent events.

There are, obviously, limitations regarding the study of Russian propaganda and political discourse on Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The Russian war in Ukraine is still ongoing and the future course of events is uncertain. New developments within the war shape the political discourse disseminated from the Kremlin and other Russian actors. This means that the topic is in development and new events will shape the course of the war. Another limitation that the author of thesis cannot consult Kazakh or Ukrainian language sources – only Russian, English, and Dutch sources.

By critically analysing the discourses surrounding the ‘Russian World,’ researchers can raise awareness about potential biases, inequalities, and exclusionary practices. This approach can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the concept, its implications, and its impact on Russia’s foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

Chapter 1 – Conceptualization and Theoretical Framework

Introduction

In this chapter, the concepts *Russkiy Mir*, *imagined communities*, *Eurasianism*, and *biopolitics* will be conceptualized. These concepts will help to understand how Russia thinks about its own place in the world and where Ukraine and Kazakhstan fit in. The *Russkiy Mir* concept is the most important concept because it can be seen as the ideology of the Kremlin. According to the *Russkiy Mir* concept, Russia is not just the Russian Federation, but a community or even civilization that transcends the borders of contemporary Russia. Indicators of belonging to the *Russkiy Mir* are language, history, culture, values, cooperation with Moscow and anti-Westernism.

Imagined communities are communities that are imagined as a community through a shared history, language, culture, and often citizenship, although not all members now each other or even know of each other's existence. This way, the concept of imagined communities contributes to understanding how the *Russkiy Mir* community is socially constructed by the Kremlin.

Another important concept that influences Russian geopolitical thinking is Eurasianism. Eurasianism is an ideology that emerged as an answer to the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in the 1920s and subsequent loss of territory and saw a revival in the form of neo-Eurasianism after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Eurasianism seeks to give an answer to what distinguishes Russia from both the West and the East and is geographically and culturally deterministic of nature. The concept of Eurasianism helps to understand geopolitical Russia's self-identification.

Biopolitics examines the ways in which power operates at the intersection of biology, society, and politics, influencing how individuals and populations are governed and controlled. Through biopolitics Russia's "compatriots" policy in the post-Soviet space can be analysed.

The theory of *Critical geopolitics* contributes to answering the research question of this thesis. Critical geopolitics is a theory that does not take geopolitics for granted as a projection of 'how things really are.' The geopolitical space is imagined and framed by geopolitical actors, therewith creating 'truths.' Thus, critical geopolitics fosters a better understanding of the *Russkiy Mir* ideology as Moscow's ideology in its Near Abroad. By analysing the power dynamics and contestations, critical geopolitics helps to understand the complex processes that influence Russia's foreign policy in Ukraine and Kazakhstan – and beyond. Moreover, critical

geopolitics enables this thesis to understand Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's geopolitical culture and self-identification and how these interact with the Russian narrative.

Concept 1: Russkiy Mir

Russkiy Mir entered official rhetoric of the Russian Federation in 2006 when Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that the “*Russkiy Mir can and must unite everyone, who cherishes the Russian word and the Russian culture, wherever they live – in Russia or abroad*” in a speech in St. Petersburg on the eve of the Year of the Russian Language.³² On June 21, 2007, The Russkiy Mir Foundation was created by a decree of Putin. The self-declared goals of the foundation are the popularisation of the Russian language, which is Russia's national treasure, and important elements of Russian and world culture, and the support of the study of the Russian language abroad.³³

Russkiy Mir is conceptualised as an ideology that claims that there is a transnational community that identifies itself with the Kremlin's Russia through the Russian language, Orthodox religion, traditional values, culture, historical experiences, emotional attachment, and cooperation with Moscow in politics, economics, and security. Geographically, it entails the post-Soviet space with Russia at its heart.³⁴ An important aspect of Russkiy Mir ideology is that it transcends the Russian Federation, as indicated by Putin's statement and the Russkiy Mir Foundation's goal.

Russkiy Mir is conceptualised as what the scholar Benedict Anderson calls an ‘imagined community’. Russian identity, in this view, is rooted in several historic epochs and is of eternal and transcendental quality. In a publication of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Aleksey Gromiko argues that Russkiy Mir, as a human community, rests on four principles: territorial-chronological, cultural, ontological, and axiological. *Mir* cannot exist without the mental component; the geographical component is “just the filling form.”³⁵ The apparent non-significance of geography in Russkiy Mir ideology distinguishes it from Eurasianism where territory plays an important role. However, Irina Kotkina disagrees with that notion and argues

³² Natalia Naydenova, “Holy Rus: (Re)construction of Russia's Civilizational Identity,” *Slavonica* 21, no. 1-2 (2016): 42.

³³ “О фонде,” Фонд, Русский Мир, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://russkiymir.ru/fund/>.

³⁴ Marcin Kosienkowski, “The Russian World as a legitimation strategy outside Russia: the case of Gagauzia,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62, no. 3 (2021): 319.

³⁵ Алексей Громыко, “Русский Мир: Понятие, причины, ценности, структура,” in *Смыслы и ценности русского мира. Сборник статей и материалов круглых столов, организованных фондом “Русский мир,”* ed. Вячеслав Никонов (Москва: Фонда Русский Мир. 2010), 20.

that Russkiy Mir inherently is irredentist, leading to the strong opposition of the Kazakh leadership to the concept and the subsequent erosion of Eurasian integration.

The importance of the mental dimension of Russkiy Mir is illustrated by Putin's remark that "*Russia is not a project, it is a destiny. You know, it is a life.*"³⁶ Because of Russkiy Mir's perceived eternal nature, it defies legal contemporary borders. According to the Russian professor Mikhailin, Russkiy Mir is a linguistic-cultural concept and is based on four pillars: the geopolitical, geo-economical, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional, and confessional components.³⁷

Historically, the term Russkiy Mir has been used to describe the Russian state and empire as a distinctive civilizational space. In Medieval sources, ancient Rus was described as a Russian world. From the 19th century, it was understood by some in spiritual terms as a community of Orthodox Christians who shared the same belief, rites, and traditions. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Russkiy Mir emerged as a new means to give meaning to the world after the fall of communism. The Russkiy Mir idea became the new "national idea" of Russia.³⁸ However, this 'new' idea stands in an ancient tradition of perceiving a shared civilizational space, such as the Greek world or Roman world, and Russia is not the only one to do so, as the British Commonwealth or *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*.³⁹ Nevertheless, Irina Kotkina argues that in spite of strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church, the concept only gained widespread recognition in Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁴⁰

Different Russkiy Mir adherents emphasise different indicators of belonging. The former head of state and prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, said in 2015 that the Russian World "*is not a nationality; this is a community of nations. Kazakhs and anyone can enter there.*"⁴¹ Vyacheslav Nikonov, the head of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, argues that belonging to the Russkiy Mir is not defined by

³⁶ Mariya Omelicheva, "Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy: Uncovering the imagery of Moscow's international relations," *International Politics* 53, no. 6 (2016): 718.

³⁷ И.В. Михайлин, "Россия своих не бросает (о формах поддержки соотечественников в странах Центральной Азии как части «Русского Мира»)," *Вестник Московского государственного лингвистического университета. Общественный науки* вып. 4 (2021): 202.

³⁸ John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal & Vladimir Kolosov, "Who identifies with the "Russian World"? Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 6 (2016): 747.

³⁹ Marlene Laruelle, "The "Russian World". Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination," *Center on Global Interests* (2015): 1 & 23.

⁴⁰ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics between the Eurasian Union and Russkii Mir," in *The Politics of Eurasianism, Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, eds. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017): 59.

⁴¹ Utku Yapici, "Chto Takoe Sovetskaya Diaspora? Is there a Living and Ideologically Sovietized 'Soviet Diaspora'?" *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 4 (2022): 651

blood or Russian Orthodoxy, because all citizens of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union belonged to it and were not all ethnic Russians or Orthodox. However, the Russian language is a determining factor. Following Nikonov, “*Русский мир полиэтничен, поликонфессионален и полисемантический. Это глобальный феномен, который не может быть описан однозначно каким-то одним определением.*”⁴² However, Gromiko argues that the ‘functional values’ of the Russian World are multi-nationality and multi-ethnicity with Russian dominance; multilingual with Russian dominance; multi-religious with Christian Orthodox dominance; and multi-cultural.⁴³ The founding fathers of the concept, Shchedrovitsky and Ostrovsky, argued that being Russian is about a shared destiny.⁴⁴

Concluding, the exact definition of the Russkiy Mir is imprecise. Nevertheless, it is important to conceptualize the Russkiy Mir as an imagined transnational community that, according to the Kremlin, belongs to Russian civilization through different concepts such as language, history, culture and values, geography, religion and cooperation with Moscow and competition with the West. Russkiy Mir is irredentist of nature. However, Russkiy Mir is also a soft power tool as it appeals to the emotional attachment of people to the Soviet Union and attracts people through Russian language and culture.

The Indicators of the Russkiy Mir

The indicators of the Russkiy Mir enable this thesis to identify how the Russkiy Mir is conceptualised through the ‘traits’ of the Russkiy Mir or the ‘conditions’ for belonging to the Russkiy Mir.

A) Russian Language

In 2016, Putin argued that the Russian language allowed the formation of a national identity with its unique and own character and traditions of a Russian citizen in a multinational country. The Russian language ensures the preservation of Russia’s identity in a globalized world and is the road to civilization and culture through spiritual and historical values.⁴⁵ Russkiy Mir Foundation writes on its website that one of its goals is to protect the Russian language as a

⁴² English translation: “*The Russian World is multi-ethnic, multireligious, and polysemantic. This is a global phenomenon that cannot be described unambiguously by any one definition.*”

Вячеслав Никонов, “Не воспоминание о прошлом, а мечта о будущем,” in *Смыслы и ценности русского мира. Сборник статей и материалов круглых столов, организованных фондом “Русский мир,”* ed. Вячеслав Никонов (Москва: Фонда Русский Мир, 2010), 5.

⁴³ Громько, “Русский Мир,” 21.

⁴⁴ Laruelle, “The Russian World,” 4.

⁴⁵ Naydenova, “Holy Rus,” 42.

means of interethnic communication.⁴⁶ The Russian language is positioned within Russkiy Mir as connecting the different nations belonging to the Russkiy Mir but also as constituting Russian civilization. In addition, the Russian language is instrumentalized to justify military interventions by Russia, as is illustrated by Russian claims that it seeks to protect Russian-speaking citizens in Ukraine.

B) Orthodox Christianity

Despite that being Christian Orthodox is not considered a prerequisite for belonging to the Russkiy Mir, the importance of Orthodox Christianity within the Russkiy Mir is illustrated by the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church is the only religion that has representatives on the Russkiy Mir Foundation's governing board.⁴⁷ Within the Russkiy Mir, Orthodoxy is not only understood as a religion, but also as a form of civilization.⁴⁸ Moscow seeks to construct a counter-hegemonic narrative against the West and the Russian Orthodox Church is taking an assertive role in the elaboration of that narrative through the concept of 'Holy Rus'.⁴⁹ The Russian nation is understood by the Russian Orthodox Church as a multi-cultural entity that historically dates to Kievan Rus and is continual to contemporary Russia. Moscow represents the centre of Holy Rus and Holy Rus constitutes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and in some interpretations Moldova and Kazakhstan. Christianity's supra-national nature justifies the non-defined borders of Holy Rus, which includes all territories that belong to the Russkiy Mir.⁵⁰

C) Traditional Values

Traditional values are expressed through anti-Westernism, conservatism, and Russian Orthodoxy. In particular, the Moscow Patriarchate and the neo-Eurasianists have carried the civilizational narrative that comes from the Kremlin's new conservative agenda.⁵¹ Russkiy Mir stands for traditional values, such as the importance of family, the motherland, and religion. In this way, Russkiy Mir opposes itself to Western liberalism. One of the justifications in Russian propaganda for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine is its claim that Ukraine has slipped into the "satanistic" world of the West.

⁴⁶ "О фонде," Русский Мир.

⁴⁷ John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal & Vladimir Kolosov, "Who identifies with the "Russian World"? Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57, no. 6 (2016): 751.

⁴⁸ Michal Wawrzonek, "Ukraine in the "Gray Zone": Between the "Russkiy Mir" and Europe," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 28, no. 4 (2014): 762.

⁴⁹ Naydenova, "Holy Rus," 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 38 & 41.

⁵¹ Laruelle, "The Russian World," 20.

D) Culture and Emotional Attachment

During Soviet times, Russian and Soviet identities were intertwined and therefore the Russkiy Mir mythologises the Soviet past.⁵² For people who have been born and raised in the Soviet Union and feel attached to its history and culture, it is easy to feel a form of emotional attachment to the narrative of the Russkiy Mir after years of being exposed to Soviet propaganda at school, work, and public life. Exemplary for this is the British journalist Joana Lillis' conversation with a Kazakh woman in her mid-fifties on the streets in Semey in eastern Kazakhstan. When asked about Russia's annexation of Crimea, the woman answered that "*Crimea's always been considered Russian,*" and that "*Sevastopol and Crimea are real Russian lands. The Russians and the Orthodox defended it from the Turkish yoke, and that's where our Russian soldiers fought.*"⁵³ The statement of this Kazakh woman, to whom Russian soldiers fighting a war 5,000 kilometres away in the 19th century are 'ours', is a strong example of the emotional attachment people can feel towards the Russian World concept.

One of the key biopolitical metaphors used by the Kremlin is that of the family – with its Soviet and imperial connotations.⁵⁴ There are different monuments that are supposed to illustrate that form of togetherness, such as the recently destroyed monument 'People's Friendship Arch', that was erected in 1982 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the USSR in Kyiv.⁵⁵ Another architectural manifestation of the idea friendship among peoples is VDNKh in Moscow. The emotional discourse on "friendship among peoples" is present in Russkiy Mir discourse and appeals to the identification of people with the Soviet Union and subsequently the Russian World.

E) Historical Experiences

⁵² O'Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov, "Who identifies with the "Russian World?" 752.

⁵³ Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows. Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan* (Bloomsbury: London, 2018) 139.

⁵⁴ Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, "Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies: reconnecting people or reaggregating lands?" *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 1 (2017): 25.

⁵⁵ Ivan Lyubysh-Kirdey, "Kyiv pulls down Soviet-era monument symbolising Russian-Ukrainian friendship," Reuters, last modified April 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/kyiv-pulls-down-soviet-era-monument-symbolising-russian-ukrainian-friendship-2022-04-26/>.

Historical narratives are crucial for nation-building. Perceptions of the past are transmitted through socialization processes, education, and political rhetoric.⁵⁶ Such narratives usually confine themselves to stay within state borders, but the Russkiy Mir ideology seeks to transcend state borders, resonating to citizens outside the Russian Federation through appealing to emotions and collective memories.

Variation in how people perceive the Kremlin's discourse as a shared Soviet past varies with geopolitical and cultural proximity to Russia – in particular, to what extent they consider themselves to be part of the Russian civilization.⁵⁷ Especially the Great Patriotic War is used by the Kremlin as a tool to unite people around the idea of a Russian world. In spiritual terms, Russkiy Mir merges the Orthodox Church with historical memory with a perceived “common origin” in the era of Kievan' Rus.⁵⁸ Thus, Russkiy Mir utilizes shared historical experiences from the Russian Orthodox Church, the Tsarist Empire, and the Soviet Union.

F) Politics

Russkiy Mir provides a psychological framework for the political reintegration of the post-Soviet space based on the idea of a civilizational community. The establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CSI) in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union can be seen as the political manifestation of Russkiy Mir. According to Laruelle, Russia is not necessarily against the independence of the states in its Near Abroad but wants to secure their geopolitical orientations.⁵⁹ The scenario of Ukraine becoming part of the institutionalized West has serious negative consequences for the prospects of the further political reintegration of the post-Soviet states. That is why the Kremlin took actions in the political, economic, and diplomatic spheres, culminating in military actions. Moscow demands political loyalty from those it considers to be part of Russkiy Mir. According to Wawrzonek, Russia's neo-imperialist political goals towards Ukraine have received a doctrinal foundation with the concept of the Orthodox civilizational community and the Russkiy Mir.⁶⁰ The Russkiy Mir's model of social and political reality advocates an authoritarian form of government.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Kristin M. Bakke, Kit Rickard & John O'Loughlin, “Perceptions of the past in the post-Soviet space,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 4 (2023): 223.

⁵⁷ Bakke, Rickard & O'Loughlin, “Perceptions of the past in the post-Soviet space,” 224.

⁵⁸ Wawrzonek, “Ukraine in the “Gray Zone,”” 761.

⁵⁹ Laruelle, “The Russian World,” 14.

⁶⁰ Wawrzonek, “Ukraine in the “Gray Zone,”” 760.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 766.

G) Economics

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is the economic expression of Russkiy Mir thought. Its member states are Belarus, Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. It is modelled on the European Union. According to Eurasianists, the Eurasian Economic Union aims to ensure multipolarity by balancing the sphere of influence between Russia and Europe.⁶² Western experts perceive the Eurasian Union as an imperial project of Moscow.⁶³ Within the Eurasian Economic Union, Russia portrays itself as the leader and the Russian language is the lingua franca.

H) Security

There is also a security component of the Russkiy Mir: The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO is a Moscow-led organization that Moscow utilises to secure its place within the former Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is also a member of the CSTO, whereas Ukraine – obviously – is not. In January 2022, Russia sent CSTO-troops to suppress the protests because of discontent with the government and former president Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the security component of the Russkiy Mir has become even more worrying for Kazakhstan, as the most influential actor of the security organization is engaged in a full-scale war. That the CSTO is not free of friction is illustrated by the case of Armenia. In February 2024, Armenia froze its membership of the CSTO because it is unhappy with Russia's role within the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁴

Concept 2: Imagined Communities

Russkiy Mir is an imagined community. Imagined communities are dynamic and evolving. They can be reshaped through political, social, and cultural processes, and individuals can have multiple imagined community affiliations based on various identities such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion. The scholar Benedict Anderson, who elaborated the concept of imagined communities, has argued there were three institutions that profoundly shaped the way in which

⁶² Shahzada Rahim Abbas, "Russia's Eurasian union dream: A way forward towards multipolar world order," *Journal of Global Faultlines* 9, no. 1 (2022): 39.

⁶³ Abbas, "Russia's Eurasian union dream," 40.

⁶⁴ "Armenia freezes participation in Russia-led security bloc – Prime Minister," Reuters, last modified February 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/armenia-freezes-participation-russia-led-security-bloc-prime-minister-2024-02-23/>.

colonial states imagined their dominions: the census, the map, and the museum.⁶⁵ Through chronologically arranged sequences of maps of the empire, there was a sort of political-biographical narrative that came into existence, according to Anderson.⁶⁶ This was no different for first the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union.

This concept is feasible to grasp the practice and meaning of the Russkiy Mir. Russkiy Mir imagines a community through political-biographical narrative, namely Russians or people that partly feel themselves Russians due to emotional attachment to Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian or former USSR citizenship, and having the Russian language as a mother tongue. Russkiy Mir considers most contemporary states that in the past were part of the Russian Empire or Soviet Union to be part of their world. Putin's remarks on Ukrainian and Kazakh statehood are clear examples of that.

However, how homogenous are those 'compatriots'? As Mikhail Suslov rightly argues, it requires much ingenuity to connect the different groups of the Russian diaspora and even call them "compatriots" due to their cultural sameness. After all, there have been three waves of Soviet-era migration, there are Russian-speakers from the Central Asian republics, Estonia and Latvia, Ukraine, and Belarus. There are economic migrants from Russia, the 'Russian wives' who came to the West, academics, and IT specialists at universities and the rich 'global Russians' who settled in places such as New York and London.⁶⁷ Research conducted by the Dutch Clingendael Institute on the Ukrainian and Russian diasporas in the Netherlands concluded that the Russian diaspora, contrary to the Ukrainian diaspora, is mostly unorganized, divided, and has a difficult relationship with the Russian Federation.⁶⁸

Thus, the Kremlin's claim of a large Russian diaspora with ties to the Kremlin through Russian language and culture is not as much of a given as Moscow seeks to frame it.

Concept 3: Eurasianism

The importance of the concept of Eurasianism for the analysis of Russkiy Mir lays is derived from a part of the Russian elite for whom Eurasianism and Russkiy Mir are compatible and

⁶⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016) 163-164.

⁶⁶ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 175.

⁶⁷ Mikhail Suslov, "Russian World" Concept: Post-Soviet Geopolitical Ideology and the Logic of "Spheres of Influence," *Geopolitics* 23, no. 2 (2018): 331.

⁶⁸ Christopher Houtkamp and Niels Drost, "Oekraïense en Russische gemeenschappen in Nederland. Onderzoek naar het diasporalandschap, verhoudingen tussen gemeenschappen en het diasporabeleid van Oekraïne en Rusland," *Clingendael Rapport Mei* (2023), 6.

interchangeable. Moreover, Putinist Eurasianism has claimed the role of the Russian Federation's official geopolitical ideology.⁶⁹

Eurasianism is a geopolitical concept and ideology that believes that Eurasia is not a bridge between Europe and Asia, but a distinct civilization with its own values, history, and interests. Eurasianism, like *Russkiy Mir*, advocates a multipolar world order. Eurasianism seeks to establish a distinct identity and geopolitical framework for the vast landmass of Eurasia, which encompasses Europe and Asia. After the demise of the Soviet Union, it became clear that the West had conflated 'Soviet' and 'Russian.' In its attempt to reconfigure the former Soviet space, the term "Eurasia" emerged as the most successful contender to become the new geocultural concept of the former Soviet Union, according to the scholar Sergey Glebov.⁷⁰

Eurasianist thought was developed by Soviet emigres in Western Europe who fled the Soviets in the 1920s and 1930s. Neo-Eurasianism elaborated a pseudo-scientific jargon in the 1990s to cope with the demise of the Soviet Union and to justify authoritarian political culture.⁷¹ Eurasianists believe that Russia can create a new binding ideology to claim the geographical and cultural space of the former Soviet Union.⁷² Eurasianism does not confine to academic debate only; Vladimir Putin, former president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, and the former president of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akaev, have all acknowledged the importance of Eurasianism in their political thinking.⁷³ Nazarbayev did not envision an Eurasian state, but believed in Political independence and economic integration in the Eurasian post-Soviet space. During Putin's election campaign for his third presidential term, he gave full support for Nazarbayev's project of uniting the former Soviet republics into a Eurasian Economic Union.⁷⁴

Glebov's approach to Eurasianism is that Eurasianism sought to neutralize the variety of nationalism in the multi-ethnic Russian Empire by embracing them under the same umbrella. Eurasianism is an imperial phenomenon. It was the product of a situation of unevenness and heterogeneity of the social and cultural space in imperial Russia.⁷⁵ There is traditionalism component and multi-ethnicity component within Eurasianism as well as in *Russkiy Mir*

⁶⁹ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 70 & 72.

⁷⁰ Sergey Glebov, *From Empire to Eurasia. Politics, Scholarship, and Ideology in Russian Eurasianism, 1920s-1930s* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2017) 1.

⁷¹ Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism. An Ideology of Empire* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008) 10.

⁷² Abbas, "Russia's Eurasian union dream," 33.

⁷³ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 10-11.

⁷⁴ Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo, "Introduction," in *The Politics of Eurasianism. Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, eds. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017): 8.

⁷⁵ Glebov, *From Empire to Eurasia*, 5-6.

thinking. According to Eurasianism, Russia has developed itself in between Europe and Asia and therefore has its own unique characteristics, such as an emphasis on spirituality and religion, but also tradition and conservatism. It is where the Russian Orthodox world and the Muslim Turkic speaking nomadic tribes intersected. Neo-Eurasianists condemn racial-ethnic nationalism in Russia and advocate the creation of historical-culturally based regional nationalism through embracing the perceived meta-culture of Eurasia.⁷⁶

Eurasianism is an essentialist interpretation of the world that serves the political objective of proving that the Western model is not applicable to the post-Soviet space. It is a form of cultural fundamentalism: individuals must respect the essence of their group.⁷⁷

Concept 4: Biopolitics

Biopolitics is a concept that originated from the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault. It refers to the intersection of power, politics, and the management of life in modern societies. Biopolitics examines how governments and institutions exert control over populations, not just through traditional forms of political governance, but also through the regulation and management of biological and social life. Biopolitics is a useful concept to understand the Kremlin's 'compatriot's' policy in the post-Soviet space. According to Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, the concept of biopolitics makes an analysis of political relations in the post-Soviet space more nuanced. They distinguish between geopolitical control over territories and the management of population as two different strategies of Russia in what it perceives as its "Near Abroad." They argue that this idea is exemplified by the discrepancy between the geopolitical ideas of Eurasianism and the biopolitical practices of protecting an imagined community of Russian speakers with a shared identity through the idea of the Russian World.⁷⁸

Theoretical Framework: Critical Geopolitics

Critical geopolitics is a theoretical approach that seeks to understand how political power, territoriality, and geographical imaginaries intersect to shape international relations, identities, and conflicts. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to traditional geopolitics, which focused primarily on the study of states, borders, and military strategy. According to the founding father of critical geopolitics, Gerard Toal, geography is "*an active writing of the earth by an*

⁷⁶ Abbas, "Russia's Eurasian union dream," 35.

⁷⁷ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 12.

⁷⁸ Makarychev and Yatsyk, "Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies," 25.

expanding, centralizing imperial state."⁷⁹ Russkiy Mir imagines a trans-territorial community that is linked to Moscow through different means such as identity, security, nationalism, historical narratives, and cultural symbols. Russian geopolitical thinking is the product of Russia's perception of itself and historical legacies. The intersection of political discourse, geographical imaginaries, and identities are of specific interest for an analysis of Ukraine and Kazakhstan in relation to Russkiy Mir.

Geopolitical narratives are performative in the sense that they may appear as just constative, but by proclaiming the categorical scheme, they constitute it. It is the power that lays in the act of categorizing. Mass media and political discourse play a central role in the dissemination of historical myths and narratives.⁸⁰ The Russian scholar Mariya Omelicheva argues that critical geopolitics resembles constructivist approaches with its views on the cognitive and discursive constructs of geopolitical space.⁸¹ The Kremlin constructs and deconstructs the Russkiy Mir in accordance with its own perceived interests, rather than that Russkiy Mir is an objective fact.

There are different geopolitical concepts that through which Russia imagines its own place within the region or even the world. The scholar David Lew argues that Russia communicates different spatial metaphors, such as Greater Europe, the Russian World, and Eurasia', which all promote different foreign policy orientations. However, all geopolitical imaginaries seek to address the fundamental challenges regarding Russia's international identity in the post-Soviet world order. These challenges concern a perceived sense of loss that is twofold: on the one hand, the loss of territories, and on the other hand, the loss of great power status. The three spatial projects have their own way of addressing these challenges. The concept Greater Europe seeks accommodation with the West on Moscow's terms, whereas the concepts Russian World and Eurasia are Russo-centric of nature and delineate a space in which Western influence is not wished for.⁸² Thus, critical geopolitics enables this thesis to research how Russian geopolitical imaginaries are instrumentalised in order to achieve Russian foreign policy objectives.

Critical geopolitics is a feasible theoretical framework to analyse how different geopolitical imaginaries compete and interact with one another. For example, Bohdan Kordan

⁷⁹ Gerard Toal, *Critical geopolitics: the politics of writing global space* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.

⁸⁰ John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal & Vladimir Kolosov, "Who identifies with the "Russian World"?" 747.

⁸¹ Mariya Omelicheva, "Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy: Uncovering the imagery of Moscow's international relations," *International Politics* 53, no. 6 (2016): 711.

⁸² David G. Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy: The Evolution of 'Greater Eurasia'," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (2018): 1612.

has researched the conflicting narratives of Russia and Ukraine on Ukrainian statehood. Moscow's and Kyiv's geopolitical culture are competing with one another. Russia's narrative of empire and Ukraine's submission to its 'elder brother' is incompatible with Ukraine's narrative of independence outside the Russian World.⁸³

The theoretical framework of critical geopolitics helps to analyse the narratives, discourses, and representations that shape Russia's 'Near Abroad' through *Russkiy Mir* ideology. The Russian term *ближнее зарубежье* ('Near Abroad') is an example of the practice of constructing reality. It is used since 1992 in the context of the demise of the Soviet Union to specify that the former Soviet Republics are indeed "abroad", but in another way than other countries. It indicates proximity to Russia.

Critical geopolitics enables this research to analyse how and why Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined differently as a part of *Russkiy Mir*. The way Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined has implications for Russian foreign policy to both respective states and geopolitics. According to Marlene Laruelle, the Kremlin's behaviour in the post-Soviet space is motivated by its perception of its own national security interests and its need to protect the current political regime and state from destabilizing influences from abroad or domestic factors. Thus, *Russkiy Mir* is a blurry geopolitical imagination that enables the Kremlin to instrumentalize it according to its own perceived interests.⁸⁴ Therefore, critical geopolitics fosters a feasible framework to analyse Russia's foreign policy behaviour in what it perceives to be its Near Abroad, because it is constructed through political discourse and Russian journalism and academia that is loyal to the Kremlin.

Critical geopolitics emphasizes the self-selecting process of actors that seek to define space in the service of power. This scholarly tradition questions the reproduction of geopolitical knowledge and discourse and attempts to expose the power relations behind geographic imaginary through geographic, historical, and ethno-demographic factors. Visual cultures and strategies of representation are examined because they are not seen as objective representations of geographic facts, but rather as naturalizing spatial imaginaries.⁸⁵

A conceptual building block of critical geopolitics is geopolitical culture. According to Toal, geopolitical culture concerns how states see the world and how they specialize the world and think of strategic fundamental tasks such as modernization, self-identity, and

⁸³ Bohdan Kordan, "Russia's war against Ukraine: historical narratives, geopolitics, and peace," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64 no. 2-3 (2022): 166.

⁸⁴ Laruelle, "The Russian World," 1.

⁸⁵ Laurence Broers, *Armenia and Azerbaijan. Anatomy of a Rivalry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019) 9.

modernization. Critical geopolitics enables to analyse geopolitical cultures and isolate myths, favoured narratives, and competing traditions with other cultures.⁸⁶

Fights over ownership, administration, and the mastery of space are inseparable of contemporary global politics. The way in which space is imagined does not necessarily have to correspond with its lived reality. As an example, Toal gives the naming of the second largest city in Northern Ireland. By saying ‘Londonderry,’ rather than ‘Derry,’ one acknowledged the legitimacy of the British writing of Irish space and oriented Irish space around the capital of the British Empire.⁸⁷ The same practice is visible in the Donetsk Oblast, where the Russians claim that Bakhmut has officially become Artemovsk again after they captured the town in Ukraine’s Donbas region. Furthermore, the Russians use the word of “Little Russia” or “Novorossiya” for parts of Ukraine to legitimize their claims for control and to delegitimize Ukraine’s sovereignty. Moreover, the practice of naturalizing space is illustrated by the publication of a map of Russia where the annexed Ukrainian territories are depicted as constituting part of the Russian Federation.⁸⁸ This is obviously no reflection of how things ‘really are’, but how Moscow ‘wants’ things to be. Nevertheless, how Moscow imagines geopolitics does have influence on geopolitical reality as its full-scale invasion of Ukraine has illustrated.

Critical geopolitics allows to look at the reproduction of geopolitical knowledge at three levels: the formal level (intellectuals and academic institutions), practical (everyday practice of foreign policy discourse), and popular (construction national identity and images of the ‘other’ in popular culture).⁸⁹ This thesis intersects these three identified levels of the reproduction of geopolitical production through the analysis of political discourse, journalism, academia, and public opinion disseminated on blogs and quasi-journalistic platform that spread the Russkiy Mir message.

Summarizing, critical geopolitics offers a critical lens through which to understand the complex relationships between geography, power, and identity within the Russkiy Mir concept and Russia’s foreign policy in its ‘Near Abroad.’ Russkiy Mir lays at the intersection of geography and biopolitics. Thus, critical geopolitics allows to understand how Russia shapes borders and gives meaning to them and how it constructs identities based on the concept of the

⁸⁶ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10.

⁸⁷ Toal, *Critical geopolitics*, 3.

⁸⁸ “В московские книжные поступили карты с ДНР и ЛНР в составе России,” Москвич Маг, last modified February 8, 2023, <https://moskvichmag.ru/gorod/v-moskovskie-knizhnye-postupili-karty-s-dnr-i-lnr-v-sostave-rossii/>.

⁸⁹ Omelicheva, “Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy,” 712.

Ruskiy Mir and geopolitical framing in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Critical geopolitics can provide a rationale for Russia's foreign policy within the post-Soviet space. Because Russia constructs its own reality in terms of history, geopolitical reality, and identity, it acts according to its own beliefs that it projects on the world.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Introduction

As the chapter on the conceptualisation and theoretical framework of this thesis has demonstrated, it is essential to understand the Russkiy Mir concept in relation to Russia's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. The academic literature acknowledges that the Russkiy Mir concept does not entail a single comprehensive definition and that there are different approaches that even can be interwoven, such as linguistic, biopolitical, and civilizational, as argued by John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov. To understand the Russkiy Mir concept and how it is instrumentalised by the Kremlin, the literature on the Russkiy Mir will be discussed together with the literature on the other concepts that help us to understand the Russkiy Mir: linguistics and the Russian-speaking diaspora, biopolitics, Russian civilizationalism, Eurasianism, Russian geopolitics and foreign policy, and potential Russian separatism or irredentism concerning Kazakhstan.

Russkiy Mir

There are different approaches in the literature. There is a school that posits that the Russkiy Mir is foremostly understood as a linguistic space. Other schools posit that the Russkiy Mir is a spiritual and Russian Orthodox space, or that the Russkiy Mir is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic space. However, there is consensus that the Russkiy Mir transcends the borders of the contemporary Russian Federation.

According to Natalia Naydenova, the ideological vacuum in post-Soviet Russia after the demise of the Soviet Union provided a situation in which religious and ethnic aspects have come to the forefront in absence of ideology and civic identity.⁹⁰ Irina Kotkina argues that Russkiy Mir provided an ideological answer to the demise of the Soviet Union and end of communism.⁹¹ Marcin Kosienkowski explains how Russia's leadership implemented the Russkiy Mir concept to produce domestic support and international acceptance for its entitlement to rule the post-Soviet area.⁹² Michal Wawrzonek argues that Russkiy Mir implies isolation from the West and consolidation of the authoritarian regime.⁹³ Thus, these scholars agree that Russkiy Mir provided an answer to the demise of the Soviet Union and in that sense

⁹⁰ Natalia Naydenova, "Holy Rus," 43.

⁹¹ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 59.

⁹² Marcin Kosienkowski, "The Russian World as a legitimation strategy outside Russia," 320.

⁹³ Michal Wawrzonek, "Ukraine in the "Gray Zone," 760.

was reactionary. It provided a framework in which Moscow could claim its lost territories and in which it continued its adversary with the West.

Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsky identify two perspectives on the Russian world: the technocratic and the religious perspectives. The technocratic perspective sees the Russian World as a post-national form of communication with other civilizational clusters in a hostile environment. According to the religious perspective, the boundaries of the Russian World coincide with the boundaries of the Russian Orthodox Church itself – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and under certain circumstances also Moldova and Kazakhstan. It claims that the Russkiy Mir is about language and values. Russian Orthodoxy is the Russian World's key foundation and Russians are a “super-ethnos” comprised of many other ethnic groups – both inside and outside Russia.⁹⁴ The idea that the Russian World interacts with other hostile civilizational clusters is not unique to Moscow. As Toal argues, the accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into NATO in 1999 was the result of these country being imagined as belonging to the Judeo-Christian West by the US and Western Europe.⁹⁵ Anton Shekhovtsov argues that the idea of the Russkiy Mir as a civilization that interacts with other civilizations is a strong component of the thinking of the influential neo-Eurasianist thinker Aleksandr Dugin.⁹⁶ This thesis argues that the idea of a Russian World did not develop in isolation but is part of a global phenomenon.

Mikhail Suslov identifies three stages of development of the Russkiy Mir: The first stage (1996-2001) emphasised a de-territorialized identification of geopolitical bodies as a network of culturally connected communities. The second stage (2001-2009) stressed that the Russian World always surpassed Russia's borders and that values are more important than territory. The third stage (2009-2015) emphasised the idea of a Russian ‘civilization’ that connects the Russian World across several ‘Russian states’. In this view, the Russian World, which is trans-territorial and culturally heterogenous, co-exists with other worlds such as the Chinese World and British World.⁹⁷ Thus, following Suslov, but also Makarychev and Yatsky, Russkiy Mir has developed from a predominately technocratic approach to a religious approach.

⁹⁴ Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsky, “Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies: reconnecting people or reaggregating lands?” *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 1 (2017): 29 & 30.

⁹⁵ Toal, *Near Abroad*, 5.

⁹⁶ Anton Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian-Ukrainian War,” in *The Politics of Eurasianism, Identity, Popular Culture and Russia's Foreign Policy*, eds. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017): 182.

⁹⁷ Mikhail Suslov, “Russian World” Concept,” 334-336.

This thesis argues that Russkiy Mir should be understood mostly through its metaphysical meaning as it is an imagined community and therefore in essence spiritual and mystical. An indication of this trend is that five years after its introduction in 2007, the usage of the term by Russian politicians has slightly decreased, but it has increased within the rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox Church. Therewith indicating that the concept can be interpreted as cultural propaganda and as the Russian Federation's ideology, according to Anastassiya Starodubtseva.⁹⁸ Wawrzonek argues that despite that Russkiy Mir is supposedly a community united by a common language and culture, the concept nevertheless relies on state power and state institutions to create the social space that the concept creates and its discourse.⁹⁹

According to Danis Garaev, one of the first thinkers of the concept Russkiy Mir, Shchedrovitskiy and Ostrovskiy, believed that the Russian World should be created based on Soviet-Russian educational and philosophical thought and should create a new people.¹⁰⁰ Creating a new people reminds of the Soviet objective of creating the *Homo Sovieticus*. This thesis argues that the Russkiy Mir concept stands in a longer Soviet-Russian tradition of social engineering. Additionally, the Russian Orthodox Church argues Russkiy Mir is unique civilization with a messianic mission within the world.

There is discussion within the literature to what extent the Russian world is based on ethnic forms of belonging or civic forms. The cultural sphere of the Russkiy Mir was imagined as Russophone by Shchedrovitskiy and Ostrovskiy, but it was implicitly defined as *русский* – Russian ethnicity, rather than the civic form of *российский*.¹⁰¹ The head of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Vyacheslav Nikonev, claims that there is no ideology behind the foundation and that the project was trans-ethnic and inclusive. Jews, Ukrainians, and Belarusians could be part of it if they chose to identify with Russian cultural traditions. The objective was to reassemble people, not lands.¹⁰² This conviction is shared by the former head of state and prime minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, who in 2015 said that the Russian World “is not a nationality; this is a community of nations. Kazakhs and anyone can enter there.”¹⁰³ The website of the Russkiy Mir Foundation says that even foreigners who

⁹⁸ Anastassiya Starodubtseva, “Negative Connotations of the “Russian World” Concept Against the Backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian War 2022,” *Respectus Philologicus* 47, no. 42 (2022): 142.

⁹⁹ Michal Wawrzonek, “The ‘Russian World’ and Ukraine,” in *Politics of the Russian Language Beyond Russia*, ed. Christian Noack (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021): 21.

¹⁰⁰ Danis Garaev, “The Methodology of the ‘Russian World’ and ‘Russian Islam:’ New Ideologies of the Post-Socialist Context,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 48 (2021): 375.

¹⁰¹ O’Loughlin, Toal & Kolosov, “Who identifies with the “Russian World?” 748.

¹⁰² Makarychev and Yatsky, “Biopower and geopolitics as Russia’s neighborhood strategies,” 29.

¹⁰³ Utku Yapici, “Chto Takoe Sovetskaya Diaspora? Is there a Living and Ideologically Sovietized ‘Soviet Diaspora?’” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 4 (2022): 651

learn and study the Russian language, belong to the Russkiy Mir.¹⁰⁴ Despite discourse on Russkiy Mir's inclusiveness, according to Irina Kotkina, Russkiy Mir is inherently irredentist and therefore exclusivist. She argues that the idea that Crimea is 'наша' (ours) or the religious underpinnings of Novorossiia conflict with the message of inclusiveness that some Russkiy Mir adherents disseminate.¹⁰⁵ This thesis agrees with Kotkina that Russkiy Mir is exclusivist despite its rhetoric of inclusiveness. It is inclusive only on Moscow's terms. Nikonov's claims that Russkiy Mir is not about collecting territories became obsolete since Russia's war in Ukraine.

Russkiy Mir was Moscow's answer to its loss of empire. Russkiy Mir emphasises that there is a linguistic, ethnic, religious, historical, and cultural space that belongs to Moscow. Because of its fluidity, Russkiy Mir can be constructed and deconstructed in accordance with Moscow's interests and the geopolitical situation Russkiy Mir should not be understood as being an isolated phenomenon but stands in a global development of creating 'regional worlds.'

This literature review will now explore the linguistic, biopolitical and civilizational meanings of Russkiy Mir.

Russkiy Mir Linguistics and the Russian-Speaking Diaspora

The linguistic school argues that Russkiy Mir is based on a transnational Russian-speaking community – the citizens of the Russian Federation and the Russian-speaking diaspora. According to Mikail Suslov, the Russian diaspora's symbolic power is that there is large group of Russian speakers abroad. However, this group is not homogenous. Suslov points at different waves of Soviet migration, Russian speaking migrants from Central Asia and Russian academics at Western universities.¹⁰⁶ The fluidity of the Russian diaspora provides that the Kremlin can endlessly construct and reconstruct its 'compatriots abroad'.

Utku Yapıcı argues that diasporas are categories of identity in a transnational form. Diaspora identity, like other identities, consists of a civic, cultural, and ethnic component in varying degrees. Yapıcı argues that Soviet diasporic identity implies some ethnic and ethno-cultural components, rather than being solely Soviet-civic.¹⁰⁷ The russification of the Soviet Union contributed to increased levels of ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking identities within Soviet identity.¹⁰⁸ Yapıcı argues that at the historical interaction at macro-level between

¹⁰⁴ "О фонде," Фонд, Русский Мир, accessed April 8, 2023. <https://russkiymir.ru/fund/>.

¹⁰⁵ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 59.

¹⁰⁶ Mikhail Suslov, "Russian World" Concept," 331.

¹⁰⁷ Yapıcı, "Chto Takoe Sovetskaya Diaspora?" 641.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 642.

Russian and Soviet identities are the key factor in the construction of cultural and linguistic affiliation of Soviet diasporas and the creation of a Russian Soviet diasporic identity.¹⁰⁹ This argument explains why the Kremlin can appeal to such a large Russian diaspora, because of the cultural Russification of those peoples who lived in the Soviet Union. Through the Russian Federation's legal status as the successor of the Soviet Union, Moscow claim's a relationship with former Soviet Union citizens living outside the borders of contemporary Russia.

According to Moritz Pieper, Russia diasporises the Russian-speaking communities in the former Soviet republics as *соотечественники* (compatriots).¹¹⁰ Wawrzonek agrees with Pieper and argues that Russian speakers in the post-Soviet space are considered natural members of the Russkiy Mir community.¹¹¹ However, those Russian-speakers can be integrated perfectly in their host countries. The Russkiy Mir Foundation is the Kremlin's official institute to promote the Russian language within the entire world. Pieper understands the Russkiy Mir Foundation as a government-funded initiative that not only promotes the Russian language, but also serves as a tool of Russian foreign policy to create relations between the Russian 'homeland' and 'its' Russian speakers outside of the Russian Federation, therewith legitimizing military interventions.¹¹²

Russia actively creates connections between Moscow and its 'compatriots' abroad – even where such connections do not exist. Russian-speaking and being Russian are used interchangeably. The Kremlin instrumentalises the Russian language to create relations between Moscow and Russian speakers abroad.

Biopolitics

Biopolitics is another meaning of the Russkiy Mir concept and refers to the active governing of peoples by the Kremlin. Makarychev and Yatsyk argue that the Russian World concept aims to point at a transnational and cross-border community of Russian people that can be identified through language, culture, religion, or political affiliations. The perceived cohesiveness of this community stems from a blood-based family-type relationship.¹¹³

Makarychev and Yatsyk introduce the concept of biopolitics as the key element of Russia's neighbourhood policy. They point to the discrepancy between Eurasianism – which is mainly

¹⁰⁹ Yapıcı, "Chto Takoe Sovetskaya Diaspora?" 653.

¹¹⁰ Moritz Pieper, "Russkiy Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian Compatriots Abroad," *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3 (2020): 760.

¹¹¹ Michal Wawrzonek, "The 'Russian World' and Ukraine," 22.

¹¹² Pieper, "Russkiy Mir," 764.

¹¹³ Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet: From Populations to Nations* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2019) 40.

a geopolitical idea with a focus on the government of territories, – and the Russian World – which is a biopolitical doctrine focused on protecting an imagined trans-territorial community of Russian speakers.¹¹⁴ However, according to Kotkina, the ideas of Russkiy Mir and Eurasianism have shared ideological building blocks: Russian great power, imagining Russia as an Eurasian civilization, Russia's *Sonderweg*, and its battle against western hegemony.¹¹⁵ Makarychev and Yatsyk argue that geopolitical and biopolitical frameworks can help to better understand Russia's reason for action.¹¹⁶ The objective of Putin's claimed 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine at first was the 'liberation' of the Russian people in the Donbas. However, as the war continued and the people fled the Donbas, the new goal became the acquisition of historically Russian lands. This thesis argues that Eurasianism and Russkiy Mir are used interchangeably by the Kremlin to legitimize its foreign policy and military actions and therefore biopolitics and geopolitics intersect within Russkiy Mir ideology.

Elizaveta Gaufman uses the Foucauldian concept of pastorate to analyse Russia's foreign policy. There are four main characteristics of pastoral power. First, power is not exercised over territory, but rather over a flock, indicating a universal appeal. Second, the power of care, which translates itself to protect the flock from wrongdoings, spiritual or physical, disciplining the community. Third, the individualization of power. Fourth, the dutiful and devotional power. The Russian genealogical twin of the pastorate is '*соборность*' (sobornost), according to Gaufman. *Соборность* is a church community that belongs not to a specific place but to the world and unites the souls of its members. There is a sense of common spirituality and the inability to live without another. This is the bedrock of Russian/Slavic identity. The main difference with the concept pastorate is the absence of the individualization, with Russian society being much more communal.¹¹⁷ It is easy to recognize the concept of pastorate in Russia's war in Ukraine: The Russian leader Putin is on a holy mission to keep the Ukrainian flock within the holy Russian World and punish those who are attempting to move away towards the West.

The concept of pastorate is useful for understanding Russkiy Mir it refers to transborder sovereignty and is trans-territorial in its essence. The Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill stresses that the Russkiy Mir is about spirituality, not territoriality.¹¹⁸ Patriarch Kirill said that Russkiy

¹¹⁴ Makarychev and Yatsyk, "Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies," 25.

¹¹⁵ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 74.

¹¹⁶ Makarychev and Yatsyk, "Biopower and geopolitics as Russia's neighborhood strategies," 26.

¹¹⁷ Elizaveta Gaufman, "Putin's Pastorate: Post-structuralism in Post-Soviet Russia," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 42, no. 2 (2017): 75-77.

¹¹⁸ Gaufman, "Putin's Pastorate," 79.

Mir nations are where Russian culture is developing and “*a universal historical memory and uniform values in social life are kept.*”¹¹⁹ The Russian Orthodox Church is perceived as the “*guardian of the spiritual legacy of the Russian Empire*”. Therewith, the Church has maintained pre-revolutionary continuity. Wawrzonek argues that because of the Church’s pre-revolutionary continuity, it is of special importance of integrating the post-Soviet space.¹²⁰

The biopolitical approach enables us to understand Russkiy Mir as a concept that believes to rule a spiritual and family type of community that is not bound by national borders and citizenship, but by a common faith, values, and spiritual connection.

Eurasianism, Greater Eurasia, and Russian Civilizationalism

There are many variations of Eurasianist perspectives and doctrines that have been articulated at the Russian national level. However, there are also Eurasianist versions that flourish elsewhere, such as in Kazakhstan or Tatarstan. According to Mark Bassin there are two elements that are common to all different variations of Eurasianism: they all claim to represent a unique symbiosis between Europe and Asia and in contemporary forms claim to be the legitimate heir of ‘classical’ Eurasianism.¹²¹ Both currents of Eurasianism were elaborated in the context of the fall of empire. They share that their view of an organic cohesive civilization did not correspond with the process of territorial fragmentation and Eurasianists therefore seek to establish a unitary Eurasian state.¹²² According to Kotkina, Eurasianism provides a civilizational platform for the interpretation of Russkiy Mir from the Russian perspective.¹²³ In Russian politics, the concept of Eurasianism was ignored in the 1990s by the Russian leadership, but from 2011, after Russia realised it would not be integrated within the West as an equal partner, the concept became a useful ideological tool, according to Dmitry Shlapentokh.¹²⁴ This thesis argues that Russkiy Mir and Eurasianism are understood and used interchangeably within Russian official and popular discourse to legitimize Russian dominance within the region.

Nadezhda Arbatova identifies three forms of Eurasianism: a conservative nationalist ideology, an imperial ideology, and an ideology of regional economic integration.¹²⁵ According

¹¹⁹ Wawrzonek, “Ukraine in the “Gray Zone”,” 761.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 762.

¹²¹ Mark Bassin, “Eurasianism “Classical” and “Neo”: The Lines of Continuity,” in *Beyond the Empire: Images of Russia in the Eurasian Cultural Context*, ed. Mochizuki Tesuo (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2008) 281.

¹²² Bassin, “Eurasianism “Classical” and Neo”,” 285.

¹²³ Irina Kotkina, “Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics,” 70.

¹²⁴ Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Kazak hand Russian History and Its Geopolitical Implications,” *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 4 (2016): 145.

¹²⁵ Nadezhda Arbatova, “Three Faces of Russia’s Neo-Eurasianism,” *Survival* 61, no. 6 (2019): 8.

to Sergey Glebov, Eurasianism is an imperial phenomenon. Not only because of its desire to regather former imperial space, but also because it is a product of the imperial situation, with its imbalances and heterogeneity in terms of social and cultural space. Eurasianism, in Glebov's view, was an attempt to unify the different nationalisms in combination with anxiety concerning modernism in the 1920s and 1930s within one narrative.¹²⁶ According to Laruelle, Eurasianism is fundamentally statist because it is based on the belief that only a political polity that is conscious of its own identity can realize a 'natural' Eurasia. She places Eurasianism within a tradition of movements dating back to the Slavophiles of the 1830s and 1840s who have attempted to define Russia as a civilization and to legitimise a Eurasian empire.¹²⁷ Arbatova, Glebov, and Laruelle all define Eurasianism as conservative nationalist and imperial, emphasising its focus on the legitimation of a Eurasian empire. This thesis agrees that Eurasianism is conservative and imperial, because it seeks to construct an empire based on traditional values on the Eurasian continent ruled by Moscow.

According to Arbatova, neo-Eurasianism owes to the first Eurasianists the trauma of the collapse of the Russian Empire and the work of Lev Gumilev regarding the origins and evolution of ethnic groups – *ethnogenesis*. The Russian ethnos is conceptualised as influenced by Byzantine and Mongol-rule and the co-existence of Orthodox Christianity and Islam.¹²⁸ According to Anton Shekhovtsov, Dugin, who is arguably the most important contemporary Eurasianist thinker, conceptualises neo-Eurasianism as an ideology constructed around the idea of creating a totalitarian, Russia-dominated Eurasian empire that in the long term will defeat its eternal adversary the United States and its Atlanticist allies.¹²⁹

According to Mark Bassin, Eurasianism moves away from Russo-centric nationalism and argues that there are different layers of identity. The lower levels are based on ethnic-national affinities while the overarching identity is Russia-Eurasia itself. The upper level is based on civilizationalism, historical experience, interethnic complementarity, and a mutual understanding of the geopolitical benefits.¹³⁰ Many important figures who think within a geopolitical paradigm have an interpretation of *Russkiy Mir* that underlines its value as a distinct civilization in Eurasianist terms.¹³¹ This is illustrated by the statement of the leader of 'Young Eurasia', who says that *Russkiy Mir* should be seen through the concept of 'Eurasian

¹²⁶ Glebov, *From Empire to Eurasia*, 6.

¹²⁷ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 202.

¹²⁸ Arbatova, "Three Faces of Russia's Neo-Eurasianism," 8.

¹²⁹ Shekhovtsov, "Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian-Ukrainian War," 181.

¹³⁰ Bassin, "Eurasianism "Classical" and Neo," 284.

¹³¹ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 70.

civilization' which is based on four principles: the Russian language, the importance of spirituality over materialism, social justice, and democracy.¹³² Especially the notions that spirituality is more important than materialism and the importance of the Russian language are recurrent themes in Russkiy Mir thinking. Moreover, it vocally opposes itself to Western culture. Eurasianism is not only focused on territory, but also on spirituality and identity as Russkiy Mir.

The third face of neo-Eurasianism identified by Arbatova, regional economic integration, is the least strong one and increasingly less likely.¹³³ However, the regional economic integrationist component of neo-Eurasianism is articulated through the concept of 'Greater Eurasia' and the Eurasian Economic Union. The Russian political scientist and head of the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy, Sergey Karaganov, argues that the last few years a new geo-economic center has been emerging in Eurasia around Russia and China in the ongoing new Cold War between the West and the non-Western pole. Karaganov argues that it is not just a mere defensive alliance, but a new center of development and a possible alternative to Euro-Atlanticism.¹³⁴ Thus, in contrary to Arbatova who argues that Eurasianist thinking is reactionary, Karaganov believes that the concept is positive and capable of constructing from within. In contrary to Eurasianism, Greater Eurasia is not an anti-European project because it includes Europe or at least that part that is willing to join the partnership, according to Karaganov.¹³⁵ Moreover, he argues that the Greater Eurasian Partnership is a conceptual framework for Russia's future geostrategic and geo-economic self-identification as the centre and north of the continent that is on the rise through key transportation hubs and economic links, but most importantly through a key security providing actor.¹³⁶ The economic component is linked to the securitization of the continent.

David Lewis critiques Karaganov's spatial imagination of a Greater Eurasia for the concept's lack of clarity.¹³⁷ According to Lewis, Greater Eurasia owes its intellectual heritage to the Eurasianist thinkers from the 20th and 21st centuries but represents a much more inclusive and open interpretation of the wider continent and rejects autarkic Eurasianism. Nevertheless, an important component of the Greater Eurasia concept is identifying a 'them' and 'us.'¹³⁸ This

¹³² Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 73.

¹³³ Arbatova, "Three Faces of Russia's Neo-Eurasianism," 21.

¹³⁴ Sergey Karaganov, "The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2018): 89.

¹³⁵ Karaganov, "The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia," 90

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³⁷ Lewis, "Geopolitical Imaginaries in Russian Foreign Policy," 1618.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1619.

is illustrated by Karaganov's remark that Greater Eurasia can be an alternative to Euro-Atlanticism. In this way, it closely relates to Dugin's vision of Eurasianism, as Dugin emphasizes Eurasia's struggle with the 'Atlanticist' Americans.¹³⁹ Greater Eurasia also relates to Russkiy Mir's idea of one of several regional worlds within the world.

Imagining Russia in terms of civilization is omnipresent in Russia and brings together loyal scholars, people from military and security circles, pro-Kremlin party functionaries and opinion journalists.¹⁴⁰ Suslov and Kotkina argue that the discipline of *culturology* replaced the field of Marxism-Leninism in Russian university curricula. The economy-centred ideology of the Soviet Union was replaced with 'culture-centrism'. They also note an evolution from the idea of multipolarity to the concept of the securitization of Russian's unique civilization from the hegemonic West.¹⁴¹ Imagining Russia as a unique civilization has developed into the idea of Russia as a state-civilization that is reinforced by the isolationist and irredentist interpretation of the Russkiy Mir since 2014.

According to Vladislav Inozemtsev, the Kremlin's policy to undo the defeats of the Soviet Union is anchored in three major pillars: the resurgence of the "imperial spirit"; the doctrine of the Russkiy Mir; and the economic revival of Russia and its integration into the global economy.¹⁴² This corresponds with Arbatova's three faces of neo-Eurasianism: conservatism, imperialism, and economic integration. According to Inozemtsev, the military invasion diminishes Russia's claims concerning its leading and positive role in Eurasia, which for many Russians was an essential element of their national identity.¹⁴³

This thesis argues that Eurasianism offers strong mental frameworks and geopolitical imaginaries concerning Russia's leading role in the post-Soviet space. It is based on a historical mix of Slavic Orthodox and Muslim Turkic nomadic peoples in the northern part of the Eurasian continent. Eurasianism provides an ideological framework for Russia to imagine itself as the ruler of Eurasia with its own unique characteristics and isolation from the West.

¹³⁹ Bassin, "Eurasianism "Classical" and Neo", 286.

¹⁴⁰ Mikhail Suslov and Irina Kotkina, "Civilizational discourses in doctoral dissertations in post-Soviet Russia" in *Russia as Civilization. Ideological Discourses in Politics, Media, and Academia*, eds. Kåre Johan Mjør and Sanna Turoma (London: Routledge, 2020), 165.

¹⁴¹ Suslov and Kotkina, "Civilizational discourses in doctoral dissertations in post-Soviet Russia," 171 & 172.

¹⁴² Vladislav Inozemtsev, "From Muscovy to Russia and Back: The Aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2022): 188-189.

¹⁴³ Inozemtsev, "From Muscovy to Russia and Back," 190.

Geopolitics and Russian Foreign Policy

What is the relationship between Russkiy Mir and Russian foreign policy? According to Ruslan Zaporozhchenko, The Russian World concept is a tool for the construction of social and political reality and a mechanism for the promotion of geopolitical views. The Russian World concept is reproduced by the political order and by the media, viewed by the Kremlin as part of Russia's Armed Forces, through which the historical memory of Russian society is constructed as well.¹⁴⁴ This thesis argues that Russkiy Mir does influence Russian geopolitical imagination and subsequently influences Russian foreign policy.

According to Elias Götz, there are three perspectives on the key drivers of Russia's neighbourhood policy. The first school posits that Russian activities in the region are driven primarily by domestic determinants, most importantly the government's attempt to silence opposition and dissatisfaction at home; the second school explains Russia's behaviour in its neighbourhood based on ideational factors, such as the rise of a civilizational identity narrative and its desire to be perceived as a great power; the third school focuses on geopolitical factors and argues that Russia's main objective is to guarantee its national security through building a regional sphere of influence.¹⁴⁵ This thesis mostly focuses on the theoretical framework of the ideational factors, but also partly draws on the geopolitical school, without denying that domestic factors too have some impact on Russian foreign policy.

Various scholars contend that Russia's imperial legacy shapes its attitudes and policy towards other former Soviet republics. Its assertive foreign policy is attributed to ancient Russian traditions. Ruslan Zaporozhchenko's argues that contemporary Russia is the continuation of a long imperial project that dates to the medieval tsardom of Russia. It replaces itself by new imperial forms through combining historical experience with the adjustment to contemporary demands and challenges.¹⁴⁶ According to Jeffrey Mankoff, Russia should be understood as the heir of a long imperial tradition to understand its cross-border interventions. He points to the tendency of other former empires in Eurasia – Iran, Turkey, and China – to behave in imperial ways.¹⁴⁷ Zaporozhencko and Mankoff both argue that Russian foreign policy is a continuation of a longer imperial tradition, and that Russia is not the exception, but that there are more former empires in Eurasia with such tendencies.

¹⁴⁴ Ruslan Zaporozhchenko, "The End of "Putin's Empire?" Ontological Problems of Russian Imperialism in the Context of the War Against Ukraine, 2022," *Problems of Post-Communism* (2023): 9.

¹⁴⁵ Elias Götz, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1530.

¹⁴⁶ Zaporozhchenko, "The End of "Putin's Empire?" 1.

¹⁴⁷ Jeffrey Mankoff, "The War in Ukraine and Eurasia's New Imperial Moment," *The Washington Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2022): 128.

Mariya Omelicheva problematizes neo-imperialist frameworks to understand Russia's foreign policy. The imperial understanding of Russia's behaviour in international relations is more normative than explanatory because it is inclined to stress Russia's backwardness and aggressiveness to counter a peaceful and aggressive West. Therefore, Omelicheva argues that for understanding Russia's incentives it should be analysed through more nuanced conceptions of Russian perceived national interests, international environment, and Russia's position in the world.¹⁴⁸ Omelicheva's argument is that for Russia, the 'truth' is that it is a great power by virtue of its size, is located between East and West, and has immense natural resources, cultural dominance, and historical legacy. Russian culture is perceived as the foundation of the national identity and state. Therefore, cultural preservation became the Kremlin's highest foreign policy priority. From the Kremlin's perspective, Omelicheva argues, the West helped to oust a legitimate leader in Yanukovych who preferred relations with Russia over relations with the US and EU. Therewith, in Putin's vision, the West prevents Russia's 'historic mission' of integrating the 'Russian World.' This led to making the annexation of Crimea 'rational' in Russia's own logic of being in civilizational conflict with the West.¹⁴⁹ In this view, Russia mostly reacts that its international environment and to what it perceives to be in its own interests.

Götz problematizes the historically and culturally deterministic views in the literature. First, this view fails to provide a convincing argument for the timing of Russia's regained assertiveness in the post-Soviet space more than 20 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Second, Russia has not formally annexed Moldova's Transnistria or Georgia's South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Third, cultural and historical experiences are not static or completely uniform – they are rather malleable and are internally complex and contradictory.¹⁵⁰ Götz's first argument is less convincing, because Russia was licking its own wounds after the fall of the Soviet Union. His second argument seems odd, because Russia on paper annexed four Ukrainian oblasts into its own territory in 2022. However, this thesis agrees with Götz's third argument and is critical of a historically and culturally deterministic approach. Despite that ideational factors do influence Russian foreign policy; these ideas of what Russia is are not set in stone and malleable. In the first decades after the Second World War, it was still believed that German culture was inherently militaristic because of Prussian militarism and the

¹⁴⁸ Omelicheva, "Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy," 710.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 719-721.

¹⁵⁰ Götz, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia," 1536.

conservative Junker-system. However, nowadays Germany is a completely different sort of state.

According to Nicolai Petro, Russia's approach to international relations is 'Civilizational Realism', which recognizes the importance of values in international affairs and sees value in the diversity of cultural communities. Petro argues that soft power through religious and cultural affinity is used to achieve foreign policy objectives.¹⁵¹ Domenico Valenza argues that the realist school does not pay enough attention to the interplay between identity and foreign policy in Russia. According to Valenza, foreign policy discourse is not about objective truths, but rather subjective myths that locate dangers outside and discipline citizens inside.¹⁵² Realism considers the international system to have primacy over *innenpolitik*, and it is here that Valenza disagrees.¹⁵³ This thesis agrees with Valenza that Russian self-identification thoroughly impacts foreign policy.

Andrei Tsygankov argues that the constructivist and neoclassical realist schools both acknowledge the influence of domestic factors and institutions on Russian foreign policy. Constructivism argues that there is interaction between international and domestic factors, whereas neoclassical realism argues that domestic factors can interfere within foreign policy decision-making, but that the international ultimately is decisive.¹⁵⁴ Geopolitics takes spatial and geographical considerations into account, such as Russia being a land-based empire that seeks to maintain access to warm water harbours and to protect its borders. Critical geopolitics combines the geopolitical approach with constructivist assumptions of social structure and knowledge and inter-subjectivity.¹⁵⁵ Götz argues that four deductions can be made from the neoclassical approach. First, regional primacy will remain a major Russian objective. Second, Russia will not back down in Ukraine because geopolitics and status are at stake there – both vital to Moscow. Third, domestic politics are a conditioning factor for Russian foreign policy. Fourth, external pressure does affect Moscow's tools and tactics for regional primacy.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Nicolai Petro, "How the West Lost Russia: Explaining the Conservative Turn in Russian Foreign Policy," *Russian Politics* 3 (2018): 324-325.

¹⁵² Domenico Valenza, "Russia's cultural diplomacy in post-Soviet space: the making of "one people"," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 64, no. 4 (2023): 424.

¹⁵³ Domenico Valenza, "Russia's cultural diplomacy in post-Soviet space: the making of "one people"," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 64, no. 4 (2023): 400.

¹⁵⁴ Andrei Tsygankov, "Theories and conditions," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. by Andrei Tsygankov (London: Routledge, 2018) 3.

¹⁵⁵ Tsygankov, "Theories and conditions," 3.

¹⁵⁶ Elias Götz, "Taking the Longer View: A Neoclassical Realist Account of Russia's Neighbourhood Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 74, no. 9 (2022): 1758.

Russia's foreign policy towards Central Asia is particularly interesting. Omelicheva suggests analysing Russian foreign policy in Central Asia through critical geopolitics enables a perspective that is not exclusively materialistic and based on ideological foundation, but allows an understanding based on geopolitical visions and Russia's ability to make certain foreign policy outcomes more likely through its discourse.¹⁵⁷ Russia's incentives for its foreign policy towards Central Asia are derived from geopolitical competition with the West; Russia's desire to reaffirm itself as a great power; statist thinking and traditions of patron-client economic relations; and the role Central Asia plays in Russia's narrative of Russian civilizationalism. Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia is a mix of geopolitical-ideological reasoning with cultural and historical arguments in the context of contemporary possibilities and challenges, Omelicheva argues.¹⁵⁸ This thesis studies Russkiy Mir discourse on Kazakhstan, therewith attempting to better understand possible future Russian foreign policy concerning Kazakhstan.

Götz wonders why has Moscow repeatedly accused Ukraine and the Baltic States of discriminatory policies against the Russian community in their states, whereas the Kremlin has shied away from voicing such concerns regarding Kazakhstan and its assimilation policies.¹⁵⁹ An explanation could be that Kazakhstan is part of different Moscow-led integrationist projects, whereas Ukraine and the Baltics are clearly moving away from the Russian orbit. Nevertheless, Dmitry Shlapentokh argues that Putin's remarks on Kazakhstan regarding it being an artificial state and its belonging to the Russkiy Mir demonstrated similarities with Putin's claims about Ukraine.¹⁶⁰ This thesis will contribute to the literature by comparing and analysing Russian discourse through Russkiy Mir on Kazakhstan and Ukraine, therewith fostering a better understanding of Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

Potential of Russian Irredentism or Russian Separatism in Kazakhstan

There are different post-Soviet countries that inhabit a significant Russian community, such as Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, or Kazakhstan. However, not everywhere there are cases of Russian irredentism or Russian separatism. How does the literature explain these differences? What is

¹⁵⁷ Mariya Omelicheva, "Central Asia," in *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Andrei Tsygankov (London: Routledge, 2018) 325.

¹⁵⁸ Omelicheva, "Central Asia," 334.

¹⁵⁹ Götz, "Near Abroad: Russia's Role in Post-Soviet Eurasia," 1538.

¹⁶⁰ Dmitry Shlapentokh, *The Creation of Kazakh National Identity. The Relationship with Russia, 1900-2015* (London: Routledge, 2023) 181.

irredentism? What can the literature tell us about the potential for Russian irredentism or Russian separatism in Kazakhstan before and after 2022?

David Siroky and Christopher Hale argue that Russia's annexation of Crimea was a classic case of irredentism: a state's use of military force to advance claims of ownership over territory in a neighbouring state based on co-ethnicity. Moreover, irredentist states seek to create a greater congruence between the state and the ethnic group. One government decides to subtract territory from one state and add it to its own state.¹⁶¹ According to Milou van Hout, irredentism is not only a political phenomenon but also a cultural one. Irredentism relies on the creation of myths regarding a nation's geographical, linguistic, and historical unity. In the literature there has been consensus that irredentist conflicts always appear in a response to the circumstances that are present within the international community, therewith irredentism constitutes an instrument of international geopolitics.¹⁶² Therefore, to examine the potential for Russian irredentism regarding Kazakhstan post February 24, 2022, new research is required.

According to Natalia Horlo, to study irredentism or separatism, it is more productive to use a rational approach. This approach views actions of political actors motivated by the will to achieve maximum results. The rational factor in ethnopolitical conflicts is connected to the will of political elites to achieve their own goals, which are most often to increase their own political, socio-economic, or territorial status.¹⁶³ Taking into consideration that Russia's foreign policy is foremostly dictated by the Kremlin and seeks to serve its elite's objectives, the wins of annexing parts of Kazakhstan should outweigh the obvious losses, as the international community condones irredentism.

To mobilise ethnopolitical groups in support for the irredentist course, a kinstate develops an ethnic ideology that resonates with its 'compatriots'. Russia's annexation of Crimea was rationalized by a blend of realpolitik and humanitarian and *jus bellum iustum* reasoning, according to Siroky and Hale.¹⁶⁴ Thomas Ambrosio identified three narratives constructed by Russian officials concerning the annexation of Crimea. First, Crimea's accession to Russia was an act of self-determination because it wanted so itself, rather than an annexation. Second, Russia has historical and cultural claims to Crimea and the peninsula's transfer to Ukraine in 1954 was illegitimate. Third, European and American criticism was based on anti-Russian and

¹⁶¹ David S. Siroky and Cristopher W. Hale, "Inside Irredentism: A Global Empirical Analysis," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 1 (2017): 117.

¹⁶² Milou van Hout, "In search of the nation in Fiume: Irredentism, cultural nationalism, borderlands," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 3 (2020): 661.

¹⁶³ Natalia Horlo, "Reasons for Emergence and Ideological Explanation of the Irredentist Policy," *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society* 8, no. 3 (2018): 46.

¹⁶⁴ Siroky and W. Hale, "Inside Irredentism," 125 & 126.

Cold War mentality.¹⁶⁵ These narratives enable perception management. Perception management is the construction of a strategic narrative for conflict that is a crucial component of military action. Perception management can influence how domestic and international audiences perceive the normative and legal legitimacy of a state's action. This has a significant impact on the ability of a state to achieve its goals, because if a state is seen as having the right to act, it is more likely that it will gain popular support at home and political support internationally.¹⁶⁶ This thesis argues that the Kremlin's Russkiy Mir narrative is perception management too.

According to Laruelle, many factors in Kazakhstan are different from Ukraine. First, there is no obvious spatial projection of Kazakhstan's 'Russianness'; second, the Russian minorities are shrinking, and the Kazakh population is growing rapidly; third, the dominantly Russian inhabited region of Kazakhstan have no significant weight within the national economy.¹⁶⁷ Another important difference between the imagination around northern Kazakhstan and Crimea is that Crimea was imagined as Eurasia in miniature in ideological and cultural-historical terms – Slavs, Turks and other peoples and religions live together peacefully, according to Yuri Kofner, the leader of the 'Young Eurasia' movement.¹⁶⁸

This thesis argues that a fourth point could be added to Laruelle's analysis. As an anti-Western state, Russia has more difficulties with Ukraine moving in Western direction whereas Kazakhstan geographically poses no such threat of joining the West against Russia. Therefore, the incentive to 'save' Kazakhstan is less pressing in Russian eyes. In 2014, when the Ukrainian crisis had already started, Putin praised former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev for keeping Kazakhstan attached to the Russian world.¹⁶⁹ If it was really an appraisal by Putin is uncertain. It could also have been a public warning to not reiterate Ukraine's behaviour. Nevertheless, that Putin claimed that the Kazakhstani leadership has chosen to be part of the Russian World is significant. Vyacheslav Morozov argues that a Russian annexation of northern Kazakhstan is unlikely, because in 2014 Russia's aggression was to boost Putin's popularity through a common enemy. A mass propaganda campaign was set up, but one that stood in a longer tradition of socially accepted attitudes and narratives that were negative of Ukraine.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Ambrosio, "The rhetoric of irredentism: The Russian Federation's perception management campaign and the annexation of Crimea," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 3 (2016): 468.

¹⁶⁶ Ambrosio, "The rhetoric of irredentism," 469.

¹⁶⁷ Laruelle, "Why No Kazakh Novorossiia?" 68.

¹⁶⁸ Irina Kotkina, "Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics," 73.

¹⁶⁹ Shlapentokh, *The Creation of Kazakh National Identity*, 178.

¹⁷⁰ Vyacheslav Morozov, "Kazakhstan and the "Russian World". Is a New Intervention on the Horizon?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 364 (2015): 2.

Morozov argues that no such propagandistic established negative reference points exist in Russia concerning Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan a friendly and well-integrated part of the Russian World.¹⁷¹

Alexander Diener provides several arguments that make Russian annexation of Kazakh territory unlikely. First, it would alienate the former Soviet Central Asian republics and confirm Russia's neo-imperial identity. Second, Russia does not need to annex northern Kazakhstan because it already has influence in Kazakhstan. Third, those Russians who would prefer to live in a Russian state already had 25 years to migrate to Russia or agitate for separatism. Fourth, Russians in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts appreciate Kazakhstan's attitude towards non-Kazakh nations and are hesitant to overt forms of nationalism.¹⁷² Laruelle agrees and notes that Moscow maintains powerful inroads through politics and business in Kazakhstan. Since 2014, Astana has started to distance itself from Russian-led projects but remains close in the field of security. Russia's policy towards Kazakhstan seeks to maintain its political and cultural predominance in Kazakh society.¹⁷³ However, according to Shlapentokh, the Russians and Russian-speaking population of the northern territories of Kazakhstan are not happy with the trend of Kazakhification in the cultural and linguistic space. Therewith, he disagrees with Diener.¹⁷⁴

Diener mentions in his article written in 2015, that there are potential events that could change the situation, such as the sudden loss of Nazarbayev as Kazakhstan's president, which he calls a 'trigger event'. This might lead to a fight over power in Kazakhstan which in turn could lead to nationalistic tensions.¹⁷⁵ There already have been three such "trigger events" in the last few years: Nazarbayev is no longer Kazakhstan's President; The January Uprising in 2022; Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This has not led to Russian irredentism or Russian separatism, but the Kazakh-Russian relations have changed in the context of the war in Ukraine. Kazakhstan has not voiced support for Russia's invasion and Tokayev even refused to recognize the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic. All of this has – yet – not led to a deterioration of the ethnic tensions between ethnic Russians and ethnic Kazakhs in Kazakhstan. However, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev claimed that Kazakhstan could be next after Russia has "finished

¹⁷¹ Morozov, "Kazakhstan and the "Russian World," 5.

¹⁷² Alexander Diener, "Assessing potential Russian irredentism and separatism in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 56, no. 5 (2015): 483-484.

¹⁷³ Laruelle, "Why No Kazakh Novorossiia?" 75.

¹⁷⁴ Shlapentokh, "Kazakh and Russian History and Its Geopolitical Implications," 156.

¹⁷⁵ Diener, "Assessing potential Russian irredentism and separatism in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts," 484.

its business” in Ukraine.¹⁷⁶ Despite such statements by Russian officials, the relations are not necessarily alarming. Nevertheless, opinions as expressed in the programme of the National-Bolshevik Party of 1994 that claimed that in ‘their’ Russia, the territories of Northern Kazakhstan would be annexed,¹⁷⁷ are still present within Russian political discourse as illustrated by the former Russian President’s statement.

At this moment of writing, it does not seem rational for Russia to open a potential second front on its southern border with Kazakhstan. However, Putin also believed that a full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a rational choice because of Russian intelligence. According to Serhii Plokhyy, Putin’s view that Ukraine is an artificial state and Ukrainians desire to live under Russian rule, led to the military operation’s planning based on the fast Russian takeover of Crimea in 2014. Illustrative for Putin’s expectations in terms of duration is that Russian soldiers only had rations for two or three days and parade uniforms were found in burned down Russian tanks.¹⁷⁸ What does not seem rational to one party can seem rational to another. Thus, this thesis argues that the ideational factor significantly influences foreign policy decision-making and is an incentive for military action. The belief that Russia is a unique civilization with the mission to unite the Eurasian heartland under Moscow rule is at heart of Russia’s foreign policy.

As Ambrosio has argued, perception management is a critical component of military action as it can influence both domestic and international audiences regarding the normative and legal legitimacy of one’s actions.¹⁷⁹ This thesis attempts to contribute to the existing literature by analysing how Russia perceives Ukraine and Kazakhstan within its ideology of *Russkiy Mir* and how to explain the differences between the way Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined and the consequences for Russia’s foreign policy and military actions regarding both countries. The *Russkiy Mir* concept is communicated to the Russian domestic audience, but also to the post-Soviet space and even broader world to legitimize Russian claims in that post-Soviet space. As the war in Ukraine has illustrated, Russia can decide to act accordingly with what it perceives as its rights in its ‘Near Abroad’. Moreover, this thesis argues that Russia perceives the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as transcending into a broader conflict between Russia – that is, the Russian World – and the West. There is a gap within the literature concerning the imagining of

¹⁷⁶ Umarov, “After Ukraine, is Kazakhstan Next in the Kremlin’s Sights?”

¹⁷⁶ Алтынбаев, “Российские пропагандисты угрожают, что Казахстан — следующий после Украины.”

¹⁷⁷ Shekhovtsov, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian-Ukrainian War,” 182.

¹⁷⁸ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2023) 154.

¹⁷⁹ Ambrosio, “The rhetoric of irredentism,” 469.

Kazakhstan within the Russkiy Mir and its implications for Russian foreign policy in the contemporary international political circumstances.

Chapter 3 – Case Study: Ukraine and Kazakhstan

Introduction

This chapter explores how advocates of the Russkiy Mir concept perceive Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The chapter analyses the research question of this thesis how and why Kazakhstan and Ukraine are imagined differently within the concept of Russkiy Mir. Sub questions will explore what the differences are between Kazakhstan and Ukraine within Russkiy Mir thinking; Why Russian foreign policy and geopolitics are of a different nature towards Kazakhstan than towards Ukraine; and how Kazakhstan and Ukraine position themselves in relation to the Kremlin's Russkiy Mir concept. These sub questions will be answered at the end of this chapter.

Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's role within Russkiy Mir thinking will be analysed through the statements made by actors linked to the Kremlin, such as Putin and other Russian officials, academics, journalists, and the Russkiy Mir Foundation. In addition, academic literature on the topic will be analysed to support this thesis' observations and analysis. This chapter will focus on the most prominent indicators of Russkiy Mir. These are history, religion, language, institutional cooperation, and geopolitics and anti-Westernism. These indicators are referred to within discourse by Russian media, politicians, scholars and public opinion on Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Other indicators of Russkiy Mir, such as culture, emotional attachment, and traditional values are more implicit and therefore omitted in this chapter. To come to a deeper understanding of how the Russkiy Mir imagines Ukraine and Kazakhstan, this chapter devotes attention to Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's self-identification concerning their relations with Russia.

Regarding Ukraine, Putin's essay of July 2021 on Ukraine provides a unique opportunity to understand the Kremlin's worldview in relation to Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian relations, and history. Therefore, a significant part of the analysis of Ukraine will be devoted to Putin's essay of July 2021. In absence of essays written by Putin or other Kremlin officials on Kazakhstan, remarks by Russian politicians on Kazakhstan in the present and recent past, together with publications by the Russkiy Mir Foundation will be analysed to get a better understanding of Kazakhstan's position within Russkiy Mir thinking.

Ukraine

Putin's Essay: Ukraine's History and Belongness to Moscow

Analysing Putin's essay '*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*' helps to understand how the Kremlin perceives Ukraine through the Russkiy Mir concept. Putin's main argument is that Russians and Ukrainians are – and always were – one people. Putin emphasises the role of a shared language, religion, and history. These are important indications of Russkiy Mir. Linguistically, one of the indications that Putin perceives Ukraine to be part of Russia, is that he consistently uses the preposition 'на', rather than 'в' when referring to Ukraine. The preposition 'на' is used in the Russian language to indicate regions, whereas the preposition 'в' is used for states. By doing so, Putin emphasizes that Ukraine is a region that belongs to Moscow.

The Russian President's urge to clarify his own thoughts and to 'teach' the international community and his own people about Russo-Ukrainian history relates to the biopolitical concept of the pastor: Putin as the father who explains to his subjects – both Russians and Ukrainians – how the world works. Putin seeks to discipline Ukrainians from moving away from the flock – the Russian World. The biopolitical school enables us to understand Putin's perception of the Russian lands as a family with Moscow being the paternalistic father.

In his essay, Putin claims that the wall that has arisen in the last few years between Russia and Ukraine, between a united historical and spiritual space, is the result of the purposeful work of those powers, who have always sought to undermine "нашего единства"¹⁸⁰ according to the principle of "разделяй и властвуй".¹⁸¹ Russo-Ukrainian unity has been disrupted by foreign powers – the West. Later, Putin claims that the developments in the early 20th century were the result of the collapse of empires, the civil war in Russia, and foreign intervention.¹⁸² Thus, the separation of Ukraine and Russia today, and the establishment of Ukraine by the Soviets, is framed as the result of the work of foreign powers that seek to undermine Russia. Putin observes two continuities throughout history: Russian-Ukrainian unity and the West's attempt to undermine that unity. The Russkiy Mir indicator Anti-Westernism is omnipresent in the Russian President's essay.

¹⁸⁰ English translation: "Our unity."

Пути, "Статья Владимира Путина."

¹⁸¹ English translation: "Divide and conquer."

Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Putin claims that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus. These peoples were bound together by one language, economic ties, the Rurik dynasty, and Orthodox Christianity.¹⁸³ Ancient Rus faced fragmentation and a decline of central rule, just like other European states during that time, argues Putin. Nevertheless, the nobility and common people still saw Rus as a common territory, a shared homeland.¹⁸⁴ Thus, the spiritual space of Ancient Rus was considered more important than territorial unity. The importance of the spiritual over the territorial displays similarities with Russkiy Mir as a trans-territorial spiritual community and space. Continuing, Putin writes that Moscow became the center of reunification of the tradition of Russian statehood through casting off the Mongol-Tatar yoke and gathering of Russian lands.¹⁸⁵ Therewith, Putin positions himself within a longer tradition of “retaking Russian lands” – even dating back to Ivan Grozny’s reign in the fifteenth century. According to Russkiy Mir thinking, there is historical continuity between Ancient Rus and the Russkiy Mir – of which both Ukraine is inherently part of.

Different Russian actors share Putin’s views. To Russkiy Mir-thinker Boris Mezhuev, the core of the Russian World outside of Russia could be found in South and Southeast Ukraine, Eastern Belarus, and Northern Kazakhstan.¹⁸⁶ Russkiy-Mir thinker Aleksey Gromiko claims that the foundation of the Russkiy Mir are the post-Soviet Slavic countries Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.¹⁸⁷ According to the head of the Russian Academy for Geopolitical Problems, Lieutenant General Leonoid Ivashov, the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are the most active members of the Russkiy Mir.¹⁸⁸ In November 2015, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, talked about the consolidation of the Russkiy Mir. Then, he called Ukrainians ‘compatriots,’ which according to Irina Kotkina indicates that the Kremlin still had imperial ambitions concerning the whole of Ukraine to be part of Russkiy Mir.¹⁸⁹ The views expressed in Putin’s essay are shared by different Russian political and military actors. This indicates that Russkiy Mir thought is well entrenched within the Russian authorities and subsequently the view that Ukraine is part of the Russian World and therefore part of Russia.

The importance of Ukraine for Russia’s own identity is illustrated by the Russian scholar A.V. Alimov. The policy of the Ukrainian authorities undermines the unity of the three roots of the Russian Orthodox Church: Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. By implementing laws

¹⁸³ Путин, “Статья Владимира Путина.”

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Suslov, “Russian World,” 341-346.

¹⁸⁷ Громько, “Русский Мир: Понятие, причины, ценности, структура,” 22.

¹⁸⁸ Irina Kotkina, “Geopolitical Imagination and Popular Geopolitics,” 72.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 65.

concerning the roots of the people, Ukrainian as the sole state language, and about land development, Kyiv interrupts within the sphere of religion by undermining the unity of a single civilization, Alimov argues.¹⁹⁰ He argues that Ukraine is a fundament of the Russian state – it is «*наш Царьград*».¹⁹¹ Russia cannot restore its empire without Ukraine.¹⁹² Kyiv is the place of the Christianization of Russia, the territory where Russian saints are buried. For several centuries, Russians have regretted the loss of Constantinople. However, argues Alimov, contemporary Russians should not lose their own Constantinople – «*мать городов русских.*» Kyiv is «*наш метафизический Царьград – русская ойкумена.*»¹⁹³ Thus, not only is Ukraine part of Russia – it is where Russian Orthodox civilization was born. Russia and East Slavic Orthodox civilization are used interchangeably because Russia stands for the three East Slavic Orthodox countries Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

The pro-Kremlin writer Aleksandr Prokhanov has the same views as Alimov but focuses on Crimea. Prokhanov argues that with the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia not only lost Crimea with its predominantly Russian population, but it also lost the cradle of Eastern Slavic Orthodox civilization and the soil where the motherland defended itself with the blood of its own soldiers.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, Prokhanov believes he stands in the tradition of the Russian writers Pushkin and Tolstoy, who also wrote about Crimea.¹⁹⁵ Here we see the same line of argument that Putin uses: Crimea is the cradle of East Slavic Orthodox Civilization – which is the Russian World. Additionally, both Prokhanov and Putin position themselves within a longer historical Russian tradition of either literature or statesmanship. This perceived historical continuity is important.

Language

Putin has regularly emphasized that historically, Russians and Ukrainians spoke the same language. In contemporary events, the Russian language largely defines Russo-Ukrainian relations. Russia accuses Ukraine of genocide on the Russian-speaking population in Donbas.

¹⁹⁰ А. В. Алимов, “О восстановлении границ русского мира,” *Международный Научный Журнал «Символ Науки»* том 5, но. 1 (2022): 96.

¹⁹¹ English translation: “*Our Constantinople.*”

Алимов, “О восстановлении границ русского мира,” 98.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁹³ English translation: “Mother of Russian cities.” And “*Our metaphysical Constantinople – The Russian Euclymene.*”

Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Анатолий Машенко, “Крым в прозе и публицистике Александра Проханова,” *Ученые записки Крымского федерального университета имени В. И. Вернадского. Филологические науки. Научный журнал* том 8, но. 3 (2022): 46.

¹⁹⁵ Машенко, “Крым в прозе и публицистике Александра Проханова,” 55.

Egbert Fortuin argues that the existence of Ukrainian as a language that is distinct from Russian has been contested in Russian propaganda. In his essay, Putin claims that Ukrainian is a vernacular dialect of Russian and that in the 17th century the language spoken by Russians and Ukrainians was identical. According to Putin, Ukrainian is no distinct language. However, linguists disagree. According to Fortuin, Russian and Ukrainian are closely related East Slavic language that have reasonable mutual intelligibility.¹⁹⁶

The official language in Ukraine is Ukrainian, but both languages are widely used. There is even an intermediate language, called Surzhyk, which plays the role of transitional stage in the assimilation process of replacing Ukrainian with Russian, according to Fortuin. In the west of Ukraine, Ukrainian is more dominant, whereas in the south and east of the country Russian was more prevalent. In cities such as Odesa, Kharkiv, and Kyiv, Russian was dominant as well. The Donbas, which is very significant for Russkiy Mir geopolitical imagination, became a Russian-speaking area in the 19th century, which is relatively late. It was the result of migration because of mining and other industries.¹⁹⁷

Ukrainian became the official state language in 1989. In 1996, Russian became a protected language in Ukraine. Fortuin argues, that for the new Ukrainian state, Ukrainian as a state language was of symbolic importance, reflecting the idea that Ukraine does have a separate identity. Ukraine's nation-building process can only be understood in the context of oppression of its language and culture by the Russians. In 2017, the Law on Education was implanted, declaring that Ukrainian was the language of all education. In 2019, the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language was implemented, which regulated the use of Ukrainian in media, education, healthcare, workplace, and other public places. This was supposed to lead to the strengthening of the Ukrainian language.¹⁹⁸ Ukraine's language policy has led to intense dissatisfaction with the Russian leadership.

The relationship between language and identity in Ukraine has been complex. According to Ammon Cheskin and Angela Kachuyevski, many Russian-speakers in Ukraine did identify themselves as an integral part of the Ukrainian (civic) nation.¹⁹⁹ Fortuin agrees with Cheskin and Kachuyevski and argues that being Russian-speaking does not equal being

¹⁹⁶ Fortuin, "Ukraine commits genocide on Russians," 318.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 321.

¹⁹⁹ Ammon Cheskin & Angela Kachuyevski, "The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space: Language, Politics, and Identity," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 1 (2019): 14.

pro-Russian or against Ukraine.²⁰⁰ Nevertheless, Putin legitimized Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the argument that a genocide is committed against Russian-speakers in Donbas. In this way, Putin claims the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. Being Russian-speaking means belonging to the Kremlin from this point of view. Here the biopolitical approach enables us to understand the imagining of that Russian-speaking community in Ukraine in terms of belonging to the historical Russian motherland.

Vyacheslav Nikonov emphasized in 2010 that after Viktor Yushenko's accession to power "*На Украине*" (in Ukraine – but with the preposition that indicates that Ukraine is a region and not sovereign state) the position of the Russian language significantly deteriorated. Nikonov claims that Kyiv always has been a Russian speaking city. During Soviet times, there were 258 schools in Kyiv that taught in the Russian language. After Yushenko's presidency, only one.²⁰¹ In May 2024, Russkiy Mir Foundation wrote that five years after the cruel policy implemented against the Russian language in Ukraine in 2019, the country has not been able to eradicate the Russian language.²⁰² Nevertheless, the Ukrainian language ombudsman Taras Kremin stated that there are less than 800 schoolchildren in Ukraine who study Russian at school and only three schools have preserved Russian language classes in the country.²⁰³ Thus, it seems plausible that Russia's attempt to 'keep the Russian World together' through a full-scale invasion of Ukraine has only led to the spiritual separation of both countries. Many Ukrainians, who spoke Russian as their first language, now discard Russian and communicate in Ukrainian.

Religion

Religion is an important indicator of Russkiy Mir. As mentioned earlier in the conceptualization, the Russian Orthodox Church is the only religion with representatives on the Russkiy Mir Foundation's governing board. According to the Russian scholar Sizov Grigorievich, from the perspective of the Russian Orthodox Church, the 'Special Military Operation' of Russia in Ukraine is a just one. The war is against the globalists who seek to destroy Russia and *«век Русский Мир.»*²⁰⁴ Despite its presence in Ukraine and the significant

²⁰⁰ Fortuin, "Ukraine commits genocide on Russians," 323.

²⁰¹ Вячеслав Никонов, "Не воспоминание о прошлом, а мечта о будущем," in *Смыслы и ценности русского мира. Сборник статей и материалов круглых столов, организованных фондом "Русский мир,"* ed. Вячеслав Никонов (Москва: Фонда Русский Мир. 2010), 9.

²⁰² Русский Мир, "За пять лет жёстких ограничений на Украине так и не смогли искоренить русский язык," Last modified May 15, 2024, https://ruskiymir.ru/news/325176/?sphrase_id=1625903.

²⁰³ Русский Мир, "На Украине осталось три школы с преподаванием русского языка," Last modified May 2, 2024, https://ruskiymir.ru/news/324828/?sphrase_id=1625904.

²⁰⁴ English Translation: "*The entire Russian World.*"

numbers of Ukrainian believers, The Russian Orthodox Church supports the war in Ukraine. This view is illustrated by the Russian scholar Vladimir Ksenofontov, who is employed by the Military University of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation in Moscow, who argues that despite the Ukrainian Orthodox Church's attitude towards ROC, the latter still proceeds with its spiritual and moral care for Ukraine's citizens.²⁰⁵

During his Sermon on 6 March 2022, Patriarch Kirill said that *«мы вступили в борьбу, которая имеет не физическое, а метафизическое значение»*.²⁰⁶ On April 3, 2022, Patriarch Kirill said that he feels the threat for all those people who live in the territories that are affected by armed conflict. *“Ведь все это люди и народы Святой Руси, всё это наши братья и сестры. Но как в средние века, желая ослабить Русь, разные силы сталкивали братьев друг с другом, погружая их в междоусобную брань, так происходит и сегодня.»*²⁰⁷ It is important that Patriarch Kirill argues that contemporary developments are similar to medieval times. Therewith, he creates continuity between Russia's and Ukraine's unity and between Russia's contemporary struggle with the West and during medieval times. Grigorievich considers the 'armed activities' in Ukraine a prolongation of the deeper conflict between Russia and the West.²⁰⁸ Thus, again there is historical unity perceived by adherents of Russkiy Mir between contemporary times and medieval times.

On March 27, 2024, The World Russian National Council (VRNS) published a declaration on the present and future of the Russkiy Mir. There were several points enumerated, such as the war in Ukraine, the Russian World and foreign policy. Concerning the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine, the order claims that the war is a new phase in the national struggle for the liberation of the Russian people in southwestern Rus' since 2014. From a spiritual and moral point of view, the war is a Holy War in which Russia and her people defend a single spiritual space of Holy Rus. Therewith, it executes the regathering of the Russkiy Mir and protecting the world against globalism and a victorious West. According to the VRNS, the only way for Russia and the Russian World to be successful and reach its spiritual and prophane

Сизов Сергей Григорьевич, “Церковь и война. Духовные смыслы специальной военной операции России,” *Вестник Омской Православной Духовной Семинарии* том 13, но. 2 (2022): 164.

²⁰⁵ Владимир Владимирович Ксенофонов, “Русский мир и его православное основание,” *Социально-политические науки* 3 (2018): 209.

²⁰⁶ English translation: “*We have entered into a struggle that has not a physical, but a metaphysical meaning.*” Григорьевич, “Церковь и война,” 164.

²⁰⁷ English translation: “*After all, all these are people and peoples of Holy Russia, all these are our brothers and sisters. But just as in the Middle Ages, in order to weaken Russia, different forces pushed brothers against each other, plunging them into internecine warfare, so it is happening today.*”

Ibid., 165-166.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 166.

potential is to reestablish the unity of the Russian people. In terms of Russia's foreign policy, it should become one of several multipolar centers, leading integrational processes, providing security and stable development within the post-Soviet space. Moreover, reuniting the Russian people should be one of Russia's priorities and the doctrine of the trinity of the Russian people – Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians – should get a legislative foundation.²⁰⁹

In terms of religion, Ukraine is important to Moscow, as it is one of the three core nations of East Slavic Orthodox Civilization, of which President Putin and Patriarch Kirill consider themselves to be the leaders. Different actors of ROC argue that the war in Ukraine is a just one and the mere prolongation of an older conflict between Russia and the West, with the latter seeking to disunite the *Russkiy Mir*.

Institutional Cooperation

Ukraine does not obtain membership of any of the Moscow-led integrationist projects. In terms of cooperation within the fields of politics, economics, or security, Ukraine has moved away from Russia. This development started after the demise of the Soviet Union but intensified from 2014. In December 2014, President Pyotr Poroshenko intensified Ukraine's cooperation with NATO and signed a law that ended Kyiv's non-bloc status. In 2018, NATO membership as a strategic foreign and security priority was adopted as legislation by the Ukrainian Parliament. In June 2020, Ukraine became an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO.²¹⁰ In terms of Russian security, Moscow emphasized its concerns about NATO enlargement towards the east, but especially concerning Ukraine. Subsequently, the Kremlin justified the annexation of Crimea as a response to NATO's attempt to displace Russia from the Black Sea.²¹¹ Since June 2022, Ukraine is also a candidate-state of the EU.

Geopolitics and Anti-Westernism

In Putin's '*State of the Nation*' speech in February 2023, he devoted significant attention to his perceived battle with the West: Western leaders helped the neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv with training nationalist battalions and supplying weapons; The United States and NATO deployed army bases and secret biological laboratories close to the Russian border. In December 2021, the Kremlin submitted draft agreements on security guarantees, Putin continues, to the US and

²⁰⁹ "Наказ XXV Всемирного русского народного собора «Настоящее и будущее Русского мира»," Русская Православная Церковь, last modified March 27, 2024, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/6116189.html>.

²¹⁰ Iryna Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO: Securitization, Otherness, and Their Effects on Russo-Ukrainian Relations," *Russian Politics* 8 (2023): 168.

²¹¹ Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO," 169.

NATO. All fundamental points were rejected, and the treaty was growing with every day. The West transformed Ukraine into an ‘anti-Russian’ state. However, Putin claims that there is nothing new about that: in the 19th century Austria-Hungary and Poland pursued the same policy to deprive Russia of its historical territories that are now called Ukraine. The West continued this ‘project’ by supporting the 2014 coup.²¹² Again, we see a perceived historical continuity between Russian-Ukrainian unity on the one hand, and the West seeking to undermine this on the other hand. Later in his speech, Putin argues that the West does not care about on who it is bettering, even if they are Nazis – if they are against Russia. The West is using Ukraine as a weapon against Russia.²¹³

However, Ukraine is not accepted in its Ukrainian form, but only in its Russified form. This is illustrated by Timofey Sergeytsev, a prominent Russian political consultant, who published an article in RIA Novosti in which he claimed that denazification should mean de-Ukrainization. “(...) *a rejection of the artificial inflation of the ethnic component of personal identification of inhabitants of the historical territories of Little Russia and New Russia. Ukrainism is an artificial anti-Russian construction devoid of civilizational content, a subordinate element of foreign and alien civilization.*”²¹⁴ Ukraine is imagined part of Russia because it is Russian in essence, according to the Russkiy Mir concept. However, Ukrainianism, the Ukraine that seeks to distance itself from Moscow, is perceived as an instrument of the West to divide Russkiy Mir. Thus, Ukraine only exists as part of Russia and an independent Ukrainian state with its own language, history, and political orientation – that is independent of Russia – is artificial and has no legitimacy in the eyes of Russkiy Mir adherents.

Not only in the view of the West was 2022 a watershed. The Russkiy Mir-thinker Mezhuiev argues that the events of 2022 indicate the end of the “*петербургского периода отечественной истории*” (Peterburgian period of national history) and that Russia goes on a seclusion on a conditional island and turns to Asia. At this moment, Mezhuiev argues, there is a current intensification of the interactions between Russia and the West, however, be it due to military conflict. But this is of temporary nature and Russia will distance itself from Europe

²¹² Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to Federal Assembly,” last modified February 21, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70565>.

²¹³ Putin, “Presidential Address to Federal Assembly.”

²¹⁴ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 210.

and look increasingly towards the East.²¹⁵ Russo-Western interaction will be of military nature for now, but Russia will continue moving East.

Ukrainian Self-Identification

To foster a better understanding of how Ukraine is perceived by Russia, it is important to also research how Ukraine perceives itself in terms of identity, history, and geopolitics. After all, nations self-identify through actively othering ‘the Other’.

Bohdan Kordan argues that the pursuit of national interests in the Russo-Ukrainian war are defined by two narratives that are mutually exclusive. Russia’s narrative is linked to a distant past that is centred around authoritarian rule and a centralized power. This story is deeply connected to imperialism. Ukraine’s story, on the other hand, is linked to European history with its emphasis on the rise of the nation-state and evolution of an international system based on independent, sovereign states.²¹⁶ According to Kordan, Ukraine’s story is a European story of development of the Ukrainian nation and its development towards statehood. It starts with the principality of Kyivan Rus’ and continues with broader European developments such as the Reformation, the rise of constitutionalism, and the Enlightenment. Foreign rule is a recurrent theme, but so is the language of rights, struggle, and resistance. This narrative enables Ukraine to distinguish itself from the Russian experience.²¹⁷

According to Taras Kuzio, in Ukrainian historiography, the Austro-Hungarian Empire is viewed positively because of its attitude towards Ukrainian language and identity, that was positive. This is contrary to the Tsarist Empire, where the autonomous Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate was destroyed and serfdom was introduced, and Russification promoted.²¹⁸ However, Iryna Zhyrun, who is an Adjunct Lecturer at the Higher School of Economics National Research University in Moscow, argues that this positive appreciation of the Habsburg Empire does not necessarily represent historical reality, as Austro-Hungary also were colonial powers in Ukraine, just like Russia.²¹⁹

In general, the protection of the Ukrainian language and culture against Russification has been an important feature of Ukrainian political thinking since the second half of the 19th century. Therefore, the ‘golden era’s’ of Soviet Ukraine were those periods that experienced

²¹⁵ Борис Межуев, “Цивилизационное равнодушие. Способна ли Россия держать культурную дистанцию в отношениях с Европой,” *Россия в глобальной политике* том 20, но. 5 (2022).

²¹⁶ Kordan, “Russia’s war against Ukraine,” 164.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 164-165.

²¹⁸ Kuzio, “Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiia failed,” 302.

²¹⁹ Zhyrun, “Ukrainian Discourses on NATO,” 172.

some sort of liberalization and therefore the freedom for Ukrainian identity. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine became an independent state and distanced itself from the USSR and started its nation building project. Memory politics are an important feature of Ukrainian nation building. The Holodomor has taken an important position within Ukrainian identity and most Ukrainians consider Stalin to be a tyrant.²²⁰

There is a memory war going on between Ukraine and Russia. Ukrainian historians claim that Kyivan Rus solely belongs to Ukrainian history, just like Russian historians. Ukrainians argue that Hetman Ivan Mazepa – who aligned with the Swedes against Muscovy in 1709 – is a hero, whereas the Russians consider him a traitor. Ukrainians argue that the Treaty of Pereyaslav as a military alliance and not a unification as the Russians claim.²²¹ The current memory war between Russia and Ukraine is not only waged on paper; In the Ukrainian city Pereyaslav, the city authorities have removed the monument to commemorate the ‘reunification of Russia and Ukraine’.²²²

Zhyrun argues that Ukraine’s self-identification transformed from Slavic and Eastern European to Western European and that Russia became the alien threatening entity. Ukraine’s cultural space is now the place where Europe is protected from the Ruskiy Mir.²²³ After a meeting on July 7, 2021, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, Poland, and Ukraine declared themselves as the ‘Lublin Triangle’. The Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dmytro Kuleba, called it an alternative to the Ruskiy Mir in this part of Europe. He also expressed his wish of a future in which a democratic Belarus will become the alliance’s fourth member.²²⁴ Kyiv does identify itself in opposition to the Ruskiy Mir concept.

In terms of politics and securitization, Ukraine seeks to join NATO. Kyiv’s relationship with NATO has undergone different stages since Ukraine’s independence. In his first term, in the early 1990s, former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma argued against NATO enlargement towards Eastern Europe. However, in the mid 1990s, he pursued a multi-vector policy in which he tried to balance between European and Russian interests.²²⁵ The Orange Revolution in 2004 was openly pro-Western and deepened the debates on NATO under then President Viktor Yushchenko. However, in 2010 Ukraine returned to its neutral policy under President Viktor Yanukovich. This again changed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and

²²⁰ Kutzio, “Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiia failed,” 303.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Plokyh, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 193.

²²³ Zhyrun, “Ukrainian Discourses on NATO,” 174.

²²⁴ Ibid., 213.

²²⁵ Ibid., 167.

Pyotr Poroshenko's accession to the presidency and subsequent ending of Ukraine's non-bloc status.²²⁶ After Ukraine's independence, there was no agreement on who the new other was – Russia or the West – among the political elites in Ukraine.²²⁷ This has dramatically changed.

Russkiy Mir Characterization of Ukraine

In Russkiy Mir thinking, Ukraine is characterized as sharing the same linguistic, religious, and historical roots with Russia. Ukraine is at the core of Ancient Rus and is one of the three Russia's that dates to Kiyavn Rus and constitutes the contemporary Russian World. Spiritually, Ukraine belongs to Russia, despite that Ukraine is currently an independent state. Furthermore, there are two constants imagined within Russkiy Mir ideology. First, Russia and Ukraine were always united. Second, foreign powers have always sought to oppose Russo-Ukrainian unity. Consequently, Ukraine is at the forefront at Russia's contemporary battle with the collective West. Ukraine is instrumentalized by the West against Russia and this has led to Ukrainian legislation regarding the Russian language in Ukraine, the Ukrainization of Ukraine – that is, anti-Russian Ukraine, and the break of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

²²⁶ Zhyrun, "Ukrainian Discourses on NATO," 168.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

Kazakhstan

Introduction

This chapter analyses the perceived position of Kazakhstan by the Kremlin and actors loyal to the Kremlin in academia and journalism, through the Russkiy Mir concept and how those convictions are expressed. Similar to the analysis on Ukraine, this part analyses history, religion, language, institutional cooperation, geopolitics and anti-Westernism, and Kazakhstan's self-identification. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin indicated in the 1990s that the newly established Republic of Kazakhstan should belong to Russia.²²⁸ Putin has not devoted an entire essay to his views on Kazakhstan, but he has made several remarks in the past. Most notoriously, in 2014, Putin argued that Nazarbayev did something extraordinary: he created a state where a state never existed before in Kazakhstan. This statement can be interpreted as an open threat or a sincere compliment. Nevertheless, Putin has made statements in which he stressed the fraternal relations between the Russian and Kazakh people. Researching how Kazakhstan is imagined within Russkiy Mir doctrine can foster a better understanding of Russian foreign policy towards Kazakhstan in the future.

History

In July 2023, a monument of Aleksandr Nevsky was revealed in Almaty in front of a cathedral carrying his name. The ceremony coincided with the 20th anniversary of the Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan. The Metropolitan Aleksandr of Astana and Kazakhstan revealed the monument. Putin was there too and called the opening of the monument a notable event in the spiritual and cultural life of Kazakhstan. Even though Russia and Kazakhstan are two separate republics, it is impossible to overestimate the wisdom and courage of this great ruler of ancient Rus, Putin claimed, and the influence he has had on both states. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev said that Nevsky is a symbol of brotherhood and alliance between the Great Steppe and Ancient Russia. In addition, Tokayev noted that he believes the monument will contribute to the preservation of the diverse spiritual heritage of the fraternal peoples of Kazakhstan and Russia. To indicate the historic relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan, Russkiy Mir Foundation emphasized that Aleksandr Nevsky has

²²⁸ Dmitry Shlapentokh, "Kazakh and Russian History and Its Geopolitical Implications," 144.

travelled to the regions of contemporary Kazakhstan and has visited the shores of the Aral and Caspian seas and the foothills of the Trans-Ili Alatau, where Almaty is now located.²²⁹

Putin, Tokayev, and the Russkiy Mir Foundation all refer to a centuries-old relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan. Through comments on Ancient Rus, the Great Steppe, and Aleksandr Nevsky's travels through Kazakh territories, Tokayev, Putin, and Russkiy Mir Foundation emphasize that there was Russian-Kazakh interaction in Medieval times. In difference of Ukraine, however, Kazakhstan was seen as an entity different of Russia. It was the Great Steppe that interacted with Ancient Rus – but it was not part of Ancient Rus.

Despite warm words concerning Russo-Kazakh relations and history, Russian views were not always of such positive nature: There are different Russian actors who claim that Russia has the right to rule Kazakh territories. In 2014, the year of Russia's annexation of Crimea, Eduard Limonov, the leader of the National-Bolshevik Party, argued that the cities in the north of Kazakhstan belong to the Russians because they were built by the Russians and Soviets. Kazakhs were nomads and did not have any cities, Limonov argued. Therewith, he used historical arguments – cities built by Russians or Soviet 'Europeans' to justify the reintegration of northern Kazakhstan with Russia.²³⁰

In the same year, the Russian politician and leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, argued that Central Asian republics would not have existed without the Soviet Union, who created them. In his view, it is not only the northern part of Kazakhstan that should be integrated with Russia again, but the entire Central Asian region should as the Federation of Central Asia.²³¹ His argument can be called 'alternate history' – without the Soviet Union and its collapse, Central Asian republics would not have existed.

The idea that there was no civilized form of statehood in Kazakhstan is omnipresent in Russian geopolitical imagination. Nikonov argued in 2020 that the region of Kazakhstan was a "nomadic desert" that Russia donated to the Soviet Union. That same year the member of parliament for United Russia, Yevgeny Fyodorof, claimed that Kazakhstan was a 'gift' from Russia to the Soviet Union.²³²

The conception that Kazakhstan was a gift from the Soviet Union is a recurrent subject in Russian nationalism. In this line of thought, Kazakhstan owes its existence to the

²²⁹ Русский Мир, "Памятник Александру Невскому открыли в Алма-Ате," last modified 13 July, 2023, <https://russkiymir.ru/news/315441/>.

²³⁰ Laruelle, "Why no Kazakh Novorossiia?" 70.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² "Russia's invasion of Ukraine favours Kazakhstan," European Interest, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.europeaninterest.eu/article/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-favours-kazakhstan/>.

Bolsheviks and Russians and other Slavic settlers who built cities and civilized the nomadic Kazakhs. This way, Kazakhstan is perceived as belonging to the Russkiy Mir as the Kazakh state itself is the result of Soviet communism. There are similarities between the Russian narrative concerning Kazakhstan and Ukraine. Both countries only exist because of Soviet communism and areas that inhabit significant Russian communities were ‘given away as gifts’ to both countries, thus providing alternate histories of Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

The Russian Egor Prosvirnin, who was the chief editor of the website *Sputnik and Pogrom*, argued that the borders of the Russian state should include northern Kazakhstan, because most of the population in North Kazakhstan, Kostanay, Pavlodar and East Kazakhstan are predominately European – Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Polish, or German. In addition, he declared that northern Kazakhstan is the continuation of Siberia not only demographically, but also geographically. Prosvirnin, played the demographic and geographic card to justify reintegration with Russia.²³³

Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown argue that Russian alternative histories have become important components of the Russian imagination since the demise of the Soviet Union. In essence, it is deeply hostile towards the West and is nostalgic towards an imagined Eurasian past where the Russian empire was in power. According to those alternative histories, the ‘real’ Russian history has been hidden so it could serve best the political agendas of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Romanov dynasty, and subsequently the Soviet Union. Russian alternative history disseminates a strongly russified Eurasianism, in contrary to the early Eurasianists from the 1920s and 1930s, who advocated a multiethnic and internationalist perspective.²³⁴

Alternative histories are a recurrent theme within the imagining of Kazakhstan within the Russkiy Mir concept. On the website *ПолитНавигатор* (PolitNavigator), there is an article that argues that Kazakhstan follows Ukraine in its own development – that is turning away from Soviet history. The website *ПолитНавигатор* is dedicated to events that take place in Ukraine, Russia, Belorussia, and Moldova. The project, as they call it themselves, was set up in the winter of 2014 «в разгар трагических событий в Киеве и изначально было посвящен Украине. Впоследствии тематика издания стала постепенно

²³³ Laruelle, “Why no Kazakh Novorossiia?” 70.

²³⁴ Konstantin Sheiko and Stephen Brown, “Empires of the Mind. Eurasianism and Alternative History in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *The Politics of Eurasianism, Identity, Popular Culture, and Russian Foreign Policy*, eds. Mark Bassin and Gonzalo Pozo (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017): 121.

расширяться на постсоветское пространство и другие зоны интересов России.»²³⁵

The website is pro-Russian and glorifies Soviet history.

In the article, the author discusses a round table discussion that took place at the department for Central Asian studies at George Washington University in the United States and was attended by the ambassador of Kazakhstan in the US. According to the article, there were two reasons for the roundtable discussion: to conduct the total decommunization and derussification of Kazakhstan and to underline the unity of Kazakh national liberals with the western agents within Kazakhstan.

During the roundtable discussion, the book *The Hungry Steppe: Famine, Violence, and the Making of Soviet Kazakhstan* (2018) of Sarah Cameron on the Kazakh famine was discussed. According to the author, Sarah Cameron is an ideological saboteur and falsificator of history with her claim that the Kazakh famine was a genocide conducted by Moscow. The article is anti-western and accuses the West of intervening within Kazakhstan. The author refers to Central Asian soldiers serving in the Wehrmacht during the Second World War and claims that the rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators and the acknowledgment of the Kazakh famine as a conscious move by the Soviet authorities are directed from Washington DC. Therewith, the US seeks to have Kazakhstan move away from Russia. In this way, Kazakhstan follows the political evolution of Ukraine.²³⁶

Religion

The Republic of Kazakhstan is officially a secular country, but most of the population is Muslim. In Kazakhstan, 70% identifies itself as Muslim and 26% of the population identifies itself as Christian Orthodox.²³⁷ According to Ksenofontov, Russian Orthodoxy plays an important role within the spiritual life of the Republic of Kazakhstan. In current times, approximately 20% of the Kazakh population professes Orthodoxy. There are 18 active dioceses.²³⁸ The conviction that Russia and Kazakhstan are spiritually connected is shared by Tokayev and Putin. Moreover, The Russian Orthodox Church included Kazakhstan into the

²³⁵ English translation: “during the tragic events in Kiev, it was originally dedicated to Ukraine. Subsequently, the subject of the publication began to gradually expand to the post-Soviet space and other areas of interest of Russia.”

ПолитНавигатор, “О проекте,” accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.politnavigator.net/about>.

²³⁶ Айну́р Курма́нов, “«Голодомор», нацисты: Казахстан полностью повторяет эволюцию Украины,” ПолитНавигатор, last modified June 14, 2021, <https://www.politnavigator.net/golodomor-nacisty-kazakhstan-polnostyu-povtoryaet-ehvolyuciyu-ukrainy.html>.

²³⁷ Bibigul Vasic, Zhibek Begimbayeva & Zada Khibina, “The problem of religious unity in modern Kazakhstan,” *Global Journal of Sociology: Current Issues* 11, no. 2 (2021): 81.

²³⁸ Ксенофонтов, “Русский мир и его православное основание,” 209.

Russkiy Mir on a belief that Russian Cossacks and Kazakhs have common ancestors and shared values that are embodied by Holy Rus'.²³⁹

In the summer of 2023, the New Testament of the Bible was translated into the Kazakh language in dedication to the 20th anniversary of the Patriarchate of Astana and Kazakhstan. A representative of the Russian Orthodox Church said to Russkiy Mir Foundation that the translation of the Bible into Kazakh is a contribution to the spiritual and intellectual development of multiconfessional and multinational Kazakhstan.²⁴⁰

Kazakhstan is in no way imagined of representing the core of Russian Orthodoxy and therefore is not of such existential importance as Ukraine is. However, Kazakhstan is in another way a representation of Russkiy Mir: namely the multiethnic and multireligious expression of Russkiy Mir.

Language

In addition to a shared history and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church within Kazakhstan, the omnipresence of the Russian language is another perceived indication that Kazakhstan belongs to the Russkiy Mir. According to the scholars Gulmira Madiyeva and Vasiliy Suprun, the Russian language remains actively used within all social fields in Kazakhstan, even at the expense of the Kazakh language. Despite Nazarbayev's statement in 2012 that it was necessary for the Kazakh language to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin alphabet, until this day the Kazakh version of the alphabet has not been embedded within Kazakh society. The authors argue that Russian remains the language of interethnic communication and within international organizations of which Kazakhstan is part, such as the CSTO and CIS. In addition, Russian keeps its role within Kazakh higher education. According to Madiyeva and Suprun, despite tensions between different countries and changing geopolitical circumstances, it will be difficult to exclude the Russian language from Kazakh society as it was, is, and will be a language of the world and friendship, a language between intercultural communication.²⁴¹ Madiyeva and Suprun clearly radiate Russian propaganda by naming Russian the language of the world and friendship.

There is a significant Russian minority in Kazakhstan that speaks Russian. According to the Russkiy Mir Foundation, the situation of the Russian language for the psychological comfort

²³⁹ Mariya Omelicheva, "Critical geopolitics on Russian foreign policy," 715.

²⁴⁰ Русский Мир, "Новый Завет выпустили на казахском языке," last modified July 11, 2024, https://russkiymir.ru/news/315370/?sphrase_id=1626270.

²⁴¹ Гульмира Баянжановна Мадиева & Василий Иванович Супрун, "Русский язык в Казахстане," *Неофилология* том 9, no. 2 (2023): 245

of the Russian diaspora is quite well in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan, there are 3006 Russian schools. Russian culture is not persecuted or oppressed by the authorities in Kazakhstan. However, nationalistic oriented public figures and organizations sometimes lead to social outrage when people do not master the Kazakh language claims Russkiy Mir Foundation.²⁴² This development is discussed in another article, where videos are described where shopkeepers, taxi drivers or other Kazakhstani citizens with Slavic appearances are forced to communicate in Kazakh. If they cannot, they are summoned to take their belongings and go to the train station and leave Kazakhstan. Tokayev commented on the controversies and said that people should speak the language that is most comfortable for them. He emphasized that the state language is Kazakh, but Russian is an official language of the Republic of Kazakhstan too.²⁴³

According to Daria Chizhova, Director of the Information and Analytical Center for the Study of Socio-Political Processes in the post-Soviet Space (IAC), the new generation in Central Asia is not capable of recognizing cause-and-effect relations between their factories, roads, and cities built under Soviet rule and the contemporary development of their countries. This is one of the reasons that there are ‘language patrols’ in Kazakhstan, she argues, where Russian speakers are being attacked.²⁴⁴ This is again an argument based on the belief that Kazakhstan owes its development to Russia and should therefore be grateful and respect Russia and its culture. Russkiy Mir Foundation argue that there is a discrepancy between the omnipresence of the Russian language in social life, politics, and academia in Kazakhstan and the positive attitude of the Kazakhstani leadership on the one hand, and the sometimes-hostile attitude of mostly young Kazakhs towards the Russian language on the other hand.

According to the author Andrey Vypolzov, the Russian language is of vital importance for the Eurasian space: It is like oil in an engine. To support this argument, the author metaphorically claims that it is of course possible to import oil (read: English language), but that geopolitical determinism is leading and that such oil will not take root, shutting the engine down.²⁴⁵ However, the presence of the Russian language in the public space does not mean there is no trend visible of the Kazakhification of Kazakhstan. In 2021, the Kazakh city of Pavlodar decided to rename dozens of streets from their Soviet names into those that reflect

²⁴² Русский Мир, “Новый Завет выпустили на казахском языке.”

²⁴³ Андрей Выползов, “Два языка – пара,” Русский Мир, last modified April 25, 2024, https://russkiymir.ru/publications/324708/?sphrase_id=1626282.

²⁴⁴ Алла Шеяпина, “Россия – Центральная Азия: на пути к Году русского языка,” Русский Мир, last modified October 21, 2022, https://russkiymir.ru/publications/306511/?sphrase_id=1627750.

²⁴⁵ Выползов, “Два языка – пара.”

Kazakh identity and history. Zhirinovskiy back then claimed that “*Three hundred years ago, the future Kazakhstan was populated by Dzungar tribes and under Russian control. There were no states there. There were steppes, nomads here or there, and salt nearby in Orenburg, and even there in Pavlodar, the future city.*”²⁴⁶ A recurrent theme within Russkiy Mir thinking is downplaying Kazakhstan’s nomadic civilizational heritage and its role within its own development as a state.

Institutional Cooperation

Kazakhstan has maintained relatively good relations with Russia since its independence in the early 1990s. Kazakhstan is a member of two Moscow-led integrationist projects within the post-Soviet space, namely the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union. Moreover, Kazakhstan is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Nevertheless, Astana does pursue a multi-vector policy in which it has friendly relations with the West. According to an article in *International Affairs*, the EU even prioritizes its relations with Kazakhstan to let it not fall into the orbit of China and Russia.²⁴⁷ In spite of friendly relations with the West, Kazakhstan remains to have close ties with Russia. Illustrative for Kazakhstan’s relationship with Russia is that it reached out to the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization to help with putting down popular unrest in January 2022.

Exemplary for Moscow’s view on its relations with Astana are the words of the Russian ambassador in Kazakhstan, Mikhail Bocharnikov, who wrote an article in 2017 dedicated to the 25th anniversary of Russo-Kazakh diplomatic relations. Bocharnikov writes that the baggage of development with which Kazakhstan entered its independence, was the product of a joint effort between the Russians and Kazakhs. Kazakhstan turned into an economically developed region, implicitly stating that it was thanks to Soviet investments. Additionally, Kazakh writers were internationally recognized because of their publications in the Russian language.²⁴⁸ In line with Russkiy Mir ideology, Kazakhstan owes its development to the Russians and Soviets and therefore is the product of Moscow’s policy in the past.

²⁴⁶ Ksenia Bondal, “Kazakhs condemn Kremlin's imperial ambitions in street renaming row,” Caravanserai, last modified April 16, 2021, https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2021/04/16/feature-01.

²⁴⁷ The International Affairs, “Four objects of a new EU’s expansion: Brazil, Chile, Nigeria and Kazakhstan,” last modified April 27, 2023, <https://en.interaffairs.ru/article/four-objects-of-a-new-eus-expansion-brazil-chile-nigeria-and-kazakhstan/>.

²⁴⁸ Михаил Бочарников, “Россия - Казахстан: четверть века дипломатических отношений и партнерства. 25 лет — это хороший повод для того, чтобы вспомнить о прошлом, оценить настоящее и заглянуть в будущее,” *Международная Жизнь*, last modified October 31, 2017, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/18580>.

In October 2022, the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mukhtar Tleuberdi, dedicated an article to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of Russo-Kazakh relations. Tleuberdi mentions that Tokayev always says that Russia is the ‘closest neighbour’ for the Kazakhs. He emphasizes the solving of the demarcation line of the Russo-Kazakh border and that it will be finalized soon. Moreover, the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs mentions the importance of the preservation of historical heritage and values, Kazakhstan’s share in the USSR’s victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the significant Kazakh diaspora living in Russia and the Russian diaspora living in Kazakhstan.²⁴⁹ Tleuberdi attempts to balance between being assertive enough to defend Kazakhstan’s interests, but at the same time maintain a respectful attitude towards Russia in order to not provoke Moscow.

Russia and Kazakhstan also have strong educational ties. In June 2023, the head of Rossotrudnichestvo, Evgeniy Primakov, talked about measures for the popularization of Russian education in Kazakhstan. Primakov told Ruskiy Mir Foundation that *«соотечественники, не имеющим гражданства России»* will receive rights concerning education, medical help, and employment in different sectors.²⁵⁰ Rossotrudnichestvo and the Ruskiy Mir Foundation closely cooperate. Rossotrudnichestvo focuses on the Near Abroad and directly presents Moscow, whereas the Ruskiy Mir focuses on the international arena as well and embodies Russian ‘civil society’.²⁵¹

Geopolitics, Anti-Westernism, and Russian Propaganda in Kazakhstan

According to the Kazakh scholar Aidar Amrebayev, Russian propaganda in Kazakhstan should be seen in the context of the Putin regime to ‘reconquer’ its influence within the post-Soviet space and to not allow the former Soviet republics to acquire full sovereignty.²⁵² He argues that despite the end of the Cold War, Cold War mentality has remained within academic institutions and think tanks in Russia and that these institutes serve to restore

²⁴⁹ Мухтар Тлеуберди, Приветствие читателям журнала «Международная жизнь» по случаю 30-летия установления дипломатических отношений между Республикой Казахстан и Российской Федерацией, *Международная Жизнь*, last modified October 18, 2022, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/37452>.

²⁵⁰ English translation: “*compatriots who do not have Russian citizenship.*”

Русский Мир, “В Россотрудничестве рассказали о популяризации российского образования в Казахстане,” <https://ruskiymir.ru/news/314941/>.

²⁵¹ Laruelle, “The “Russian World,” 14.

²⁵² Айдар Амребаев, “Близкий друг: Особенности Российской пропаганды в Казахстане,” in *Эксплуатация уязвимостей: особенности российской пропаганды в Центральной Азии*, ed. by Mikhail Samus and Yuri Poita (Kyiv: CACDS, 2020), 3.

Russia's greatness.²⁵³ Thus, Russkiy Mir thinking has infiltrated within Russian institutes which have influence in Kazakhstan.

Amrebayev identifies several basic narratives of Russian propaganda within Kazakhstan. There are narratives regarding the necessity of the integration of post-Soviet countries; the artificiality of the Kazakh state and the possibility of revising the existing borders; the option to receive Russian citizenship; the positive contribution of the USSR and Russia in relation to Kazakhstan; and the negative aspects of cooperation between Kazakhstan and other countries.²⁵⁴ Especially the artificiality of the Kazakh state and the contributions of the USSR are recurrent themes in Russkiy Mir discourse.

Russian nationalist thinking believes former colonies of Moscow should be grateful for Russia's role in developing their countries. Illustrative for this conviction was the statement of the Russian politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, who in 2021 argued that "*Russians have for centuries, often at their own detriment, developed their periphery, built cities and enterprises, and brought enlightenment to Central Asia.*" In addition, he said that "*Even today, hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz families live off earnings in Russia.*"²⁵⁵

An indication that Kazakhstan takes a special place within Russian geographical thinking, is that during Soviet times, Central Asia was called *Казахстан и Средняя Азия*.²⁵⁶ The Russian scholar Vladimir Kalutskov argues that the Russian *Центральная Азия* means something different than the English Central Asia. After all, *Центральная Азия* also includes the Turkic speaking regions of China.²⁵⁷ Kalutskov argues that the Russian cultural space includes the post-Soviet space at large and that by using the western concept of Central Asia, glorious Russian history and geographical concepts will be lost. He asks the readers a question: If we start using the term Central Asia for Kazakhstan and Middle Asia, did Russian explorers such as Przhevalskiy even exist?²⁵⁸

Despite that Kazakhstan does cooperate with the West, this has not led to serious tensions between Russia and Kazakhstan, as is the case with Ukraine. An explanation for that might be that Kazakhstan in itself is not striving to become a democratic country that is part of the West and detangled from Russia. Moreover, geographically Kazakhstan finds itself

²⁵³ Амребаев, "Ближний друг," 5.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 9-18

²⁵⁵ Bakyt Ibraimov, "Russia Bares Fangs Over Language in Kyrgyzstan," The Moscow Times, last modified August 12, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/12/russia-bares-fangs-over-language-in-kyrgyzstan-a74766>.

²⁵⁶ Владимир Калущков, "Постсоветское Азиатское пространство: Туркестан или Центральная Азия?," *Псковский регионологический журнал* 23 (2015): 94.

²⁵⁷ Калущков, "Постсоветское Азиатское пространство," 95.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 96.

between Russia, China, and other autocratic Central Asian states, making it difficult to detangle itself from Russia even if it wished to do so.

Kazakhstan's Self-Identification

How and where does Kazakhstan position itself in terms of history, geopolitics, and culture? Is it different from the Russian perspective and if so, in what way? In the view of Kazakh historians, the medieval Russian and Kazakh states existed in two separate cultural and geopolitical universes. The Kazakh state is considered the direct descendent of the Turkic and Mongol Empires, whereas the Russian state's roots can be found in the Byzantine Empire and Europe. The Russians conquered Kazakhstan through colonial conquests. These colonial expeditions, so argue Kazakh historians, were driven by the same motives as other European powers: plunder and exploitation. Additionally, the migration of Slavic settlers to Kazakhstan did not develop into the merging of two mutually enriching peoples but was rather the conflict between colonialists and an oppressed people.²⁵⁹ Thus, contemporary Kazakh perspectives do not share the Eurasianist conception that the colonisation of Kazakhstan by the Russians and the settlement of Slavic farmers led to a symbiosis of Turkic and Slavic peoples. The Kazakh perspective is no different than that of peoples colonised by Western powers.

In Russian historiography, Kazakhstan only received real statehood when the Kazakh Socialist Republic was established as one of the republics of the USSR. The narrative concerning this event stresses that Kazakh statehood was a 'gift' from the Russian 'elder brother'. Astana has developed a narrative concerning its own position within the Eurasian heartland that is different from Moscow's understanding. Firstly, it argues that there was indeed a symbiosis between peoples in Central Asia: one between the Kazakhs and other Turkic peoples – but not with Slavs. Secondly, it emphasizes that the nomadic civilization was a culturally rich one. Third, Russian colonialism was harmful and brought nothing but forced displacement and oppression.²⁶⁰ Moreover, former President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, declared the Kazakh Khanate of the 15th century the official predecessor of the contemporary Republic of Kazakhstan.²⁶¹ Thus, Kazakh historians have rejected the notion of

²⁵⁹ Dmitry Shlapentokh, "Kazakh and Russian History and Its Geopolitical Implications," 147.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁶¹ Malika Orazgaliyeva, "Astana Celebrates 550th Anniversary of Kazakh Khanate, Holds CCTS Summit," *The Astana Times*, last modified September 14, 2015, <https://astanatimes.com/2015/09/astana-celebrates-550th-anniversary-of-kazakh-khanate-holds-ccts-summit/>.

Eurasianism, which claims that there is a ‘Eurasian’ nation, and those of neo-Sovietism, that stresses the existence of a ‘Soviet people’.²⁶²

According to Ksenofontov, one of the corner stones of Kazakhstani patriotism is its contribution to the Great Patriotic War.²⁶³ However, Bakke, Rickard, and O’Loughlin argue that in post-independence Kazakhstan, the Great Patriotic War and Stalin’s legacy have not been something to rally around or to distance oneself from. The nation-building efforts of Kazakhstan are called a ‘*hybrid state identity*’. This means that Kazakhstan defines itself simultaneously as *Kazakh*, the political state of the Kazakh people and its historical achievements, as well as *Kazakhstani*, which means a multiethnic nation in the middle of the Eurasian continent and Old Silk Road that is transnational of nature and integrated into the world.²⁶⁴

This dual identity of Kazakhstan, being ethnic Kazakh but at the same time being a multinational Kazakhstani republic, is an important component of Kazakhstan’s self-identification. An identity that has multiple layers can be used by the leadership to meet specific demands in international relations. It is one of the corner stones of Kazakhstan’s multi-vector policy, in which it attempts to maintain good relations with different powers, such as Russia, China, the EU, and the US. Interestingly, it can be argued that Russia also has a dual identity, namely being *русский* and *российский*. The first implies being ethnically Russian, whereas the second one is being Russian in a civic way and includes among other Chechens, Bashkirs, and Tuvans.

In terms of geopolitical orientation, Kazakhstan pursues a multi-vector policy. According to Luca Anceschi, Kazakhstani foreign policy during Nazarbayev’s presidency, which he terms neo-Eurasianism, played different roles at different times, but served to glorify Nazarbaev’s leadership, regulate Kazakhstani multi-vector foreign policy, and to find a feasible relationship with Moscow that protects the country’s political autonomy and regime but simultaneously does not jeopardize its economic ties with its most important neighbour.²⁶⁵ Despite that the Nazarbayev regime’s rhetoric on the Eurasian space at times included an area from Lisbon to Vladivostok, in which Kazakhstan was the centre in a space between Europe and China, in reality Eurasian cooperation concentrated itself on the

²⁶² Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Kazakh and Russian History and Its Geopolitical Implications,” 148.

²⁶³ Ксенофонов, “Русский мир и его православное основание,” 209.

²⁶⁴ Bakke, Rickard & O’Loughlin, “Perceptions in the past in the post-Soviet space,” 238.

²⁶⁵ Luca Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy. Regime neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbaev era* (London: Routledge, 2020), 4.

cooperation between a few post-Soviet states through the framework of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, according to Anceschi.²⁶⁶

Marlene Laruelle states that the case of Kazakhstan in terms of its identification with Eurasianism is interesting because other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have paid no attention to this issue.²⁶⁷ Kazakhstani neo-Eurasianism played an important role in the development of Kazakhstani development, which was inherently multi-ethnic and imagined Kazakhstan as being at the heart of the Eurasian continent, rather than Kazakhstan being a solely Kazakh political entity. Consequently, anti-Eurasianism find fertile soil among Kazakh nationalist groups.²⁶⁸ However, the Kazakhstani leadership's attitude towards ethnonationalism is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that it is prohibited to create political parties on the principles of nationality or religion.²⁶⁹

Russkiy Mir Characterization of Kazakhstan

Russkiy Mir imagines the relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia as fraternal. A friendly bond between the Great Steppe and Ancient Russe. Kazakhstan belongs to the Russian World, because of Slavic settlers that arrived in the 19th century and the shared Soviet past. Additionally, Slavic Soviets came to Kazakhstan to build cities and infrastructure. This was needed, according to Russkiy Mir discourse, because the nomadic Kazakhs were not capable of building the necessary infrastructure for communism themselves. Thus, Kazakhstan owes its development and existence to the Soviets – and therefore to the Russians.

This part of the chapter will research in more detail how the analysis of both Ukraine and Kazakhstan can help to answer the sub questions of this thesis.

What are the differences between Kazakhstan and Ukraine within the Kremlin's concept of the Russkiy Mir?

The main differences between how Kazakhstan and Ukraine are imagined within Russkiy Mir thinking is that Ukraine is one of the three Eastern Slavic Orthodox nations that constitutes Russkiy Mir – and therefore is Russia. Ukraine is, according to Russkiy Mir ideology, in its

²⁶⁶ Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy*, 165.

²⁶⁷ Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*, 172.

²⁶⁸ Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy*, 168.

²⁶⁹ Михайлин, "Россия своих не бросает," 210.

essence Russian. It is at the core of the Russian World: Kyiv is the mother of all Russian cities; Russian civilization was born when the Rurik dynasty chose Christian Orthodoxy and Crimea became the cradle of the Russian World. Moreover, Russians and Ukrainians are one people who spoke the same language, adhered the same religion, and have a shared history. Ukraine represents the *русский* component of Russkiy Mir.

Kazakhstan is imagined in another way. According to Russkiy Mir discourse, Kazakhstan owes its development – and even existence – to the Soviets and Russians. Before Russian settlers came to the Kazakh steppe and colonized the area, there were no cities or infrastructure, according to Russkiy Mir adherents. Therefore, Kazakhs should be grateful to the Russians. Kazakhstan represents the multi-ethnic component of the Russkiy Mir concept and therefore the inclusive *российский* form of Russkiy Mir.

Why is Russian foreign policy and geopolitics of a different nature towards Kazakhstan than towards Ukraine?

In Astana, Moscow does still have considerable influence through Kazakhstan's membership of Moscow-led integrationist projects, such as CSTO and EAEU. In Kyiv, Russia has no such inroads and Kyiv even seeks to join organisations that are hostile to Russia, such as NATO and the EU. The Kremlin perceives Ukraine to be at the forefront in Russia's battle with the West. According to Putin, the West has been trying to take Ukraine away from Russia throughout history. Russia's fear of losing Ukraine has led to the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. With Astana, the Kremlin maintains good bilateral relations.

How do Kazakhstan and Ukraine position themselves in relation to the Russian Russkiy Mir concept?

Ukraine considers its own history to be part of European history, in contrary to Russian history. It followed the same path of development through the Renaissance and Enlightenment. One of main issues throughout Ukrainian history was its struggle against Russia and its fight for independence. In particular, the status of the Ukrainian language was perceived an indicator of how the Ukrainian nation was doing. In terms of foreign policy, considers itself to be part of Europe and seeks to integrate within the West through accession into the EU and NATO. One expression of Ukraine's desire to join Europe is the establishment of the Lublin Triangle together with Poland and Latvia.

Kazakh historians disregard the Eurasian and Soviet perception that a symbiosis took place between the Kazakhs and Slavic settlers in the 19th century. However, a symbiosis did

take place, but between the Kazakhs and other Turkic tribes in Central Asia. Russian involvement in Kazakhstan is seen mostly through the prism of Russian colonialism and exploitation of the Kazakhs. In contrary to Russkiy Mir ideology, who argue that Kazakhstan is an artificial Soviet construction, Kazakhstan does trace back its own existence to the Kazakh Khanate of the 15th century. The policy of Astana is to celebrate Kazakhstan as a multi-ethnic country. Kazakhstan has a hybrid state identity: it is both Kazakh and Kazakhstani at the same time.

In terms of foreign policy, Astana seeks to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy in which it maintains good relations with different powers, such as Russia, China, the EU, and the US. Kazakhstan's neo-Eurasianist ideology has high ambitions with discourse claiming there is a Eurasian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok with Kazakhstan in the centre. However, there is only institutional cooperation between some former Soviet Republics.

Conclusion

Russkiy Mir is understood as the Russian Federation's ideology and is articulated through the Kremlin and Kremlin-controlled media and academia. Russkiy Mir refers to a trans-territorial community that is linked to Putin's Russia through the Russian language, Russian Orthodoxy, shared historical experiences with Moscow and other former Moscow-ruled territories, cooperation with Moscow, culture, and values. Russkiy Mir is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual in essence, but the Russian language, nationality, and Russian Orthodoxy dominate Russkiy Mir society. Russian ethnicity is conceptualised as a super-etnos. Subsequently, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Tatars, and Chechens can all be Russian in this reading.

This thesis explored how Ukraine and Kazakhstan are imagined within the Russkiy Mir concept through the analysis of Putin's essays, statements of Russian officials, the articles of Russian scholars, and Russian media. In this conclusion, the research question of this thesis will be answered.

“How and why are Kazakhstan and Ukraine imagined differently within the concept of the Russkiy Mir?”

Ukraine

Ukraine takes a special place within Russkiy Mir thinking. There are several reasons for that. Russkiy Mir is imagined as a transnational empire that transcends the borders of the Russian Federation and is a global civilization. Ukraine, together with Belarus and Russia, belongs to the very core of the Russkiy Mir civilization. This sense of unity stems from the idea that the three eastern Slavic peoples of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, together form the eastern Slavic and Orthodox civilization that is the foundation of the Russian World. According to Putin, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine together form the Russian people. Their perceived unity lays in a shared history, dating back to the baptism of medieval Kyivan Rus, shared language, Orthodox Christianity, wars against the Swedes and Ottomans, the development of Russian culture and statehood, the Second World War, and the experiences of communism.

Interestingly, despite a perceived shared history, Moscow also emphasises Ukraine's troubled history from a Russian perspective. With Russia's emphasis on 'denazifying' Ukraine, Moscow refers to the Second World War and Stepan Bandera and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). Moreover, in his essay of July 2021, Putin claims that the Cossack Hetman

Mazepa, who rebelled against Moscow, had relatively few followers. The anti-Russian attitude that can be found in Ukraine is according to Putin, the result of foreign agents – the West.

An important aspect to consider is that according to Putin's discourse concerning Russo-Ukrainian relations, there is continuity. On the one hand, Ukraine belongs to the Russian World since medieval times and continues to belong to the Russian World until this day. However, also since medieval times, foreign powers have attempted to disunite Ukraine and Russia.

Currently, there is widespread support among Russkiy Mir adherents for the Russian war in Ukraine. This is indicated by statements made by Russian politicians, opinion makers, journalists, but also by officials of the Russian Orthodox Church. ROC frames the war in Ukraine as a holy war to keep Holy Rus together, but also as a crusade against the West and its liberal ideology. Thus, besides religious, and historical ties, there is an important contemporary component of Russkiy Mir thinking, namely Russia's battle with the West. More precise: Russia's battle with the West *in Ukraine*. This battle, that mostly revolves itself around values and geopolitics, has increasingly been framed by the Kremlin as a struggle between ancient Holy Rus' and the satanist West. Ukraine is imagined through the Russkiy Mir concept as the actual frontline where Russia and the West are engaged in a battle. The West, in this view, instrumentalises Ukraine in order to deprive Russia from its 'historical lands' and special role within Eurasia. The Ukraine that seeks to distance itself from Russia is an artificial construct, created by the Soviets, according to Putin.

Thus, according to Russkiy Mir ideology, there is continuity between Kiyvan Rus and the contemporary Russian World. Ukraine is one of the three 'Russia's' that constitute the core of the Russian World. However, at the same time, there is another Ukraine that is hostile to Russia. That Ukraine seeks to distance itself from Moscow, join the West, and is instrumentalised by the West at the forefront in the battle between Russkiy Mir and the West.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's position within the Russkiy Mir is different from Ukraine. Kazakhstan's belongingness towards Russkiy Mir mostly stems from a shared Soviet history, shared historical experiences and contemporary institutional cooperation. There is no medieval continuity between Russia and Kazakhstan, but Kazakhstan has become part of the Russian World the moment Moscow began with its imperial project and colonised the lands in the East during Tsarism. In the 19th century, Slavic settlers settled themselves in what are now the northern parts of Kazakhstan and Cossacks established Verniy in what is now the south of Kazakhstan

– that is contemporary Almaty. During Soviet times, Kazakhstan developed itself rapidly through its relationship with Moscow, like the other Central Asian republics. During the Second World War, many factories were relocated to Kazakhstan from the western parts of the Soviet Union to stay safe from a potential Nazi occupation.

Despite several remarks made by Russian propagandists on Russian television, or former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's public threats towards Kazakhstan, Astana's position within the Russian World is rather secure. Despite maintaining relations with other powers through Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, Astana remains part of Moscow-led integrationist projects in the Eurasian space. In 2014, Putin argued that it is in Kazakhstan's own interest to remain "in the so-called greater Russian world".²⁷⁰ The main arguments given by adherents of *Russkiy Mir* to explain why Kazakhstan belongs to the *Russkiy Mir* in their opinion centre around the idea that Kazakhstan owes its very existence to Russia and the Soviet Union. In this way, there is similarity with Ukraine, because Ukraine is also considered to be an artificial construct. However, the difference is that Ukraine is in essence Russian and the Ukraine that is Ukrainian is artificial, whereas Kazakhstan in essence is not Russian, but the result of Russia's 'special civilizational mission' in the world.

Kazakhstan is not considered to be at the core of the *Russkiy Mir* in the broadest sense. However, because of the presence of Russian Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan since the expansion of the Russian Empire and the settlement of Slavic settlers the Soviet experience, and the use of Russian in contemporary Kazakhstan, *Russkiy Mir*-adherents do consider Kazakhstan to be part of the spiritual and religious world of the *Russkiy Mir*. Especially the northern parts of Kazakhstan, which by many Russian nationalists are considered to be Russian lands 'given' to Kazakhstan by the Soviets. In addition, Kazakhstan is imagined as the multi-ethnic and multireligious form of *Russkiy Mir*. Kazakhstan belongs to the *Russkiy Mir*, but is not, unlike Ukraine, perceived as constituting the essence and core of *Russkiy Mir*. Kazakhstan started belonging to the *Russkiy Mir* after Russia's expansion, whereas Ukraine is the cradle of *Russkiy Mir* civilization.

What can these differences with Ukraine mean in the future for Kazakhstan? Laruelle argues that the countries that have aligned themselves to Moscow's Eurasian project have not yet experienced the instrumentalization of their Russian minorities by the Kremlin for political means. The same goes for those countries that do not participate in Moscow's integrationist

²⁷⁰ Laruelle, "The "Russian World," 18.

projects, but nevertheless maintain good bilateral relations with Russia, as for example Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Thus, Russkiy Mir is invoked when Eurasia fails.²⁷¹ The Kremlin's capability to create an informational space through Russian-state owned media and the Russian language enabled Moscow to create an informational space in Central Asia through which not only ethnic Russians perceive the world through Russian eyes. Following Laruelle, the region can be seen constituting part of Russkiy Mir because it belongs to the Russian information space.²⁷²

What differentiates the Russkiy Mir from other 'Mir's' is that the Russkiy Mir conjugates with the understanding of 'empire', 'great power', and 'civilization'. Indeed, Gromiko argues, that Russkiy Mir came into being from the Russian Empire. Second, the core of the Russian Mir, is Russia – a great power. Third, Russian World equals “*Русская, или Российская цивилизация.*”²⁷³ Thus, it is important to recognize that Russkiy Mir discourse might have implications for geopolitical stability in the post-Soviet space. If Astana boldly starts moving away from Moscow's perceived sphere of influence, it can become another victim of Moscow's aggression.

Contribution to the Literature

This thesis attempts to contribute to the literature through a comparative analysis of Ukraine and Kazakhstan in Russkiy Mir ideology. Through a discourse analysis of Russkiy Mir ideology of the two former Soviet republics, this thesis contributes to a better understanding of Russian post-imperial policies towards its former subjects. As the war in Ukraine has illustrated, Russian discourse does matter and the Russian narrative contributes to Russia constructing its own reality – with potentially disastrous consequences for its former colonies.

Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis aims at contributing to the literature by analysing how Ukraine and Kazakhstan are perceived within the Russkiy Mir by its adherents through the analysis of statements of Russian politicians, Russian academics, and Russian journalists.

For in the future, it is important that scholars continue to conduct research on Russian foreign policy drivers and the instrumentalization of the Russkiy Mir concept by the Kremlin

²⁷¹ Laruelle, “The “Russian World,” 18.

²⁷² Ibid., 19.

²⁷³ English Translation: “*Russian, or Russian civilization.*”

Громыко, “Русский Мир: Понятие, причины, ценности, структура,” 22.

and other pro-Kremlin actors. Without neglecting academic objectivity and avoiding the pretention that the future can be predicted, a thorough understanding of Russian political thinking can foster an adequate response to geopolitical challenges in the future within the post-Soviet space – and even beyond.

A seemingly pressing issue is the continuing and increasing control of Moscow over Belarus. As the analysis of the Russkiy Mir concept has shown, Belarus is at the Russkiy's Mir very core due to similar reasons as Ukraine: due to a shared history, language, and religion Belarus belongs to the eastern Slavic Orthodox civilization. In Moscow's perception, that is the Russkiy Mir. In addition to this perceived shared identity, the mass demonstrations of 2020 in Belarus against the false election of Aleksandr Lukashenko were only suppressed with the help of Putin, which allowed Russia to even gain a stronger grip on Minsk. Therefore, a suggestion for future research would be how Belarus is imagined through Russkiy Mir and how Belarus imagines itself.

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