

Novorossiya: A Launching Pad for Russian Nationalists

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The Ukraine crisis is a game changer for Russia's domestic landscape. One of the most eloquent engines of this is the spread of the concept of "Novorossiya," or New Russia. With origins dating from the second half of the 18th century, the term was revived during the Ukraine crisis and gained indirect official validation when Russian President Vladimir Putin used it during a call-in show in April 2014 to evoke the situation of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. It appeared again in May when the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) decided to unite in a "Union of Novorossiya." In August, a presidential statement was addressed to the "Insurgents of Novorossiya," though the text itself referred only to "representatives of the Donbas."

The powerful pull of Novorossiya rests on its dual meaning in announcing the birth of a New Russia geographically and metaphorically. It is both a promised land to be added to Russia and an anticipation of Russia's own transformation. As such, "Novorossiya" provides for an exceptional convergence of three underlying ideological paradigms that I briefly analyze here.

"Red" Novorossiya

The first ideological motif nurturing Novorossiya emphasizes Soviet memory. Novorossiya is both a spatial and ideological gift to Russia's reassertion as a great power: it brings new territory and a new mission. This inspiration enjoys consensus among the Russian population and is widely shared by Russian nationalists and the Kremlin. The "red" reading of Novorossiya justifies the Donbas insurgency in the name of geopolitical arguments, Russia's destiny as a large territory, and Soviet perceptions of the Donbas as a region proud of its industrial legacy and one that shows the way to a new oligarchic-free Russia.

Spearheading this conception is Alexander Prokhanov and his nationalist think tank, the Izborsky Club, which is the most vocal of the groups with developed connections in the Donbas. Prokhanov proudly stated that “all the current military elites of Novorossiia are authors of my newspapers, *Den* and *Zavtra*....These people are like my younger brothers.”¹ The Izborsky Club directly advises DNR leaders in drafting their constitution and some of their legal documents. In deciphering the meaning of Novorossiia for Russia, Prokhanov puts an emphasis on economic issues: Novorossiia “will be above all a non-oligarchic state. Big owners such as [Rinat] Akhmetov will be expelled....I went to see the huge industries there that work with Russia. They are the products of Soviet impulse, of Soviet elites. They are the future industry of Novorossiia; this is a powerful industry that will cooperate with Russia.”² Thus, the main gist of Prokhanov’s understanding of Novorossiia is as a renewed form of the Soviet Union that will be liberated from oligarchs, have its enterprises renationalized, and will witness the emergence of a new Russian socialism.

Eurasian ideologist Alexander Dugin prefers to focus on the territorial aspect of Novorossiia. In an April 2014 interview, Dugin stated that he sees in the Ukraine crisis the birth of a “Great Russia” (*Bol’shaya Rossiya*) that he equates with “the Russian world, the Russian civilization. I think the territory of Great Russia approximately overlaps, with some minuses and pluses, the territory of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.”³ When Pozner asked him to specify the exact borders of this Great Russia, Dugin acknowledged that it excluded the Baltic states and western Ukraine but included the South Caucasus, Central Asia, eastern Ukraine, and Transnistria. With the concept of “Great Russia” Dugin attempts to merge the Kremlin’s two main foreign policy doctrines for the post-Soviet region, the Eurasian Union and the Russian World. This allows for the Russification of the concept of Eurasia, too often suspected of betraying Russia’s national interests in favor of backward peripheries, therefore allowing it to keep pace with increasingly xenophobic public opinion.

“White” Novorossiia

The “white” approach to Novorossiia sees the Donbas insurgency as a vehicle that can open the way to a renewal of political Orthodoxy. This, in turn, will confirm Russia’s status as a herald of conservative values and Christianity and, for some adherents of this view, popularize the notion of a new monarchy. It sees in Orthodoxy both a civilizational principle that makes Russia a distinct country and a political value that resonate with the regime. In many ways, this political Orthodoxy draws inspiration

¹ “Aleksandr Prokhanov. Vključat’ Novorossiiju v sostav Rossii eshche ne vremya i ne rezon,” Rambler, July 1, 2014, <http://www.rambler.ru/view/149118/?origin=sobesednik&topic=head>

² Ibid.

³ “Pozner. Aleksandr Dugin,” First channel, April 21, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cc0xuUgLV6I>. Full transcript available at: <http://pozneronline.ru/2014/04/7669/>

from the Black Hundreds, a far-right movement created during the 1905 Revolution that defended a most reactionary autocracy, refused the liberalization of the Russian political regime, organized pogroms in the name of a fierce anti-Semitism, and was also violently anti-Ukrainian.

Many groups nurturing the concept of Novorossiia adopt political Orthodoxy as their main credo. Ultra-conservative Orthodox motifs are highly developed both on the ground in eastern Ukraine, in particular inside the so-called "Russian Orthodox Army," and among their supporters in Russia. All political Orthodoxy groups promoting Novorossiia have personal connections with some senior clerics in the Moscow Patriarchate, which directly or indirectly encourages these movements, and with "Orthodox businessmen" such as Konstantin Malofeev. All make use of Tsarist imagery, including pictures of Nicholas II and his family, and utilize open or veiled anti-Semitic narratives.

The Russian imperial flag has often been flown at combat sites in the Donbas and at meetings in Russia to support Novorossiia. In August 2014, the previously adopted flag of Novorossiia, red and blue and inspired by a flag of the Tsarist Navy, was relegated for use as a battle flag to make room for a new state flag, the Russian imperial white-yellow-black tricolor. The secessionist authorities stated that through the adoption of the new flag, used as a symbol of the Russian Empire from 1858 to 1883, they "integrate their own history into the historical course of the Russian state." Positive memories of Russia's Tsarist past are getting an unprecedented boost from the Novorossiia mythmaking process.

"Brown" Novorossiia

Novorossiia also became the engine of the so-called "Russian spring," which claims that the ongoing "national revolution" should not only fight Kyiv but export itself to Russia. This motif can be defined as neo-fascist; it calls for a totalitarian national revolution that would overthrow the current regime and transform society. It combines an allegedly leftist discourse denouncing corporations and oligarchs and a focus on the dangers threatening the survival of the nation, two features typical for fascist movements. Volunteer groups fighting alongside Donbas insurgents and nurturing the ideological war at home display many fascist symbols and glorify violence and sacrifice. Some of these groups claim association with the practically defunct Russian National Unity movement of Alexander Barkashov, and these are joined by dozens of other small groups offering all possible versions of neo-Nazi ideology.

Dugin is also one of the champions of this approach, seeking to open a new, domestic, front in the ideological war of Novorossiia. After years of denouncing the liberal and pro-Western "fifth column," he recently launched the concept of a "sixth column" of

internal enemies—Kremlin modernizers, in particular Vladislav Surkov—and accuses them of hampering Putin’s will to intervene militarily in eastern Ukraine.

This “brown” reading of Novorossiia is also the most internationalized. It networks with a kind of Neo-Fascist/Neo-Nazi International ready to fight for the Novorossiia cause—if, ironically, also for their right-wing Ukrainian adversaries. Both Russian and Ukrainian insurgents are joined by dozens of foreigners from Serbia, Belarus, Italy, France, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic states.

It should be noted that even the main Russian neo-Nazi groups are internally divided. Most of them support the Russian over the Ukrainian side but call for Novorossiia to remain free and avoid unification with a corrupt Russia. A minority, however, saw Euromaidan as a genuine democratic revolution against a corrupt regime backed by Putin and are now supportive of the current Ukrainian government. This is the case, for example, of some members of *Restrukt*, who joined the Ukrainian Right Sector and its various brigades. The *Russkie* movement, which brings together former members of Belov’s Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) and Dmitri Demushkin’s skinhead Slavic Union, is also divided. A pro-Ukrainian minority stand alongside neo-Nazis from all of Europe, particularly Sweden, Italy, Germany, and Finland.

The Intertwining of Narratives and Networks

“Novorossiia” is thus a unique sounding box for Russian nationalism, nurturing simultaneously “red,” “white,” and “brown” readings of the events happening in eastern Ukraine. These three interpretations compete but also overlap in certain doctrinal elements and organizational networks. Anti-Semitism is one of the main shared doctrines, as Jews can be simultaneously denounced as oligarchs and capitalist bankers, enemies of Christianity and Russia, and as polluting the white Aryan race in Europe. Anti-Westernism is another shared doctrinal element, but this is “softened” by the movement’s complex relationship to Europe; the “white” and “brown” motifs in fact exhibit pan-European postures via their respective commitments to Christianity and “white power.” Dugin straddles both the “red” and “brown” camps; he is faithful both to Eurasianist and fascist outlooks. Others, including the Russian Imperial Legion and some youth groups, intermix Black Hundred and neo-Nazi imagery. Finally, the “brown” motif is the most paradoxical as it reveals an open neo-Nazi fracture between pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian groups.

Conclusion: The Revenge of 1993

This intertwining of narratives and networks should remind us of another one, associated with the clash between then-President Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament in October 1993. The Ukraine crisis is a new turning point for Russian nationalists. It is their most important fight since October 1993, when they helped

defend the parliament against dissolution by Yeltsin. One cannot help but draw a parallel between the two events. For the first time since 1993, Russian nationalists can finally point to actions rather than words. Similar ideological groups can be identified in 1993 and in 2014, intertwining the “red,” “white,” and “brown” of Russian nationalism. The defunct Russian National Unity even seemed to rise from the ashes for the occasion. In both cases, paramilitary groups have embodied the fight, benefiting from personal protection from the security services and the military and claiming legitimacy for their patriotic upbringing. The Izborsky Club stands out as an ideological successor to the Supreme Soviet, trying to articulate a coherent policy whole on the basis of diverse nationalist doctrines. Political Orthodoxy and “Orthodox businessmen” have updated the legacy of *Pamyat* that marked the Russian nationalist spectrum in the final years of perestroika and in the first years of post-Soviet Russia.

Novorossiia may eventually have a boomerang effect. If the Donbas insurgency collapses, Putin will face the return of nationalist groups unrestrained by months of ideological struggle and crowned by dead martyrs, as well as a few thousand suddenly battle-hardened men. It is uncertain how Moscow can prepare for the return of these fighters. It will require measures of either authoritarian repression, which would be costly for the regime and would impact the general “patriotic” atmosphere, or cooptation in one form or another, for instance integrating them into some kind of institutionalized paramilitary role similar to Cossacks. The anti-regime mood of many, especially those who assume that the Kremlin has abandoned them, will push them to join the ranks of the resistance to Putin. If, however, the insurgency succeeds in imposing an autonomous Donbas, then the Kremlin will have to deal with a vassal regime incommensurably more nationalist than the one in Transnistria.

In the end, the main boomerang effect may be at the level not of the insurgents but of the ideological nurturers of Novorossiia. Both the Izborsky Club and political Orthodox lobbyists have raised their profile in the Russian public space and are cultivating networks of influence that rise high in the state hierarchy. Their hope is to make nationalism, whatever its doctrinal content, the new state ideology of Russia.