

The Ambiguities of the Separatist Symbolic “(Pro-)Russianness”: The Case of the Unrecognised Donetsk People’s Republic¹

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution and internal ambiguities of separatist symbolic “(pro-)Russianness” in the unrecognised Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) between 2014 and 2022. Focusing on symbolic politics, historical narratives, and language policy, it shows that the separatist discourse was neither linear nor ideologically coherent. In the aftermath of the failure of the *Novorossia* project and the signing of the Minsk II agreement, DNR leaders temporarily emphasised Donbas regionalism, multiethnicity, and interethnic tolerance, presenting their polity as a multiethnic alternative to Ukrainian ethnic nationalism that separatists attributed to the Ukrainian leadership in Kyiv. This orientation was reflected in language policies, historical references to the Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic, and educational materials. However, these narratives coexisted with competing Russian nationalist interpretations and gradually gave way to a more explicitly *russkii*-centric discourse. The adoption of the “Russian Donbas” doctrine in 2021 marked a decisive symbolic shift toward ethnic nationalism and irredentism. The article argues that these shifts reflect changing political contexts, strategic calculations, and the instrumental use of history in separatist state- and nation-building.

Keywords: Donbas; Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR); separatism; Russian World; historical memory; language policy; nation-building.

On 28 January 2021, an “Integration Forum ‘Russian Donbas’” (*intergratsionnyi forum “Russkii Donbass”*) took place in Donetsk, the capital of the then unrecognised separatist Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR). In addition to local participants—including representatives of the neighbouring Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR)—the forum was attended by several media “heavyweights” from Russia, among them Margarita Simonyan, head of the Russia Today holding, the main mouthpiece of Russia’s international propaganda. A number of Russian parliamentarians also took part in the forum, while several others submitted pre-recorded video messages. The main highlight of the forum, however, was the adoption of the eponymous doctrine “Russian Donbas,” which declared as its goal

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the “consolidation of the statehood of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics as Russian nation-states [*ukrepleniiu gosudarstvennosti Donetskoi i Luganskoii Narodnykh Respublik kak russkikh natsional’nykh gosudarstv*].”²

Some of the deputies of DNR’s People’s Soviet, the parliament of the separatist republic, who contributed to the elaboration of the doctrine, attempted to present its emergence as a logical step in the coherent strategy of the evolution of two breakaway republics since their declaration in 2014.³ There were obvious political reasons to frame the newly declared doctrine as a continuation of the same ideological and political course towards the celebration of Donbas’ “Russianness” at the time of the adoption of the “Russian Donbas” doctrine. Nonetheless, a closer examination of the evolution of the symbolic dimension of the DNR and LNR political course since 2014 and until Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing annexation of the two separatist republics unveils a much more complex picture.

In this article, I will outline some of the ambiguities of the declared “(Pro-) Russianness” in the political discourse of the Donetsk People’s Republic and their evolution from 2014 to 2022. The political discourse in these separatist polities was framed by the internal and external goals of the Donbas separatist republics and their patron-state, that is Russia, the existence of competing and at times converging intellectual and ideological trends among Donbas separatists, and the overall evolution of Donbas-related international politics.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on one of the two separatist republics that existed in Donbas at that time. The main trends outlined below were generally common to both the DNR and the LNR. It is also important to note that during their years of unrecognised existence, the DNR was the driving force behind ideological and symbolic innovation in separatist political discourse. The LNR leadership largely followed suit.⁴ In my discussion of these issues, I will focus particularly on how the separatist leaders used historical references for political purposes.

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The Novorossiiia project dominated the early stages of the existence of the Donbas separatist republics. Historically, *Novorossiiia* (“New Russia”) referred to the 18th and 19th-century Russian imperial territorial acquisitions, roughly corresponding to present-day Southern and Eastern Ukraine. The present-day understandings of what Novorossiiia meant, though, differed among the separatist leaders, some of whom saw Novorossiiia as a step to a sort of USSR revival, others rather that of the return of the Russian Empire, yet others as a “regeneration” of

² Russkii Tsent, *Doktrina “Russkii Donbass”*, Russian-Center.ru, 4 Sept. 2019 (or latest update), <https://russian-center.ru/8315-2/> (accessed 7 Nov. 2024).

³ Miroslav Rudenko and Oleg Onopko, “Doktrina ‘Russkii Donbass’: Ideino-teoreticheskie osnovy i politicheskoe znachenie,” *Voprosy Natsionalizma*, no. 1 (2021): 126–33.

⁴ Elsewhere I have also highlighted some of the disagreements between the leadership of two Donbas separatist republic, Alexandr Voronovici, “Internationalist Separatism and the Political Use of the “Historical Statehood” in the Unrecognized Republics of Transnistria and Donbass,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 67 (2022): 297.

the Russian nation. In Marlene Laruelle's words, the Novorossia project attracted different interpretations from among its supporters: "red" (Soviet), "white" (Orthodox), and "brown" (fascist).⁵

Nevertheless, a more pronounced Russian orientation in symbolic and historical politics was evident in the early stages of the separatist republics in Donbas. While some separatist leaders interpreted Russianness in ethnic terms, others did so in terms of imperial nationalism, while a third group adopted a Soviet-style approach to a Russian-led peoples' union. The term "Russian Spring" (*Russkaia vesna*), coined by the Russian nationalist publicist Egor Kholmogorov to describe pro-Russian protests in Ukraine, has become widespread. It presupposes an alleged and desired Russian national "awakening" in Ukraine, as well as the aspirations of local Russians and Russian speakers to "return" to Russia and its political patronage.

However, it soon became clear that the Russian propaganda machine, pro-Russian (para-)military forces and pro-Russian political movements had failed to successfully spread secession beyond the DNR, LNR and Crimea. As a result, the Novorossia project was "frozen". In symbolic terms, the focus shifted towards Donbas rather than the larger "Novorossia" territories, and towards Donbas' multiethnic character rather than its Russianness.⁶

Indeed, in both DNR and LNR cases, there was a pronounced pro-Russian orientation. However, the pro-Russian orientation was more *rossiiskii* than *russkii* in nature. Russian language and culture played a key role in the public sphere, state-building, and attempts to form a regional community in the separatist republics. Nevertheless, the leaders of Donbas at least declaratively emphasised the multiethnicity of the local population and its inherent interethnic tolerance, which they contrasted to the militant ethnic nationalism attributed to the Ukrainian authorities. The separatist leaders claimed that it was the interests of the multiethnic population of Donbas that they defended and represented.⁷

The new approach was well-suited to the circumstances following the signing of the Minsk II agreement in February 2015, which ended large-scale military

⁵ Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2016): 55–74; see also, Mikhail Minakov, "Novorossiya and the Transnationalism of Unrecognized Post-Soviet Nations," in *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Timm Beichelt and Susann Worschech (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2017), 65–88; Anna Matveeva, *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

⁶ These should not be imagined as clear-cut stages. Rather, one can observe coexisting tendencies. Depending on the circumstances and political goals, one tendency may become more prominent than the other.

⁷ See also, Yulia Abibok, "Identity Policy in the Self-Proclaimed Republics in East Ukraine," OSW Centre for Eastern Studies, June 6, 2018, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2018-06-06/identity-policy-self-proclaimed-republics-east-ukraine-0> (accessed November 7, 2024).



operations in eastern Ukraine and, for the time being, froze the separatist DNR and LNR in an intermediary state. The agreement was signed after (pro-)Russian forces had scored several major victories over the Kyiv military and were on the offensive. As a result, the agreement largely reflected this situation and constituted a significant diplomatic victory for Moscow and the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. It envisioned a special autonomous status for DNR and LNR, as well as a major say at the all-Ukrainian level. Moscow's crucial role in the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine was not acknowledged. In addition, Kyiv and Moscow interpreted some parts of the agreement differently, which undermined the possibilities of its realisation.⁸

In this new post-Minsk II context, the idea of reintegrating the breakaway Donbas republics back into Ukraine with broad autonomy became an important part of Russia's strategy in Ukraine. Reintegration under these conditions would have allowed the local Donbas leadership—and, through them, Moscow—to exert significant influence over Ukrainian politics and effectively gain a veto over major (geo)political decisions. Under these circumstances, breaking with everything Ukrainian and symbolically monopolising identity under an exclusively Russian banner would have contradicted the outlined strategy.

In addition, throughout their existence, the Donbas separatist republics declared the necessity of exerting influence in Ukraine beyond their borders, promoting their project as an alternative to Kyiv's not only to those parts of Donbas but also to broader segments of Ukraine that remained under the control of the Ukrainian government. The "Humanitarian Program for the Reunification of the People of Donbas" was one embodiment of this approach.⁹ The program, for instance, created educational and medical opportunities in DNR and LNR for the population of the Kyiv-controlled parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

But there was more to this symbolic shift than a situational adaptation to a new international conjuncture. According to the pre-secession data, the population of Donetsk and Luhansk regions was quite diverse from ethnic and linguistic points of view. Moreover, the majority was Ukrainian and not a Russian one. In the context of the contested legitimacy of a separatist polity, an attempt to appeal to and to claim the representation of larger groups of the region's population might have seemed like an advantageous approach.

Additionally, the shift towards a symbolic emphasis on multiethnicity intertwined well with longer-term traditions of local discourses on Donbas regional-

⁸ For the discussion of Minsk II and their (failed) realisation, see Cindy Wittke, "The Minsk Agreements – More than 'Scraps of Paper'?" *East European Politics* 35, no. 3 (2019): 264–90; Kristian Åtland, "Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2020): 122–39; Kristian Åtland, "War, diplomacy, and more war: why did the Minsk agreements fail?" *International Politics* (2024). <https://doi-org.manchester.idm.oclc.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00637-x>

⁹ "Gumanitarnaya Programma po Vossoedineniyu Naroda Donbassa," Ombudsman of the Donetsk People's Republic, <https://ombudsman-dnr.ru/gumanitarnaya-programma-po-vossoedineniyu-naroda-donbassa/> (accessed November 7, 2024).

ism and uniqueness. In this regard, these were familiar tropes both for local political leaders and for the broader population.

Symbolically, this tendency was reflected in two decisions. In both the DNR and the LNR, there were initially two official state languages: Russian and Ukrainian. Obviously, Russian dominated the public and official space. The leadership of the Donbas separatist republics proclaimed their orientation towards Russia and their belonging to the “Russian World” (*Russkii mir*), and strong Russifying tendencies were present. Nevertheless, this symbolic recognition of the status of the Ukrainian language was telling. It was only in 2020—in May for the DNR and in June for the LNR—that Ukrainian lost its official status, with Russian remaining the sole state language in the two separatist republics.

The adoption of the “Memorandum of the Donetsk People’s Republic on the Principles of State-Building, Political and Historical Continuity” (*Memorandum DNR ob osnovah gosudarstvennogo stroitel’sтва, politicheskoi i istoricheskoi preemstvennosti*)¹⁰ by the DNR People’s Council—the parliament of the break-away polity—on 6 February 2015 constituted another major manifestation of the new tendencies in separatist memory and symbolic politics. The leadership of the separatist republic proclaimed the DNR to be a successor of the Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic (DKRSR) and its “traditions.” The DKRSR was a short-lived Soviet republic that emerged in February 1918 in the chaotic context of the civil war and claimed the territories of the Donetsk and Kryvyi Rih mining and industrial basins—that is, much of present-day, internationally recognised eastern Ukraine, as well as bordering Russian territories. There is a historiographical debate over whether the polity existed beyond the political declarations of its leaders and some bureaucratic formalities, and whether it actually controlled any of the territories it claimed. In any case, even by the most generous assessments, it existed only until February 1919.

The Memorandum characterised the DKRSR as a “multinational people’s state [*mnogonatsional’nogo narodnogo gosudarstva*]” and claimed historical continuity between the Soviet republic and the DNR. Essentially, the DKRSR became a celebrated historical statehood of the DNR, the anniversary of which was annually commemorated by the local separatist leadership. For our purposes, the discursive shift introduced by the Memorandum is of major importance. It emphasised “economic integration” as a key factor in the emergence of the DKRSR. Commenting on the Memorandum in later interviews, separatist leaders likewise highlighted the economic factor as the main basis for the emergence of Donbas statehood—both the DKRSR and the DNR.¹¹

¹⁰ “Memorandum,” People’s Council of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), <https://web.archive.org/web/20160316070936/http://dnrsovet.su/zakonodatelnaya-deyatelnost/memorandum/> (accessed December 23, 2025).

¹¹ “«My ne otdeliaem sebja ot Har’kova i Odessy» Interv’iu s predsedelem Narodnogo soveta DNR Andreem Purginym,” *Lenta.ru*, February 9, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/09/dnrpurgin/> (accessed November 10, 2024).



The new separatist discourse differed in its emphases from the *Novorossia* project. It downplayed the Russian imperial and/or nationalist dimensions of the latter, foregrounding instead Donbas regional specificity, economic self-sufficiency, and multiethnicity.

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The discursive emphasis on multiethnicity—and especially on an inclusive attitude towards “Ukrainianness” and the Ukrainian language—along with the toning down of Russian imperial and nationalist elements, was not unambiguous and did not go uncontested.

The political program of Pavel Gubarev, one of the early leaders of Donbas separatism in 2014, who was later marginalised, provides a good indication of this. In 2018, he attempted to run for the position of head of the DNR in the elections. Among other things, Gubarev’s campaign program emphasised the need for the “purification” of the DNR’s education and culture from the “hostile to historical Russia ideology of Ukrainianness [*ochishcheny ot vrazhdebnoi istoricheskoi Rossiia ideologii ukrainstva*]” and the “nurturing of young people in the spirit of Russian [*russkie*] national values.”¹² By promoting such an agenda as an opposition candidate, Gubarev sought to play the Russian nationalist card against the DNR’s governing mainstream. Eventually, the DNR elections committee withdrew him from the race, claiming that some of the signatures in his support were invalid. Ironically, however, some of Gubarev’s programmatic statements were later at least partially implemented by those he ran against, and elements of his discourse became part of the officially promoted separatist propaganda.

The ambiguity in interpretations of the orientation towards Russia and the “Russian World” persisted. This can be traced, for example, in university textbooks on the history of Donbas. In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Science of the DNR recommended two textbooks. One was prepared for students of non-historical specialisations; the second was aimed at a broader circle of students and history teachers. Interestingly, according to the editorial data, the Ministry approved both textbooks on the same day. At the same time, the dominant analytical frameworks of the two textbooks differ significantly.

The textbook for non-historical specialisations, entitled “History: Donbas in the Context of the Development of the Russian State [*ruskogo gosudarstva*]”,¹³ presents a Russian ethnic narrative of Donbas history. This is emphasised by the very title of the textbook, which uses the term *ruskii* rather than *rossiiskii* state. It should be noted that such a choice of wording and terminology—especially with reference to the modern and contemporary periods—was unusual even in the Russian context at the time. This phrasing was largely drawn from the repertoire of various Russian nationalist and monarchist groups. Indeed, the content of the

¹² Pavel Gubarev, “Programma,” personal website, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181013205438/http://pgubarev.ru/> (accessed December 23, 2025).

¹³ A. V. Brovar’ ed., *Istoriya: Donbass v kontekste razvitiia Russkogo gosudarstva. Uchebnik dlia studentov neistoricheskikh spetsial’nostei obrazovatel’nykh organizatsii vysshego professional’nogo obrazovaniia* (Donetsk: Donetsk National University, 2017).

textbook largely follows the logic suggested by its title. In the introduction, the authors stress that one of the textbook’s tasks is to cultivate “a sense of patriotism, love, and pride for one’s homeland and the Russian nation.” The use of the phrase “Russian nation” (*rusaskaia natsiia*)—or even “Russian national state” (*ruskoe natsional’noe gosudarstvo*), rather than simply “Russian people” (*ruskii narod*)—highlights the textbook’s dominant national(ist) framework. To some extent, the use of the adjective *ruskii* in this context does not entirely exclude the symbolic inclusion of other groups in the Donbas political project. Nevertheless, the textbook does not emphasise the multinational character of the Donbas population or its subjectivity as a multiethnic community.

In this respect, the contrast with the second textbook, entitled “History (History of Donbas: from Antiquity to the Present): A Textbook”, is striking. Its authors emphasise in every possible way the “multinational character of the region [*mnogonatsional’nyi kharakter regiona*],” to the formation of which “representatives of each nation made their contribution.”¹⁴ Later in the textbook, multiethnicity repeatedly comes to the fore. Notably, the book contains a separate section that explains the population of Donbas through the prism of an “interethnic community” (*mezhetnicheskaia obshchnost’*). The authors note that “over the course of the twentieth century, a stable interethnic community has developed in Donbas, speaking Russian, with common value orientations, cultural features, a clear regional sense of self, identity, and stable ethnic and religious tolerance.” Slightly later, the authors state explicitly that “the inhabitants of the region constitute a stable interethnic community (and not a separate ethnic group). At the same time, regional identity absolutely dominates over ethnic identity.”¹⁵

Overall, this textbook is written with an emphasis on regional multiethnicity, interethnic and intercultural tolerance, and the local population’s rejection of ethnic nationalism. However, the inclusion of a separate section explaining the essence of the Donbas “interethnic community” suggests that the authors themselves understood that this argument—and the historical narrative built around it—might not be obvious even to the population of the region and might be significantly more difficult to grasp than a Russian nationalist narrative, which is more straightforward, even if more uncompromising. For the sake of comparison, it is noteworthy that the authors of Transnistrian history textbooks likewise considered it necessary to address the issue of the “regional identity” of the Transnistrian population in a separate short section. They concluded as follows: “one can state the process of formation of a people called ‘Transnistrian’ and the creation of a political nation.”¹⁶

The coexistence of two textbooks with different conceptual frameworks in the DNR underscored the presence of divergent ideas about “Russianness” and about

¹⁴ L. T. Shepko and V. N. Nikol’skii, *Istoriia (istoriia Donbassa ot drevnosti do sovremennosti): uchebnoe posobie* (Donetsk: Donetsk National University, 2018), 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 556.

¹⁶ N. V. Babilunga and B. G. Bomesheko, *Istoriia Pridnestrovskoi Moldavskoi Respubliki. 11 klass: Uchebnik dlia obshcheobrazovatel’nykh uchrezhdenii* (Tiraspol’: PGIRO, 2014), 121–22.



the dominant identity of the local population in the region, as well as the ambiguity surrounding the orientation towards Russia and unification with it. Nevertheless, it was the second manual—built around the narrative of the “multinationality” of Donbas—that was adopted as the basis for the development of school history textbooks, which were introduced beginning in autumn 2019. This choice highlights that, at that time, the narrative emphasising the multiethnic regional identity of Donbas was dominant in the unrecognised republic.

This tendency is also evident in teaching materials for the subject “Lessons in Donbas Civics” (*Uroki grazhdanstvennosti Donbassa*), which was one of the school subjects in the DNR. In these publications, three “macrospheres” were identified for each grade: “Donbas is my Motherland,” “Donbas and the Russian World,” and “Raise a Citizen of the Donetsk People’s Republic in Yourself.” The first two macrospheres, in particular, addressed key historical and political topics in school education, as defined by the authors of the didactic programmes. It is significant that discussions of Donbas’s belonging to the “Russian World” coexist with a pronounced emphasis on the region’s multiethnicity. Thus, materials for the ninth grade include lessons entitled “National ‘Palette’ of the Donetsk Region” and “The History of Donbas Is an Integral Part of the History of the Russian World.”

The lesson on the national “palette,” for example, includes a text on the history of the Yuzovsky plant, containing the following passage: “For representatives of different ethnic groups, Donbas is a native home. Today, more than 100 nations and peoples live in the region, most of whom have found a second homeland, creating a multinational family of the peoples of Donbas. The intellectual potential of each ethnic group is very rich and unique. From the mosaic of their ethnic cultures, a unified cultural space of the mining region is formed. Friendship among the peoples of Donbas is perceived in our society as a norm. Democratic transformations in the republic have contributed to the growth of ethnic self-awareness and have led to the creation of national-cultural societies and associations.”¹⁷

By contrast, the lesson devoted to belonging to the Russian World offers schoolchildren the following definition: “The Russian World is a community of people who, regardless of nationality, feel Russian [*ruskimi*], are bearers of Russian [*ruskoi*] culture and the Russian language, are spiritually connected to Russia, and are not indifferent to its affairs and destiny.”¹⁸ Materials for the sixth grade include an additional clarification: “The Russian World is not a super-ethnic [*superetnicheskaia*], but a supranational [*nadnatsional’naia*] community.” Thus, the “Russian World” is presented as a multinational space, and an ethnic interpretation of it is deliberately and explicitly rejected. In this sense, the multiethnic idea of Donbas articulated in the course materials and history textbooks of the DNR is

¹⁷ O. V. Hatalah et al., *Uroki grazhdanstvennosti Donbassa: 9 klass: materialy dlia uchitelia k urokam kursa* (Donetsk: Istoki, 2017), 8. See also Jaroslava Barbieri, “Raising Citizen-Soldiers in Donbas: Russia’s Role in Promoting Patriotic Education Programmes in the Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples’ Republics,” *Ethnopolitics* 23, no. 5 (2024): 515–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2023.2220097>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

integrated smoothly and without tension into the broader cultural framework of the Russian World.

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As mentioned above, in 2020, Ukrainian lost its status as one of the two state languages in the Donbas separatist republics. The practical, day-to-day consequences of this decision were rather limited. The DNR leadership itself acknowledged that “the use of Ukrainian as a state language was not practically realised.”¹⁹ For instance, school education in the DNR after 2014–2015 was conducted in Russian, with only one class of Ukrainian per week. After the change in the language’s status in 2020, even that single hour was no longer mandatory in the school curriculum. However, “those willing would have the opportunity to learn their native language, be it Ukrainian or any other.”²⁰

The main task of this decision was symbolic. As later events and decisions demonstrated, it turned out to be one of the first symbolic acts highlighting the shift from a narrative of a multiethnic, separate Donbas towards a more Russia(n)-centric approach. This move should be viewed within the broader context of the evolution of Russian and Ukrainian domestic and foreign policies. Russian media presented the decision of the DNR authorities by referring to the Ukrainian law “On Ensuring the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language,” adopted in spring 2019.²¹ This was one of the last laws signed by the incumbent Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko after his electoral defeat by Volodymyr Zelensky. The law prioritised the use of Ukrainian in the public sphere, and its critics claimed that it did so at the expense of minority languages. Donbas separatist and Russian official authorities instrumentalised these developments for political gains and portrayed the new language law as a clampdown on the Russian language in Ukraine. Within this framework, the decision to change the status of the Ukrainian language in the Donbas republics was presented as a response to Kyiv’s policy. No less importantly, the first public mention of this idea by the DNR head Denis Pushilin occurred several days before a meeting of the Normandy Contact Group, the format in which Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany discussed issues related to separatism in eastern Ukraine.²² This was clearly an attempt to exert pressure on the new Zelensky administration and potentially to push it to repeal the predecessor’s decision and to implement the Minsk agreements in a manner favourable to Russia.

It was, however, the adoption of the “Russian Donbas” doctrine that consolidated this new trend in the symbolic and historical politics of the secession-

¹⁹ Denis Pushilin, “Russkii iazyk po pravu poluchil dolzhnyi gosudarstvennyi status,” official website of Denis Pushilin, <https://denis-pushilin.ru/news/denis-pushilin-russkij-yazyk-po-pravupoluchil-dolzhnyj-gosudarstvennyj-status/> (accessed November 10, 2024).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For instance, “Glava DNR predlozhit sdelat’ russkii iazyk edinstvennym gosudarstvennym,” *Izvestiia* (Iz.ru), December 2, 2019, <https://iz.ru/949711/2019-12-02/glava-dnr-predlozhit-sdelat-russkii-iazkyk-edinstvennym-gosudarstvennym> (accessed November 10, 2024).

²² *Ibid.*



ist DNR. The text of the doctrine deserves closer examination. In addition to the goal of consolidating the DNR and LNR as “Russian nation-states” (*russkie natsional’nye gosudarstva*), the doctrine contains several other key ideological components. I will not examine all of them here in detail, but will instead outline those that are of particular importance for the focus of this paper.

The doctrine also goes to great lengths to highlight the alleged artificiality of Ukrainianness and of the Ukrainian state, especially in relation to eastern Ukraine. It is filled with phrases such as “ancestral Russian territory” (*iskonnaia russkaia territoria*) when referring to Donbas. In a lengthy historical overview that occupies more than half of the text, Ukrainians are almost never mentioned as an ethnic or national group. Instead, the authors employ the term *Malorosy* (Little Russians), a designation for Ukrainians used in Russian nationalist discourse, which assumes that Malorosy/Ukrainians are part of a triune Russian nation together with Belarusians (White Russians) and *Velikorosy* (Great Russians), that is, Russians proper.

To underscore the Russian character of Donbas, the doctrine emphasises the central role of the Russian language. Russian is presented as “the basis of the Russian mentality of the people of Donbas [*osnovy russkoi mental’nosti Donbassa*]” and as “the language of the Russian political nation [*iazyk russkoi politicheskoi natsii*].” By focusing on the Russian language, the authors identify an unambiguously “Russian” feature that is meant to unify the heterogeneous population of Donbas.

At the same time, the authors acknowledge that Donbas is and has been populated by groups of different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural origins. Yet for them, Russian (in this case, *russkii*) identity and Russianness become an all-encompassing umbrella that allows people of diverse backgrounds to be classified as belonging to the Russian World and Russian civilisation. In this sense, one does not have to be ethnically Russian to be *russkii*. This assumption had already been present—sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly—in earlier Donbas separatist discourse, particularly when DNR leaders spoke about the region’s belonging to the Russian World. Nevertheless, the emphasis has shifted significantly. Previously, there was at least an additional and important focus on Donbas regional identity and on the recognition of the region’s multiethnic character.

The doctrine does not merely assert the “Russian” character of Donbas; it also ascribes to it a specific mission as a Russian frontier and borderland. It stresses that Donbas is a “forward bastion of the Russian World, the Russian nation [*pere-dovoi bastion Russkogo mira, russkoi natsii*].” This frontier narrative, however, is not framed solely in defensive or heroic terms. Beyond that, the authors place the borderland at the centre of Russia and Russianness. In their words, Donbas becomes “an example for the Russian World and for a Russian person [*primer i obrazets dlia Russkogo mira i russkogo cheloveka*]” and “an experimental site of the Russian future.” Clearly, such claims served both propagandistic and political purposes. As a public declaration, they also represented an attempt to retain attention—and ideally to attract more of it—within the Russian political public sphere.

In addition to its Russian nationalist dimensions, the doctrine also contains irredentist passages. For instance: “Russia is the only historical state of the Russian

nation [*russkoi natsii*]. Its mission was and is to politically unite this nation. Any separation of certain parts of the Russian nation from Russia, any political formations that include Russians and are not Russia, are of an exclusively temporary nature.” This passage can be read as a warning to Ukraine, as well as other states with sizable Russian minorities, but also as a declaration of the temporary character of other “Russian” states—that is, the DNR and LNR themselves.

There may be a temptation to read this document retrospectively in light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which occurred about a year after the adoption of the doctrine, and the subsequent annexation of the two separatist republics in eastern Ukraine. Rather, however, the adoption of the doctrine can be seen as a manifestation of the Kremlin’s failure to find effective ways to exert influence over Ukrainian politics and to bring—and keep—Ukraine within Russia’s sphere of influence, whether through the implementation of the Minsk agreements in a form favourable to Russia or through pro-Russian political forces within Ukraine. The doctrine thus functioned as an additional means of pressuring Kyiv. For the separatist leaders, the shift towards a more Russia(n)-centric approach made the message more straightforward and, in that sense, resulted in a simpler and clearer agenda.

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The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 may have rendered irrelevant, or even erased, many of the nuances and ambiguities outlined in this article. The evolution of the Donbas separatist discourse of (pro-)Russianness, however, highlights the importance of shifting political contexts, both at the local level and internationally. Donbas separatist leaders and their Moscow curators sought ways to adapt the needs of the breakaway polities and their processes of state- and nation-building to local circumstances, as well as to the international agendas of Russia, Ukraine, and other involved actors.

The ambiguities inherent in the meanings of “Russian” (*russkii*) allowed for the merging of discourses and narratives of different ideological origins. These did not always intertwine seamlessly, but coherent narratives are often an expectation of scholars who study symbolic and historical politics, rather than of the political and mnemonic actors who actually implement and promote them.

In certain respects, the Donbas separatist republics indeed became an experimental—albeit short-lived—site for a Russian future, as claimed by the authors of the “Russian Donbas” doctrine. Heigi Blakkisrud has convincingly demonstrated that elements of Russian nationalist discourse and narratives became increasingly present in official rhetoric in Russia after 2014, albeit with caution and in an instrumental manner.²³ The full-scale war and the ensuing transformations of the Russian state and its official rhetoric pushed nationalist agendas and discourses much more prominently to the fore, despite an awareness of the dangers that Russian ethnic nationalism may pose to Russia itself. The discourse emphasising the Russianness of all peoples living in Russia thus became far more prominent than

²³ Helge Blakkisrud, “Russkii as the New Rossiiskii? Nation-Building in Russia After 1991,” *Nationalities Papers* 51, no. 1 (2023): 64–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2022.11>.



before. Unknowingly and unintentionally, DNR leaders experimented with making Russian nationalist discourse mainstream and official—albeit in an unrecognised context—before it soon became considerably more acceptable in Russia's own official rhetoric.

Rezumat

Acest articol analizează evoluția și ambiguitățile interne ale discursului simbolic „(pro-)rus” în Republica Populară Donețk (RPD), entitate nerecunoscută, în perioada 2014–2022. Axat pe politica simbolică, narațiunile istorice și politica lingvistică, studiul arată că discursul separatist nu a fost nici liniar, nici coerent din punct de vedere ideologic. După eșecul proiectului *Novorossia* și semnarea Acordurilor de la Minsk II, liderii RPD au pus temporar accentul pe regionalismul Donbasului, multietnicitate și toleranță interetnică, prezentând entitatea separatistă drept o alternativă multietnică la naționalismul etnic ucrainean. Această orientare s-a reflectat în politicile lingvistice, în referințele istorice la Republica Sovietică Donețk–Kryvyi Rih și în materialele educaționale. Totuși, aceste narațiuni au coexistat cu interpretări naționaliste ruse concurente și au fost treptat înlocuite de un discurs tot mai explicit *ruso*-centric. Adoptarea doctrinei „Donbasul Rus” în 2021 a marcat o schimbare simbolică decisivă către naționalism etnic și iredentism. Articolul argumentează că aceste transformări reflectă contexte politice schimbătoare, calcule strategice și utilizarea instrumentală a istoriei în procesele de construire statală și națională ale separatiștilor pro-ruși.

Cuvinte-cheie:

Donbas; Republica Populară Donețk (RPD); separatism; Lumea Rusă (*Russkii mir*); memorie istorică; politică lingvistică; construcție națională.

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