

# Ruskyi Mir in the Black Sea Region

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## About the author

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Andrei previously worked for the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, UNDP Moldova, and was a researcher at the Institute for Public Policy in the Republic of Moldova. Andrei works closely with government institutions, civil society, and international organizations on matters related to policy development and democratization.

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# Russkyi Mir in the Black Sea Region

Russkyi Mir is an ideological construct and foreign policy concept defined in the first mandate of President Vladimir Putin. While not regulated through legislation or policy, the concept is popular among Russian political thinkers and ideologists as a way to shape Russia's relationship with the world. It is also often referred to in speeches by the president, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and other key figures.

At glance, the Russkyi Mir ideology is an instrument for Russia's geopolitical ambitions and hegemonic claims on the post-Soviet space. Russia relies on the concept to project a narrative of a unique country-civilization with an outstanding historical and cultural heritage and a messianic role in the world – all of which Russia lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The construct is based on myths and historical references and its boundaries go far beyond Russia's current borders. Sponsors include Russian state institutions, as well as citizens of post-Soviet countries who associate with the concept and ultimately act as “agents of Russkyi Mir.”

At the same time, this ideology serves as a tool in Russia's hybrid warfare arsenal by posing both international and national security threats. It is deployed in the territorial expansion of Russia, and it challenges democratic and human rights values promoted by the EU and United States.

## The emergence of Russkyi Mir and its geographical spread

Following the collapse of the USSR, Russia maintained a firm grip on the bloc's former satellite states, especially those from the Black Sea region. This influence was exercised through various means.

Most politicians in leadership positions in the satellite states were previously part of the soviet *nomenklatura* (the body responsible for running all spheres of Soviet activity) and had close ties with the soviet intelligence *apparatus* (meaning affiliation with Soviet intelligence agencies). They were brought up and educated in the Soviet spirit and despite their declared aspirations to lead democratic reforms in the newly independent states, their *modus operandi* remained very much Soviet.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the economies of the newly independent republics were heavily reliant on Russia. Export industries were almost entirely oriented toward the Russian market. Key industrial companies were dependent on Russian capital or had Russian companies as majority shareholders. Russian media was the main source of information for television, radio, and newspapers.

In many post-Soviet countries, the Russian language held a special status or was declared the second state language. The Russian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch were the most influential religious

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symbols for Orthodox states of the region. In the military sector, some Soviet army bases remained in this region together with Russian soldiers (for example, the 14<sup>th</sup> Army in Moldova). High ranked army officials, all of whom were trained within the USSR, maintained Soviet tactics and military infrastructure stayed the same. These deep connections with Russia were reflected not only on the post-Soviet states from the Black Sea region, but also within European countries formerly considered USSR allies like Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.

However, in the early 2000s, many pro-Russian political elites from the region were ousted from power through electoral uprisings and “color revolutions.” The first wave of revolutions, which sought to refresh the political landscape of many countries in the region, included Georgia’s Rose Revolution and Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. Both uprisings signaled the initial spread of democratic values in the region, with the goal of replacing the autocratic regimes that emerged as a legacy of the USSR. They also sought to diminish Russian influence and put these countries on a path of EU and NATO integration.

The Kremlin understood that its grip on countries of the former Soviet space, and especially those in the Black Sea region, was loosening and it needed to find a new approach for maintaining hegemony. And so, Moscow began amplifying an ideology that would promote a new image of Russia – one not only linked to the Soviet past. This new ideology became known as Russkyi Mir.

As a result, Russia began investing “unifying” narratives of Slavic identity, positioning itself as the motherland of Slavs. This was a message that appealed to Balkan and some Central and Eastern European states who affiliated with this ethno-linguistic identity. Russia also positioned itself as a Mecca of Orthodoxy and a nucleus of the Christian Orthodox Church. It did so by targeting predominantly Christian Orthodox countries in the region. At the same time, the Kremlin promoted the idea of “Eurasianism” to post-Soviet Central Asian countries, positioning Russia as a keeper of “traditional values” as opposed to those of the “Western world.”

### **Russkyi Mir as a neo-imperialist ideology of Russia**

In 2007, the Russkyi Mir Foundation was established by a decree of President Vladimir Putin as a subsidiary institution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.<sup>1</sup> In its 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia began incorporating this ideology into its soft power strategy, developed in line

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ruskiymir.ru/fund/the-decree-of-the-president-of-the-russian-federation-on-creation-of-fund-russian-world.php#1>

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with Kremlin's new ambition to expand its influence abroad.<sup>2</sup> Russkyi Mir became a brand that Russia promoted globally, having previously only been viewed through the lense of a Soviet legacy.

The geographical focus of Russkyi Mir is broad and vague. It initially targeted the post-Soviet space but was later expanded to focus on Central and Eastern Europe, and then worldwide. Consequently, the Russkyi Mir ideology is not limited only to post-Soviet countries in the Black Sea. It also targets EU member states in the region. Russia is investing in political parties in Bulgaria that adopt anti-EU stances while exploiting the country's affinity with Orthodoxy and Slavic ethnocultural aspects. The Russkyi Mir Foundation has so far established six Russian Centers in Bulgaria and is actively organizing events to target younger generations.<sup>3</sup>

But Russkyi Mir should not just be considered a promotion of Russia's cultural and linguistic heritage. It is ultimately an instrument of soft power in Russia's asymmetric warfare arsenal with at least two main objectives. First, to create an attractive brand for post-Soviet Russia, targeting former satellites and other countries. Second, to maintain Russian dominance in the post-Soviet space (and beyond) as part of the Kremlin's hybrid tactics.

The Kremlin's perception on the borders of this ideology was demonstrated in 2016 when Putin attended an awards ceremony for the Russian Geographic Society in Moscow. During the ceremony, the president asked a pupil where Russia's borders end, to which the boy suggested "at the Bering Strait with USA." Putin interrupted by saying "Russia's border doesn't end anywhere." His remarks were a signal that Russkyi Mir is borderless.<sup>4</sup>

### **Russkyi Mir agents**

The primary goal of Russkyi Mir agents is to convince large populations of the supremacy of Russia and the righteousness of Russia's policy worldwide. In the Black Sea, especially in post-Soviet countries, agents of Russkyi Mir are concentrated mostly at a grassroots level, for example at church or in local politics. However, there are also agents of Russkyi Mir at the political level who directly advocate for Russia's foreign policy agenda.

At the grassroots level, agents are the beneficiaries of Russia's "passportization" policy in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia and are mostly concentrated in secessionist territories. The ideology is also trying

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<sup>2</sup> "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, last modified February 18, 2013, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186)

<sup>3</sup> <https://russkiymir.ru/rucenter/catalogue.php>

<sup>4</sup> "Vladimir Putin: Russia's border 'doesn't end anywhere,'" BBC, last modified November 24, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-38099842>

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to strengthen support among students and younger generations through a large network of Russian Centers positioned as quasi academic structures within universities and libraries. This is a strategy to gain direct access to young people who can be educated from an early age on the spirit of its values.

Churches of this region are actively infiltrated with agents of Russkyi Mir. Russia continues to position itself as the center and protector of the Orthodoxy. The Russian Patriarch plays a distinguished role in promoting the ideology, given the relationships cultivated by the Russian Orthodox Church in the region with religious sites and non-government organizations. Russia is also successful at promoting Russian politics and hegemony as inalienably linked with the Orthodoxy. In addition, the Patriarch publishes books on Russkyi Mir that are distributed through Russian Centers and religious organizations.<sup>5</sup>

At the political level, Russkyi Mir is designed to create a sense of affiliation between Russia and different political circles in Black Sea countries. The ideology targets political parties, especially those with extreme left or right leanings, that promote a conservative agenda or position themselves as anti-EU and anti-NATO. It also sponsors pro-Russian politicians who advocate for secession if their country is not following the Kremlin agenda. For example, prior to Moldova preparing to sign its Association Agreement with the EU in 2014, Russia supported a group of radical politicians to organize an independence referendum in Gagauzia – a small autonomy in the Southern part of Moldova and a region allegedly opposed to the European integration promoted by the central government. The realization of another secessionist territory in Moldova never came to pass because of involvement from the EU and U.S. However, Russia has continued to spread the Russkyi Mir narrative in Moldova by sponsoring politicians to act as ambassadors for the ideology. Ukraine and Georgia have also received consistent support from the EU and U.S. in its efforts to counter the effects of Russkyi Mir. As a consequence, Russia has failed in establishing ‘Novorossiya’ – a geopolitical project designed to create a union between the two Ukrainian separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

The ideology is flexible, enabling Moscow to target sub-regions of the Black Sea and also beyond. Russia has already expanded Russkyi Mir to Bulgaria and onto the Balkans by strengthening its military and cultural cooperation with Serbia. While the Russian Orthodox Church has been given a key role in promoting Russkyi Mir across the Black Sea region, the ideology does not only target Christian Orthodox countries. It extends to Central Asia and most recently, any society worldwide that would like to identify with Russia.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/5595127.html>

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From a security point of view, Russkyi Mir can be considered as an instrument of hybrid warfare deployed by Russia. Alongside other instruments of hard and soft power, Russia is creating divergences and weakening societies in the Black Sea region by using propaganda and disinformation and providing support to marginal political parties. In doing so, the Kremlin seeks to erode the foundation of states and institutions by exacerbating societal tensions, especially those around EU and NATO integration.

Agents of Russkyi Mir can be citizens of other countries who act destructively against their own state to promote Russian interests. In more extreme circumstances, this leads to separatism and insurgency against their own government and fellow citizens. At a lesser level, they act as voters of pro-Russian political parties, consume Russian propaganda, and strive for Russian passports as part of the “passportization” policy.

The role of EU and U.S. decision-makers in combatting this ideology is to offer consistent support to Black Sea countries, both post-Soviet states as well as those historically recognized as USSR allies (i.e. Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary). Support provided to Ukraine and Georgia in strengthening state institutions, promoting democratic reforms, and enhancing defense capabilities has been a significant help in countering Russian asymmetric warfare tactics. The fight against corruption at the political level is another important measure that should be supported by the EU and U.S. Political corruption in the Black Sea region allows Russia to maintain agents of Russkyi Mir at different state levels.

Finally, additional support should be provided to Moldova as one of the frontline countries balancing EU and Russia integration. The U.S. should therefore assist Moldova with EU integration, which includes implementing several reforms and measures that would protect it from the Russia’s destructive ideology.

