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The concept of the "Russkiy Mir": History of the Concept and Ukraine

by Alexander Meienberger

The concept of the Russkiy Mir (Russian world) has cultural and geopolitical implications. Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the concept has started to play a significant role as a propaganda instrument and as a justifying tool for Russian military aggression in Ukraine. However, this was not always the case. It was not until 2007 that the Kremlin institutionalized the concept by creating a foundation called Russkiy Mir. Until this time, the concept was not widespread among the Russian elites. Later, Russian politicians articulated the Russkiy Mir differently and without its exact meaning. Three different understandings of the Russkiy Mir have emerged: a global sphere of the Russian language and/or Russian-speaking diaspora, the geopolitical sphere of influence of Russia, and an ideological sphere of the new conservative right-wing forces. By analyzing the idea's roots in the Russian context using published sources, the article shows how the Russkiy Mir has developed from a nonpolitical and loose idea that should unite all Russian-speaking people around the globe to a geopolitical tool Russia uses to justify its influence in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Ukraine. Moreover, the article aims to answer the question of to what extent, from a Russian state view, Ukraine plays a role in this concept.

Keywords: the concept "Russkiy Mir", history of the concept, Russian geopolitics, cultural policy

Introduction

The Russian cultural sphere is larger than the Russian state. President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly lamented that Russia is the largest divided nation in the world, resulting in tensions particularly with Ukraine. The country has been a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy since the end of the Soviet era. The Kremlin considers Ukraine to be within its sphere of influence because Russia views itself as the successor state of both the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union and lays claim to the heritage of both great empires. In 2014, tensions reached their climax when Russia illegally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and unofficially intervened in the war in eastern Ukraine. On 24 February 2022, Russian troops invaded Ukraine's territory and started a full-scale war against the Ukrainian nation. One of the reasons for the invasion was an assumption that Ukraine is a part of the so-called *Russkiy Mir*.

The *Russkiy Mir* concept is a patchwork of well-known special path ideologies that have existed in Russia like "Moscow, Third Rome," "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality," and philosophical movements such as Slavophiles, Westernizers, Pan-Slavism, Eurasianism, and Neoeurasianism. As Michael S. Gorham put it concisely:

> *Looking for a more organically "Russian" conceptual anchor to improve global perceptions of a nation resurgent, political technologists turned in part to a loose mixture of language, culture, religion, and history, symbolically unified under the umbrella concept of the "Russia world".*[1]

According to Ulrich Schmid, the *Russkiy Mir* is originally a cultural concept, which in its ideologized form, is also used to legitimize Russian influence in the post-Soviet area.[2] It emphasizes the social ties between Russian language and literature, Russian orthodoxy, and a collective East Slavic identity.[3] Moreover, the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* stresses the special role of Russia in the world and sees the country different from the so-called West, in particular from the U.S. The current version of the *Russkiy Mir* consists of three main elements: Russian culture, Russian history, and Russian orthodoxy. All these elements can stand alone or be mixed.

The subject of the *Russkiy Mir* is relatively new in science because the concept was established in political and social discourses only after the political crisis in Ukraine in 2013-2014. However, some scholars have already done research on this topic from various perspectives. On the one hand, many scholars see the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* as a new geopolitical ideology or as a new Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, which the Kremlin is pursuing with determination.[4] Some of them see the concept as a new geopolitical tool of the Kremlin, especially in Ukraine.[5] On the other hand, the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* from the perspective of Eurasianism and Neoeurasianism is considered in the works of Laruelle[6], Kukulin[7], Kurfürst[8], Lewis[9], Morozova[10]. In his texts, Kazharski examines the discourse on Eurasianism and civilization among Russia's political elite.[11] From a geopolitical perspective, Trenin sees some opportunities for Russian foreign policy, which the Russian Federation can realize in the greater Eurasia region, post-Soviet region, plus other countries in Eurasia.[12]

Moreover, the role of the church, which contributes significantly to the concept of the *Russkiy Mir*, has often been underestimated in Russian foreign and geopolitics. Sidorov has shown that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is often viewed as marginal, with its representatives playing a strong role, and the concepts they propose are often modern or postmodern.[13] In their articles, Bremer[14], Druzenko[15], Halbach[16], and Curanović[17] believe that the ROC plays an essential role in propagating the *Russkiy Mir*.

Besides the presented literature, the problem of defining the *Russkiy Mir* has been addressed in many works, but not considered in detail. Batanova has attempted to thoroughly study the concept and believes that defining it is hugely

problematic.[18] She concludes that the *Russkiy Mir* means Russians abroad. The authors Kočerov[19] and Alejnikova[20] comment on the same problems. Although they propose many definitions of the *Russkiy Mir*, they cannot agree on a common interpretation. However, both authors argue that Russia and its geopolitical interests are at the heart of the concept. In his work, Suslov emphasizes the three different articulations of the concept and points to its historical development from 1996 to 2015.[21]

This article looks at the current debates on Russia's "special path" in a contemporary setting and, more precisely, the *Russkiy Mir* concept, which is currently enjoying a renaissance in Russia. The Russian political elites justify some of their decisions with this concept and move the country to the right on the political spectrum by endorsing conservative views. Looking at the meaning and genealogy of the concept, I want to find out how the current version of the Russian special path narrative, particularly the concept of the *Russkiy Mir*, has shifted away from a liberal idea towards a conservative thought. Furthermore, the questions which role the Kremlin assigned to the Ukraine in the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* to answer. To analyze this complex concept from a historical perspective, I will apply qualitative discourse analysis.

The Russian "special path" in the 19th century

The concept of the *Russkiy Mir* as a special path has a long tradition in Russian history. The open compound word *russkiy mir* (Russian world) is not a product of the 21st century. According to the Russian national corpus *Ruscorpora*[22], it appears as a term as early as the 19th century and refers to the entire Russian Empire.[23] This term is used in literature by liberal but also conservative circles without any political connotations. Mikhail Zagoskin, a best-selling author, and supporter of official patriotism, mentions the word collocation *Russkiy Mir* in his story *The Russians at the Beginning of the 18th Century* published in 1848. "A few more days passed, and the great feast of God came, and the whole Russian world was abuzz with life and merriment."[24] Liberal writers such as Pavel Annenkov also used this compound word in his texts as a synonym for the Russian Empire. In his memoirs of Nikolay Gogol', Annenkov writes "In general, he [Gogol'] was convinced at that time that the Russian world is a separate sphere with its own laws, of which Europe has no idea."[25] Likewise, oppositional publicists such as Nikolay Ogarev used this term in reference to the Russian Empire and its culture. In his *Introduction to the Anthology of Russian Uncensored Literature*, he compares the importance of the *Russkiy Mir* for Aleksandr Pushkin to the importance of the compound word "German world" for Wolfgang Goethe and Friedrich Schiller.[26]

Moreover, the *Russkiy Mir* was used as a proper name in the 19th century. There were two weekly newspapers named *Russkiy Mir*: The first newspaper was published from 1859 to 1863 by Fedor Stellovskiy. The newspaper had no political

orientation and published political reviews, fiction, feuilleton, and bibliographies.[27] The second newspaper was published between 1871 and 1880 by the Governor General of Turkestan, Mikhail Chernyaev. It is only with publications of this newspaper that the term *Russkiy Mir* is associated with conservative views. Major General Rostislav Fadeev, who had to leave the army due to disagreements, was named the editor-in-chief. Fadeev was known for his conservative and national orientation, belonged to the Pan-Slavist movement, and expressed himself against the West. He polemicized against Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin[28], among others, and published his conservative ideas in the newspaper in numerous articles under the common title *What shall we become?*[29]

Meanwhile an ideology of the Russian special path developed in the conservative circles of Russia, the apotheosis of which is the *"Russkiy Mir"* in today's Russian state. In general, the 19th century is characterized by a flourishing of diverse ideas and concepts that impacted the development of the *Russkiy Mir*. During the 1830s and 1840s, Russian intellectuals divided into Westerners, who stood for European-standard reforms, and Slavophiles, who favored the "original Russian" and viewed the village community as an extended family.[30] In 1840, the Minister of Education Sergey Uvarov proposed his triad "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality" to Tsar Nicholas I as a national ideology. Uvarov's concept interpreted tsarist power as unrestricted and declared the autocratic rule system as a profoundly Russian characteristic, distinguishing Russia from the Occident.[31]

In the second half of the 19th century, Russian social discourse was dominated by the idea of Russian Pan-Slavism, actively propagated by Fëdor Dostoevskiy and Nikolai Danilevskiy. Russian Pan-Slavism envisioned the Russian Empire as the power center of a future All-Slavic Empire. [32] At the end of the 19th century, the idea of "Moscow as Third Rome," formulated by the monk Philotheus of Pskov in the 16th century, was further developed. In a letter to Ivan IV, Philotheus warned the tsar of the fall of the Christian world and the victory of evil. Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and there will be no fourth.[33] Philotheus' idea fell on fertile ground with representatives of religious philosophy, such as Vladimir Solov'ev and Nikolai Berdyaev, and with those of Symbolism, such as Dmirtiy Merezhkovskiy. [34] They saw in this idea a historical mission that the Russian state should pursue. In the 1920s, Russian émigrés Georgy Florovskiy, Pëtr Savitskiy, Pëtr Suvchinskiy, and Nikolay Trubetskoy published the anthology *Way Out to the East* in Sofia in 1921, in which they formulated the political concept of Eurasianism. Its adherents saw Russia as a unique civilization whose task was to unite the Asian and European peoples into a state and cultural entity.[35]

During Soviet times, the *Russkiy Mir* concept was forgotten for obvious reasons. The whole country was building a new Soviet reality. However, since the 1990s, the concept has experienced a renaissance in Russia.

From a cultural to a geopolitical concept

According to a Levada-Center survey conducted between 24-28 November 2017 in 48 regions in Russian among 1,600 participants, 64% of respondents think that Russians are great people with particular importance in world history.[36] The perception of a particular country connects with an idea of the Russian special path. The Russian idea of the special path refers to the German idea of *Sonderweg* (special path) that was developed during the 19th century and became popular in 1914 at the beginning of the first world war. "German *Kultur* was considered different from and superior to western [English or French] Civilization […]."[37] The Russian and German special paths have certain similarities notably because Russian intellectuals copied the idea of *Sonderweg* and transformed it into Russian special path in the 19th century.[38] The main difference between these two ideologies is that the German *Sonderweg* is not as attractive to Germans anymore as it used to be in the interwar period. In contrast, the Russian special path is currently enjoying a renaissance in Russia.

The idea of a Russian special path became immensely popular by the elite as early as 1994, and is widely used now. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 brought on the one hand a wind of change, but on the other, a vacuum of political and ideological concepts emerged. Although Russian intellectuals produced a wide range of ideas and ideologies in a short time, they could not meet the demands of the young nation and new political elites. Nowadays, the political elites actively promote a new Russian patriotism using rhetoric based on differences between "us" Russians and "others" Western countries. Many Russian intellectuals and serious scholars are trying to find out why Russia is not the U.S. and why Russia cannot go the same way of capitalism and liberalism. In this way, the idiom of special path is an extended part of the official political discourse that the elites use from time to time to gain popular support and to control the masses.[39]

In the 1990s, the general discourse of the Russian special path turned into something new, into a concept of the *Russkiy Mir*. More recently the *Russkiy Mir* gained popularity because of the political and military crisis in Ukraine in 2014.[40] Until this time, the concept was widespread neither among the former Soviet states nor among the Western countries. Moscow justified the annexation of the peninsula Crimea as "protection of the Russian-speaking population from the unstable Ukrainian government."[41] Immediately after that, Dmitriy Peskov, the spokesman for the Russian president, called Vladimir Putin the security guarantor of the *Russkiy Mir*.[42] On 2 February 2022, Putin proclaimed at a state awards ceremony in the Kremlin: "It is such a multifaceted '*Russkiy Mir*,' huge. We did not create it. Our mission is to strengthen it, develop it, and make it attractive to our citizens, to the whole world."[43] Three weeks later, Putin sent Russian troops into Ukraine under the slogan of "protecting the '*Russkiy Mir*.'" As recently as 14 March 2023, he declared that Russia was fighting for the *Russkiy Mir* in Ukraine.[44]

What is this *Russkiy Mir* that the Kremlin tries to defend? Directly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the space of the *Russkiy Mir* was understood as the entirety of all Russian-speaking people without political connotations. Based on the idea of the *russkiy mir v mire mirov* (Russian world in a world of worlds) formulated by Mikhail Gefter in the 1980s, political technologists Petr Shchedrovickij and Efim Ostrovskiy developed a political doctrine of the *Russkiy Mir*.[45] The authors understood by it as a global community of Russian speakers.[46] The Russian language is the asset that still unites all these expatriate Russians with the homeland – even if they no longer live there. Therefore, Russia should use these foreign Russians to be successful and not miss the connection to new technology.[47] The ideologues were convinced that the *Russkiy Mir* could exist as a linguistic space just like the Francophonie.[48] This cultural initiative targeted the 40 million Russian speakers who lived outside the borders of Russia after 1992. The concept was institutionalized with the establishment of the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation in 2007. With its many cultural centers around the world, the foundation serves to popularize the Russian language as well as cultural dialogue with other countries and forms the institutional basis of Russia's cultural policy abroad.

Parallel to this, a notion formed that the *Russkiy Mir* is limited to the post-Soviet space. Vadim Tsymbursky developed the idea of the *Ostrov Rossiya* (Island of Russia). According to him, Russia should unite with other post-Soviet countries to form an island and distance itself from Europe.[49] After all, Europe has brought Russia only wars throughout history. Political technologists Sergey Gradirovsky and Boris Mezhuev defined the *Russkiy Mir* as a cultural space of Russian speakers within the post-Soviet area.[50] Fellow expert Yuri Gromyko also limits the *Russkiy Mir* to the post-Soviet space.[51] It is important to emphasize that the two did not attribute geopolitical connotations to the term but instead spoke about the divided Russian nation as a phenomenon that emerged after 1991. The common colonial past that links Russia to these countries is crucial to these views. The *Russkiy Mir* is understood here as a postcolonial spatial construct like the Commonwealth of Nations or the Francophonie.

President Putin introduced *Russkiy Mir* into the political discourse in 2001. Later, the term developed into a foreign policy concept, which is supposed to legitimize Russian influence in the post-Soviet sphere. In 1999, a diaspora law was passed, which defines the term "compatriot abroad"[52] and in 2008 the federal agency "*Rossotrudnichestvo*" was founded to primarily deal with the matters of the "compatriots abroad." With this initiative, the Kremlin attempted to exploit its cultural sphere of influence. Similar opinions were expressed by several intellectuals who see the *Russkiy Mir* as an instrument for Russia to exert power in the post-Soviet territory. They spoke of "Russian islands" such as Crimea, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorny Karabach and Northern Kazakhstan, which should reunite with Russia.[53]

Conservative circles have also simultaneously discovered the concept for their own purposes. Since taking office as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2009, Patriarch Kirill I has actively supported the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and further developed the concept. In his speech at the Third Plenary Assembly of the *Russkiy Mir*, he explained the ROC's position on the *Russkiy Mir*. The patriarch's concept sounded more like geopolitics than church doctrine.[54] He mentioned Russian orthodoxy as a basis of the *Russkiy Mir* besides the Russian language and history.[55] Thereby orthodoxy sees itself as the founder of the *Russkiy Mir* and serves more as a value system and not only as a religion.[56] With the new category, the Patriarch Kirill I completes the already overloaded concept in the semantic sense while making the geographical space of the *Russkiy Mir* narrower. The *Russkiy Mir* core for him consists of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The periphery includes Moldova, the South Caucasus, and some southern European countries such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia.[57] This conception of the core of the *Russkiy Mir* coincides with the canonical territory of the ROC.[58] With establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU) in 2018, the ROC and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Moscow Patriarchate (UOC MP) had to give up their monopoly in Ukraine. However, it did not vacate its place because there are two Orthodox Churches in Ukraine: the OCU and UOC MP.

Orthodox rhetoric in the *Russkiy Mir* is represented by the anti-liberal Izborsk Club[59], founded in 2012, whose members are Russian intellectuals with conservative[60] and right-wing views on foreign and domestic policy. Since 2005, Vitaliy Aver'yanov, Sergey Baranov, Aleksandr Gaponenko, Aleksandr Eliseev, Alexey Komogorcev, and Nikolay Starikov have worked on the Russian doctrine, which in 2016 they renamed the doctrine of the *Russkiy Mir.* It goes in the same direction as the patriarch's reflections and considers Russia as a specific civilization whose values directly contradict those of the West.[61] The authors argue that Gefter's idea has lost its appeal over time and that the Kremlin, especially after the annexation of Crimea, is more sympathetic to the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* formulated by the patriarch. However, the ROC follows the Kremlin's agenda and not vice versa. Regarding categories belonging to the *Russkiy Mir,* the authors cannot decide which categories are most important: geography, genes, Russian language, religious faith, state or territory, and Russian culture.[62] The authors explain that the *Russkiy Mir* cannot be reduced to one of these because all categories are fundamental to this "Russian world." However, they add something new: the Russian spirit or the Russian energy.[63] The Russian spirit lives in all East Slavic peoples, which form the core of the *Russkiy Mir*. These are Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.[64]

In the meantime, the concept of the *Russkiy Mir* has developed from a liberal idea of peaceful co-existence of all cultures into a conservative Orthodox buzzword. It exhibits three characteristics: *Russkiy Mir* as a 1) global sphere of the Russian language and/or Russian-speaking diaspora; 2) the geopolitical sphere of influence

of Russia; 3) as an ideological sphere of the new conservative right-wing forces.

	Culture	Geopolitics	Ideology
	***Russkiy Mir* as a global sphere of the Russian language and/or Russian-speaking diaspora**	***Russkiy Mir* as the geopolitical sphere of influence of Russia**	***Russkiy Mir* as an ideological sphere of the new conservative right-wing forces**
Actors	Pavlovskiy, Shchedrovitskiy, Ostrovskiy, Gradirovskiy, Tishkov	Tsymburskiy, Mezhuev, Gromyko, Dugin	Narocnickaya, Patriarch Kirill, Members of Izborsk Club
Important elements:	Russian language and culture	Historical awareness: tsarist and Soviet history	Norms and values of the Russian Orthodox Church
Institutions and political bodies:	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Rossotrudnichestvo, Russky Mir Foundation	Kremlin, EAWU	Russian Orthodox Church, Izborsk Club
Recipients:	Russian-speaking population abroad, Russian-speaking diaspora, Russian compatriots	Countries of the EAEU, former republics of the Soviet Union	Worshipers in Belarus, Molodova and Ukraine

Ukraine in the *Russkiy Mir*

From the Russian government's perspective, Ukraine plays a key role in the *Russkiy Mir* concept. This narrative is actively propagated by Moscow and other Kremlin-linked institutions such as the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, the federal agency *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the Russian Orthodox Church. The Russian politicians are convinced that the three foundational elements of the *Russkiy Mir* concept - the Russian language, Russian history, and the Russian-Orthodox faith - are strongly present in Ukrainian society. According to the Kremlin's claim, Russian culture and language are central narratives for the unity of Ukrainians and Russians. The Russian elites justify this discourse with the "Great Russian" culture, which is *edina* (uniform) for these people.[65] Authors such as Nikolay Gogol' and Taras Shevchenko are mentioned as examples of this common culture and language: both originated from Ukraine; Gogol' wrote in a form of Russian that was full of Ukrainianisms, while Shevchenko penned his poems in Ukrainian and his prose in Russian.[66]

Since the conservatism turn of the Russian state in 2012, the Russian elites constantly point out that Ukraine is a part of the Russian culture. The apotheosis of this controversial idea was an article published on 12 June 2021 by Putin on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians, in which he claims that Ukraine does not have a tradition of statehood and that it is only a product of the 19th century.[67] This view is based on the concept of *Russkiy Mir*[68] propagated by Russia. It bonds Ukraine to Russia in three ways: linguistically (culturally), historically (politically),

and spiritually (religiously).

The Russian language holds a prominent position in Ukraine, even though it is slowly losing influence. In 2013, 21.2% of Ukrainians declared Russian to be their mother language, whereas only 11.4% did so in 2017. Yet an increasing number of Ukrainians declare that they are bilingual: in 2017, 23.5% of Ukrainians reported Ukrainian/Russian to be their mother language.[69] Thus, the loyalty of the citizens towards both languages has increased.[70] Nevertheless, Ukraine remains part of the *Russkiy Mir* from the Kremlin's viewpoint. In 2014, Russia invaded Crimea under the pretext of protecting the Russian-speaking population from the unstable Ukrainian government.[71] The same rhetoric "to protect Russian-speaking people from the neo-Nazis Kyiv regime and to demilitarize and denazificate Ukraine" was used on 24 February 2022 after the Russian president launched a full-scale war against Ukraine.[72] The aggressive Kremlin policy in the name of its Russian compatriots, the hidden support for military groups in Eastern Ukraine have the effect in Ukraine that Russian culture and language are seen as endangering national unity. The survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology at the end of 2022 among 2,005 Ukrainians shows that 41% of responders speak only Ukraine language, 6% speak only Russian, and 24% of Ukrainians speak both languages.[73] Many Ukrainian activists called to boycott Russian culture in the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war.[74] Some of them went further and proposed canceling Russian literature for being imperialistic.[75]

The Kremlin appeals to the shared history when elevating the cultural proximity of Ukrainians and Russians. Moscow claims that Ukraine was part of Russia for centuries until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Russian state cannot acknowledge that Ukraine is a sovereign state with its own political and security interests. According to this narrative, Russian elites foresaw Ukraine as a future cornerstone of the Eurasian Economic Union – an alternative to the EU promoted by Russia. This perspective was so crucial for the Kremlin that Moscow did not want to approve an approximation of Ukraine to the EU. From a Russian perspective, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, as a result, the full-scale war launched in 2022 is only the second-best solution. The price for this is that the Kremlin has lost Ukraine as an alliance partner for decades. On a symbolic level, Ukraine bid the common past with Russia and the Soviet/Russian Victory in the Great Patriotic War farewell as soon as 2015. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko renamed Victory Day, celebrated on 9 May, as the Day of Victory over Nazism in World War II in 2015 and designated 8 May as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation. 2023 President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree to celebrate the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in World War II on 8 May.[76]

As for the religious context, both countries were linked until 2019, when the new autocephalic Orthodox Church was founded in Ukraine. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church is doomed to lose its canonistic sphere in Ukraine, even though

25% of believers profess their allegiance to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is subordinated to the Moscow patriarchate.[77] The concept propagated by the ROC regards Russian orthodoxy and "the triune of Russian people" as central elements, which came about after the "baptism of the Rus."[78] For the Russian Orthodox Church, these elements are incomplete without Ukraine and void the entire concept. Moreover, members of the Izborsk Club call for the Russian annexation of the Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine because these areas have more in common with Russia than with "rump Ukraine" characterized by liberal ideas from the West.[79] The club's members view the democratization processes in Ukraine as defective and dangerous for the unity of the Russian people. Despite the proximity of the Izborsk Club to the Kremlin this revanchist idea has only found support in right-wing conservative circles up to now.

The full-scale Russian war against Ukraine marked, on the one hand, the final Ukrainian goodbye to Russia with its language, culture, shared history, and church; on the other, it contributed to the strong Ukraine identity, which is newly more orientated to Europe and European values rather than the Soviet past.

Conclusion

The "special path" ideology has a long tradition in Russian history and can be traced back to the 19th century. In the new Russian history, the *Russkiy Mir* concept became an umbrella term for conservative thoughts and irredentism ideas. However, it was not always the case. Russian philosophers introduced it in the 1990s to public discourse as a liberal idea to unite all the Russian-speaking population abroad and build a community on an example like a Francophonie. In the 2000s, the Russian political elites discovered the concept. They institutionalized that by creating federal and state institutions to promote Russian culture and language abroad and to support Russian compatriots abroad. The Kremlin's understanding of the *Russkiy Mir* concept was squeezed into the post-Soviet space, whereas the initial idea would unite the whole globe. Meanwhile, conservative circles such as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Izborsk Club discovered and reinterpreted the concept according to their understanding of the *Russkiy Mir*. They stressed orthodox beliefs as a critical element of the concept and the Russian national identity.

From the Russian state perspective, Ukraine is essential for the existence of the *Russkiy Mir* concept. Without Ukraine's cooperation in the framework of *Russkiy Mir* as a socio-cultural project, the latter loses its foundation, whether it is the sphere of the Russian language, Russian history, or the Russian-Orthodox faith. Even though the political elites of Russia insist that Ukraine is part of the *Russkiy Mir*, the reality is different. Ukraine is indeed culturally, politically, and religiously linked with Russia, but this does not substantiate any of Russia's political claims. After the full-scale Russian war on Ukraine and the tragedy in Butča and other

Ukrainian cities, the *Russkiy Mir* stands now for the Russian regime's imperial politics and the Russian violence in Ukraine.

About the author

Dr. Alexander Meienberger studied international affairs, Eastern European history, and Slavic literature in Russia, Germany, and France. He received his Ph.D. from the Department of Eastern European Studies at the University of St. Gallen. He is the executive director of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE) and teaches Slavic literature at the University of Konstanz. His research interests are Slavic cultures and literature of the 20th century and the present. His first book on Russian soft power and the foundation "Russkiy Mir" is forthcoming from the Böhlau Verlag.

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