



Geopolitics of Russia's Heartland and its Relation to *Ruskiy Mir* Ideology

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Abstract:

In an era of shifting global power dynamics, Russia's strategic deployment of geopolitical theories and cultural narratives has become a vital subject within the field of international relations. This research examines how Russia integrates Mackinder's Heartland theory with the Ruskiy Mir ideology to pursue dominance across Eurasia. Utilizing the Ukrainian conflict (2014–2024) as a case study, the analysis demonstrates how territorial control and cultural narratives are intertwined within Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. By methodologically combining discourse analysis of Russian state policies with an examination of conflict dynamics, the study reveals several key findings: (1) the Heartland theory serves as the overarching strategic framework, while the Ruskiy Mir concept provides ideological legitimation; (2) the asserted protection of Russian-speaking populations functions as a geopolitical pretext for territorial expansion; and (3) this dual approach has fundamentally reconfigured Eurasian security paradigms. This research bridges the traditional divide between analyses of Russia's geopolitical and ideological instruments, offering a unified framework for understanding 21st-century power projection that merges territorial strategy with identity politics. The findings illuminate how major powers can weaponize historical and cultural ties in conjunction with military means, providing broader implications for the study of similar strategies in global geopolitics.

Keywords: *Heartland, Russia, Ruskiy Mir, Geopolitics, Eurasia*

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INTRODUCTION

The Heartland concept introduced by Sir Halford Mackinder in the early 20th century is one of the most influential geopolitical theories in the history of international relations. In his monumental work, *The Geographical Pivot of History* (1904), Mackinder argued that whoever controlled the Eurasian heartland - which he called the Heartland - would have the potential to dominate the world. The Heartland, according to Mackinder, encompassed most of Russia, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, a region that was geographically inaccessible, rich in natural resources and strategically positioned as a link between Europe and Asia.

In the contemporary context, Russia is the geographically and historically most dominant country in the Heartland region. From the era of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, to the current Russian Federation, control over this region has always been a top priority in Russian foreign policy and national defence. For Russia's political and military elite, the Heartland is not just a geographical region, but a symbol of great power status and a foundation for national security. Control of the Heartland is considered vital to preventing the penetration of Western powers, maintaining access to energy resources, and securing strategic transport routes across Eurasia.(Codevilla, 2024).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia faced major challenges in maintaining its influence in the Heartland region. Many of the breakaway states of the Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, Georgia and the Baltic states, began to move closer to the West and sought to join NATO and the European Union. This is seen as a direct threat to Russia's strategic interests. Therefore, Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet era underwent a significant transformation. Rather than relying solely on military power and hard power instruments, Russia has also been increasingly active in using ideological and cultural instruments as part of its geopolitical strategy. One of the main instruments used by Russia is the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) doctrine. *Russkiy Mir* is an ideological construct that emphasises the importance of the unity of the Russian-speaking community, a shared historical heritage and Orthodox civilisational values. This concept extends beyond the territorial boundaries of the Russian Federation, encompassing the entire Russian diaspora in neighbouring countries, and even claiming a special relationship with territories that were once part of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Through *Russkiy Mir*, Russia seeks to build cross-border solidarity, strengthen collective identity, and create moral and political justification for intervention abroad.

While previous studies have extensively examined the Heartland theory and *Russkiy Mir* ideology separately, this research bridges the gap by analyzing their integration as a cohesive strategy in Russian foreign policy. Earlier works often focused on either the geopolitical imperatives of the Heartland or the cultural-ideological aspects of *Russkiy Mir*, without fully exploring how these elements synergize to advance Russia's regional hegemony. This study uniquely demonstrates how Heartland provides the territorial and strategic framework, while *Russkiy Mir* supplies the ideological narrative, together forming a multidimensional approach that combines hard and soft power. By examining this integration through the lens of the Ukrainian conflict, the research offers fresh insights into the evolving nature of Russia's geopolitical tactics and their implications for international security.

The implementation of *Russkiy Mir* as a foreign policy tool has become more apparent since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the prolonged conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The Russian government has consistently used the narrative of protecting 'Russian citizens' or 'Russian speakers' as an excuse for military and political intervention in strategically important regions. These narratives are not only used to justify actions in the eyes of the domestic public, but also to influence international opinion and undermine the legitimacy of the governments of target countries (Pieper, 2020).

Moreover, the mobilisation of cultural and ideological narratives through *Russkiy Mir* marks a new phase in Russia's approach to regional and global politics. The collaboration of classical geopolitical imperatives - such as territorial control, resource control and border security - with cultural and history-based soft power instruments creates a multidimensional strategy that is difficult for Russia's opponents to anticipate. This approach also strengthens Russia's position in international negotiations, while increasing its bargaining power with Western countries. This article aims to analyse in depth the relationship between Russia's geopolitical control of the Heartland and its use of the *Russkiy Mir* ideology as a complementary strategy in achieving regional hegemony.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative approach that combines theoretical analysis, literature review, and case study methods to examine the integration of Russia's Heartland geopolitics with the *Russkiy Mir* ideology. The study is anchored in offensive realism and classical geopolitical theory to analyze Russia's strategic imperatives, while also incorporating constructivist perspectives to assess how identity and ideological narratives shape foreign policy. Primary data includes official Russian policy documents, speeches by political leaders, and reports from international organizations such as the OSCE and UN, which are analyzed using critical discourse analysis to uncover underlying ideological justifications. Secondary sources, including academic journals, books, and policy papers, provide contextual depth and comparative insights. The Ukrainian conflict (2014–2024) serves as the focal case study, offering a clear example of how Russia operationalizes the Heartland concept alongside *Russkiy Mir* in practice. Process tracing is employed to map causal relationships between geopolitical actions and ideological narratives, while hybrid warfare theory helps dissect Russia's use of non-military tactics, such as disinformation and cyber operations. To mitigate potential biases in Russian primary sources, findings are cross-referenced with Western and Ukrainian perspectives. The study acknowledges its temporal focus on 2014–2024 but supplements this with a review of pre-2014 developments to ensure historical context. Ethical considerations, including proper citation and academic integrity, are strictly adhered to throughout the research process (Creswel, 2013).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Operationalisation of Heartland in Russian Foreign Policy

The Strategic Significance of Heartland

The Heartland, which encompasses most of Russia and Eastern Europe, is at the core of Russia's security doctrine and an important foundation of contemporary geopolitical thinking. This concept, first introduced by Sir Halford Mackinder in 1904, emphasises that whoever controls the Eurasian heartland will have the potential to dominate the 'Island of the World' (Eurasia and Africa) and ultimately the world. For Russia, control of this region is not just a territorial ambition, but a strategic imperative that has shaped national security policy for centuries (Bradshaw & Prendergrast, 2005).

Control of the Heartland provides Russia with three key strategic advantages. Firstly, strategic depth allows Russia a wide room for manoeuvre in the face of external invasion. History shows how this strategic depth saved Russia from Napoleon's invasion in 1812 and Nazi Germany's attack in 1941-1945. In the modern context, this strategic depth remains relevant given the development of long-range weapons technology and anti-missile systems. Second, the Heartland provides resource security vital to Russia's economic and military survival. The region is rich in oil reserves, natural gas, strategic minerals and vast agricultural land. According to Russian Energy Ministry data, about 60 per cent of Russia's natural gas reserves and 40 per cent of its oil reserves are located in the Heartland region. Control over these resources not only ensures Russia's energy independence, but also provides geopolitical

leverage against European countries that depend on Russian energy supplies. (J Mearsheimer, 2011).

Third, the Heartland serves as a buffer zone against threats from the West. From Russia's perspective, the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU is seen as an existential threat to national security. Russian security doctrine explicitly mentions the expansion of foreign military alliances on Russia's borders as one of the main threats. According to Trenin (2019), the Russian security elite views the former Soviet states as "near abroad" that must remain within Russia's orbit of influence to ensure border security (Lamour, 2024). Russia's military interventions in neighbouring countries reflect consistent efforts to maintain influence over the Heartland. The conflict in Georgia (2008) occurred after NATO promised membership to Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit. The annexation of Crimea (2014) and support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine was a response to the Maidan Revolution that toppled the pro-Russian government and potentially brought Ukraine into the Western orbit. Russia's actions in Ukraine are a manifestation of 'defensive geopolitics' aimed at preventing the expansion of Western institutions into what is considered Russia's traditional zone of influence (Kudelia, 2025).

The significance of the Heartland is also reflected in Russia's official policy documents. The Foreign Policy Concept 2016 and the National Security Strategy 2021 explicitly mention the importance of maintaining influence in the 'post-Soviet space' as strategic priorities. Putin himself, in a speech in July 2021, emphasised that Russia and Ukraine are 'one nation' with inseparable histories and cultures, reinforcing the narrative that Ukraine is an integral part of Russia's geopolitical space (Hillis, 2015).

Russia's efforts to maintain control over the Heartland also involve economic and energy strategies. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 was an attempt to integrate the economies of former Soviet states under Russian leadership. Gas pipeline projects such as Nord Stream and Turkish Stream are designed to strengthen Europe's energy dependence on Russia, while reducing Russia's dependence on transit routes through Ukraine (Kementerian Luar Negeri, 2022).

In the context of global competition, control of the Heartland gives Russia a strategic position in dealing with Eurasian geopolitical dynamics. China's Belt and Road initiative and Beijing's expansion of economic influence in Central Asia are viewed with suspicion by Moscow. Through its control of the Heartland, Russia seeks to balance China's influence in a region that has historically been within its orbit of influence. As such, the strategic significance of the Heartland for Russia goes beyond military and territorial dimensions, encompassing economic, energy and cultural-historical identity. Control of this region is central to Russia's vision of itself as a great power and a key determinant of Russian foreign and security policy in the 21st century.

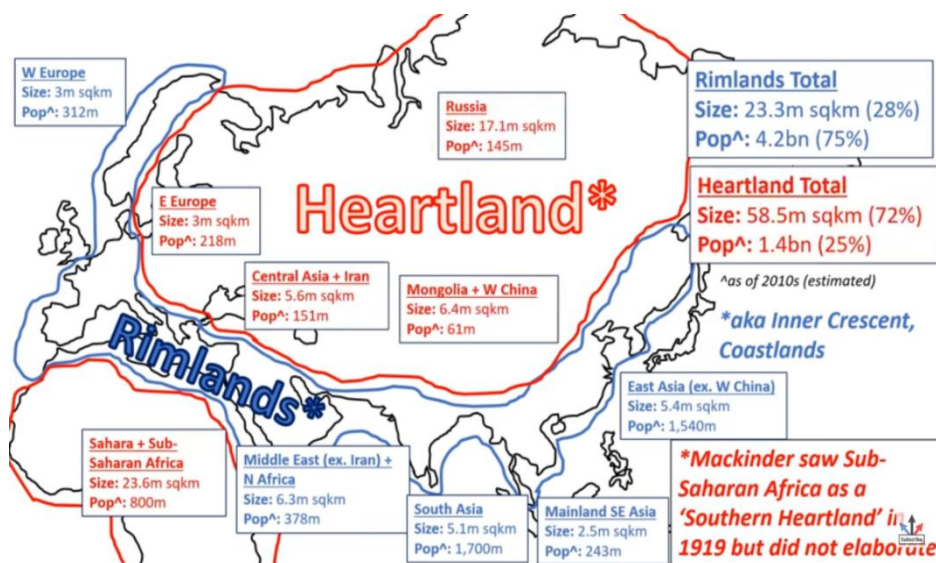


Figure 1. Mackinder Heartland Map

Source: Modified by Mackinder, H.J. (1904)

Hybrid Warfare and the Control of Geopolitics

The Russian concept of hybrid warfare derives its theoretical foundation from what is known as the Gerasimov Doctrine, which emphasises the importance of integration between military and non-military means to achieve political and strategic goals. Within this framework, military operations are only one component of a broader spectrum, where information operations, diplomacy, economic pressure, and manipulation of public opinion are equally important in winning modern conflicts. Gerasimov highlights that victory in contemporary conflicts is no longer determined solely on the battlefield, but also in the psychological, social and political realms through the influence of narratives and perceptions. (Duginets & Busareva, 2021).

Russia's implementation of hybrid warfare is most evident in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Russia has not only provided direct military support to pro-Russian separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk but also established quasi-state entities that are de facto under Moscow's control. This support includes the provision of weapons, military training, logistics, and even the deployment of military personnel without official identities (often called 'little green men'). In addition, Russia also integrates these territories economically with the Russian Federation, for example using the ruble as currency, the provision of humanitarian aid, and the integration of the education system and local media with Russian standards (Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, 2017).

Another very prominent aspect of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy is its massive use of information warfare and disinformation. Through state media such as RT and Sputnik, as well as thousands of fake social media accounts and bots, Russia systematically spreads pro-Russian narratives, discredits the Ukrainian government, and confuses international public opinion. This disinformation campaign aims to create uncertainty, weaken Ukraine's internal solidarity, and create doubts and divisions among Western countries that support Ukraine. In addition, digital propaganda is used to build the legitimacy of separatist groups and justify Russian intervention in the eyes of the international community (Curea, 2023).

Cyber warfare is also a key tool in Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. Since 2014, Ukraine has been subject to numerous cyberattacks targeting critical infrastructure such as the power grid, banking system, and government institutions. These attacks not only caused significant economic losses but also created a sense of insecurity and instability in Ukrainian society. In addition, cyberattacks are used to steal intelligence data, disrupt military communications, and undermine the Ukrainian government's crisis response capabilities.

Economic pressure is another dimension of Russian geopolitical control. Russia often uses neighbouring countries' dependence on energy supplies, especially natural gas, as a bargaining chip in political negotiations. Gas supply cuts or sudden price increases are often used to pressure target governments to be more co-operative with Russian interests. In some cases, this economic pressure is combined with trade sanctions, embargoes, or restrictions on access to the Russian market for products of countries deemed hostile (Duginets & Busareva, 2022).

Support for separatist movements also characterises Russia's hybrid warfare approach. In Eastern Ukraine, pro-Russian separatist groups are actively building self-governing structures, managing local security and adopting symbols of the Russian state. This process is supported by the infiltration of Russian agents, arms smuggling, and organised military recruitment and training campaigns. By creating quasi-state entities, Russia has managed to maintain long-term influence in strategic areas without resorting to formal annexation, while complicating the Ukrainian government's efforts to restore sovereignty over these areas.

Russia's hybrid warfare strategy also involves systematic efforts to construct historical narratives and cultural identities that support Russia's claims to the Heartland region. Through educational curricula, media and cultural activities, Russia instils the *Ruskiy Mir* ideology and reinforces a collective identity as part of the Russian world. This narrative is used to justify interventions, strengthen local people's loyalty to Moscow, and undermine the national identities of neighbouring countries (Anna Colin Lebedev, 2017).

Russia's hybrid warfare approach in the Heartland has proven effective in creating ambiguity, lowering the military response threshold of Western countries, and expanding Russian influence without engaging in large-scale open conflict. However, it also poses serious challenges to regional stability and the international order, as it complicates the conflict resolution process, deepens social polarisation and increases the risk of unexpected military escalation.

Thus, hybrid warfare and geopolitical control have become the main foundations of Russia's strategy to maintain and expand its influence in the Heartland region. The integration of military power, information operations, economic pressure and cultural identity mobilisation makes Russia's approach highly adaptive and difficult for its opponents to anticipate. This phenomenon shows that modern warfare has evolved into a multidimensional contestation, where victory is not only determined on the battlefield, but also in the information, economic and psychological domains of the target society (Jakubiak, 2022).

***Ruskiy Mir* as Ideological Instrument**

Evolution and Institutionalisation of Ruskiy Mir

The concept of *Ruskiy Mir* (Russian World) is the result of a long evolution of Russian national identity narratives rooted in history, culture and religion. Although the idea of a Russian world dates back to the era of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the term

Russkiy Mir began to gain a clear political articulation in the early 21st century, especially under Vladimir Putin. The concept evolved in response to the challenges of globalisation, post-Soviet fragmentation, and increasing geopolitical competition between Russia and the West (Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2017)

Formally, *Russkiy Mir* was institutionalised in the mid-2000s through the establishment of the Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007. It was established at the initiative of President Vladimir Putin and Patriarch Alexy II of the Russian Orthodox Church, marking a synergy between the state and religious institutions in building a national narrative. The Russkiy Mir Foundation coordinates programmes to promote the Russian language, spread cultural values, and strengthen the network of Russian diaspora communities abroad. Its activities include establishing cultural centres, organising art festivals, scholarship programmes, and training Russian language teachers and lecturers in target countries (Kupriianova, 2024).

The institutionalisation of *Russkiy Mir* is inseparable from the Russian government's efforts to expand its soft power influence in the post-Soviet region and other regions with significant Russian-speaking populations. Through the Russkiy Mir Foundation, Russia seeks to build cross-national solidarity based on common language, history and Orthodox religion. In countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan and the Baltic states, it actively supports Russian-speaking schools, cultural communities and social organisations that promote Russian identity.

Ideologically, *Russkiy Mir* is based on three main pillars:

1. A historical narrative of Russian civilisation that emphasises the continuity between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and the modern Russian Federation. This narrative positions Russia as the rightful heir to the imperial tradition and the great power of Eurasia.
2. Russian Orthodox religion, which is positioned as the spiritual and moral foundation of the Russian nation. The Orthodox Church plays an important role in defining *Russkiy Mir's* identity and establishing moral legitimacy for Russian foreign policy.
3. The legacy of the Soviet Union, particularly in terms of solidarity between nations and Russia's role as a unifier of the Eurasian region. Although Soviet ideology has officially been abandoned, Soviet symbols and rhetoric are often used to build nostalgia and a sense of community among diaspora communities (Meienberger, 2023).

The evolution of *Russkiy Mir* was also influenced by domestic and international political dynamics. Domestically, the concept was used to strengthen national cohesion and overcome identity fragmentation due to globalisation and Western influence. Abroad, *Russkiy Mir* became an instrument of cultural and political diplomacy, used to build networks of influence in neighbouring countries and other strategic regions. Through the Russkiy Mir Foundation's programmes, the Russian government can reach out to young people, intellectuals and opinion leaders in target countries, while creating a base of support for Russian foreign policy.

In addition to the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, various state institutions and civil society organisations are also involved in the promotion of *Russkiy Mir*, such as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Rossotrudnichestvo* (Federal Agency for the Affairs of the Commonwealth of Independent States, Citizens Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation), as well as state-owned mass media such as RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik. The synergy

between these institutions strengthens the effectiveness of spreading the *Russkiy Mir* narrative at the global level.

However, in some other countries, notably in Central Asia and Transnistria (Moldova), the *Russkiy Mir* narrative still enjoys a positive reception, especially among diaspora communities and the older generation with nostalgia for the Soviet era. This suggests that *Russkiy Mir*'s effectiveness depends heavily on the local context, domestic political dynamics, and bilateral relations with Russia (Shevchenko & Lozoviuk, 2022).

Overall, the evolution and institutionalisation of *Russkiy Mir* reflects Russia's strategic efforts to combine hard and soft power in its foreign policy. By utilising history, culture and religion as instruments of diplomacy, Russia seeks to maintain and expand its influence in Eurasia and beyond. Recent studies confirm that *Russkiy Mir* has become one of the main pillars in Russia's foreign policy architecture, as well as a source of controversy and debate at the international level (Lampe, 2022).



Figure 2. Map of the Russian World

Source: Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. (2020)

Geopolitical and Ideological Synergy

Ukraine Conflict Case Study

The Ukrainian conflict is the most obvious example of the convergence between the geopolitical interests of the Russian Heartland and the use of the *Russkiy Mir* ideology as an instrument of legitimisation and influence expansion. Since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and actively supported separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk, the region has turned into a laboratory for Russia's multidimensional strategy combining military force, information operations, economic pressure and cultural identity mobilisation. The annexation of Crimea was driven by two main narratives: first, the importance of Crimea as a strategic military base on the Black Sea that is key to Russia's access to the Mediterranean and southern Eurasia; second, the narrative of protecting ethnic and Russian-speaking communities that the Ukrainian

government claimed were discriminated against. The referendum, organised under Russian military supervision, was used as a legitimising tool, even though the result was rejected by most of the international community (Mitrokhin, 2023).

In Donbas, Russia provided military, logistical and political support to separatist groups that later proclaimed the independence of the 'Donetsk People's Republic' and the 'Luhansk People's Republic'. Russia's official recognition of these two entities in February 2022 clarified Russia's direct involvement in the conflict and strengthened its geopolitical claims over the Heartland region. The move also expanded the scope of *Russkiy Mir's* narrative as a defender of the rights of Russian communities abroad, while providing justification for a wider military operation in Ukraine (VOA Indonesia, 2022).

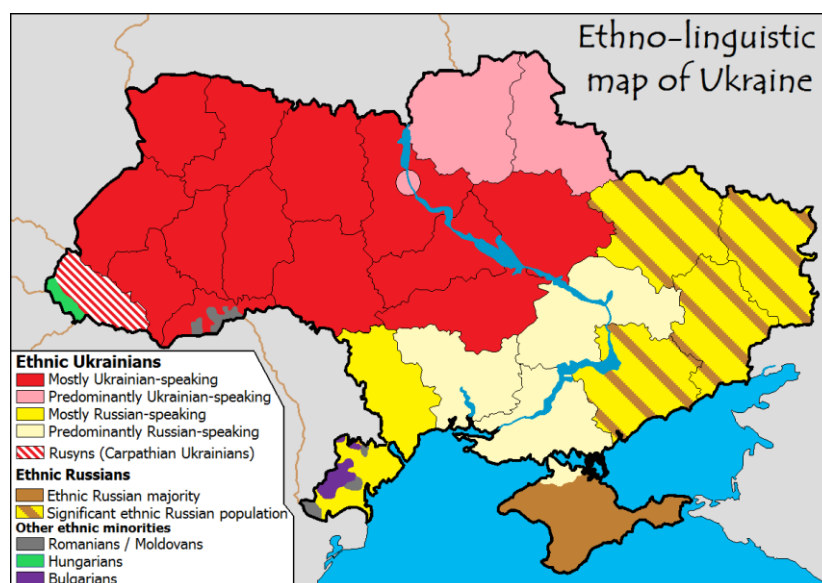


Figure 3. Ethnic Russian regions in Ukraine

Source: OSCE. (2022)

The strategy employed by Russia in Ukraine not only relies on conventional military strength but also integrates various non-military instruments within a hybrid warfare framework. This approach involves open military operations, cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, economic pressure, sabotage, digital propaganda, and support for separatist groups. Through government media like RT and Sputnik, as well as thousands of fake social media accounts and bots, Russia systematically spreads pro-Russian narratives, discredits the Ukrainian government, and confuses international public opinion. This disinformation campaign aims to create uncertainty, weaken internal solidarity in Ukraine, and sow doubt and division among Western countries that support Ukraine. Additionally, digital propaganda is used to build legitimacy for separatist groups and justify Russia's intervention in the eyes of the international community (Saeri et al., 2023).

Economic pressure is also an integral part of Russia's strategy. Russia often exploits the dependence of neighboring countries on energy supplies, especially natural gas, as a bargaining tool in political negotiations. Disconnection of gas supplies or sudden price hikes are often used

to pressure the governments of target countries to be more cooperative with Russian interests. In some cases, this economic pressure is combined with trade sanctions, embargoes, or restrictions on access to the Russian market for products from countries deemed hostile. This strategy not only creates direct pressure on governments but also influences public opinion and the economic stability of target countries.

The conflict in Ukraine also has a significant impact on regional and global stability. On one hand, Russia's actions are regarded as violations of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity established in the UN Charter. On the other hand, Russia argues that they are acting to protect the rights of the Russian community who are threatened by the policies of the Ukrainian government and NATO's expansion. This tension has triggered massive economic sanctions from the United States, the European Union, and other Western countries, as well as an increased NATO military presence in Eastern Europe. The conflict also highlights the limitations of the international system in preventing military aggression, especially when the acting country is a permanent member of the UN Security Council with veto power. (Vikulov et al., 2023).

The social and humanitarian impact of this conflict is immense. Thousands of people have died, millions more have been forced to flee, and public infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and transportation facilities have suffered severe damage. Amid this worsening situation, propaganda and disinformation further complicate the atmosphere, deepening social polarization and undermining national reconciliation efforts. In addition, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine also affects regional and global economic stability, particularly concerning energy and food supply. Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of wheat, corn, and energy to global markets. Disruptions due to the war have led to soaring commodity prices and triggered food crises in various undeveloped countries.

On the other hand, Ukraine responds to Russian aggression by strengthening national identity, tightening ties with the West, and implementing military and political reforms. Military, financial, and intelligence support from NATO and European Union countries bolsters Ukraine's resilience in facing Russian pressure. However, Russia's strategy in Ukraine also faces significant challenges, such as fierce resistance from Ukraine, international support for Kyiv, as well as the negative impact of diplomatic and economic isolation for Russia itself (Maschmeyer et al., 2025).

Overall, the Ukraine conflict has become an important case study on how the concept of the Heartland and the ideology of *Russkiy Mir* are simultaneously operationalized by Russia to achieve geopolitical goals and strengthen its hegemonic claims in the Eurasian region. The integration of military power, information operations, economic pressure, and the mobilization of cultural identity makes Russia's approach highly adaptive and difficult for its opponents to anticipate. This phenomenon shows that modern warfare has evolved into a multidimensional contest, where victory is determined not only on the battlefield but also in the realms of information, economics, and the psychology of the target society.

Impact on Regional and International Order

The Ukraine conflict is the clearest illustration of how Russia integrates the geopolitical interests of the Heartland and the ideology of the *Russkiy Mir* into its foreign policy. Since

2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk, this region has transformed into an arena for implementing a multidimensional strategy that combines military power, information operations, economic pressure, and mobilization of cultural identity. The annexation of Crimea was not only driven by a strategic need to secure a naval base in the Black Sea but also by a narrative of protection for Russian-speaking communities that were claimed to be experiencing discrimination by the Ukrainian government. The referendum held under the shadow of the Russian military was used as a tool for legitimacy, although its results were rejected by the majority of the international community. (Singh, 2023).

In the Donbas region, Russia provided military, logistical, and political support to separatist groups that later proclaimed the independence of the "Donetsk People's Republic" and the "Luhansk People's Republic." Russia's official recognition of these two entities in February 2022 marked an increasingly direct involvement, while also reinforcing geopolitical claims over the Heartland region. This move also expanded the scope of the *Russkiy Mir* narrative as a defender of the rights of Russian communities abroad, serving as a justification for broader military operations in Ukraine. Russia's strategy in Ukraine not only relies on conventional military power but also integrates various non-military instruments into a hybrid warfare framework. This approach involves open military operations, cyber warfare, disinformation campaigns, economic pressure, sabotage, digital propaganda, and support for separatist groups. Through state media such as RT and Sputnik, as well as thousands of fake social media accounts and bots, Russia systematically spreads pro-Russian narratives, discredits the Ukrainian government, and confuses international public opinion. This disinformation campaign aims to create uncertainty, weaken internal solidarity in Ukraine, and sow doubt and division among Western countries that support Ukraine. Additionally, digital propaganda is used to build legitimacy for separatist groups and justify Russia's intervention in the eyes of the international community (Wiswesser, 2024).

Cyber warfare has become a key tool in Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. Since 2014, Ukraine has been the target of various cyber-attacks aimed at critical infrastructure such as power grids, banking systems, and government institutions. These attacks have resulted in significant economic losses and have created a sense of insecurity and instability in Ukrainian society. In addition, cyber-attacks are used to steal intelligence data, disrupt military communications, and weaken the Ukrainian government's response capabilities to crises. This tactic has proven effective in creating disruptions and lowering the opponent's morale, while also strengthening Russia's bargaining position in international negotiations.

The mobilization of the local Russian-speaking community in Donetsk and Luhansk has become one of the main pillars of Russia's strategy. Through networks of community organizations, educational institutions, and Orthodox churches, Russia builds loyalty and solidarity at the grassroots level. Humanitarian aid, educational programs, and the dissemination of Russian cultural symbols strengthen the identity of *Russkiy Mir* in the conflict area. This creates moral and political justification for Russian intervention while undermining the position of the Ukrainian government. By creating quasi-state entities in this region, Russia successfully maintains long-term influence without needing to formally annex the area,

complicating the Ukrainian government's efforts to restore sovereignty over the territory (Azarov et al., 2023).

Overall, the Ukraine conflict has become an important case study on how the concept of the Heartland and the ideology of *Russkiy Mir* are simultaneously operationalized by Russia to achieve geopolitical goals and strengthen its hegemonic claims in the Eurasian region. The integration of military power, information operations, economic pressure, and the mobilization of cultural identity makes Russia's approach highly adaptive and difficult for its adversaries to anticipate. This phenomenon shows that modern warfare has evolved into a multidimensional contest, where victory is determined not only on the battlefield but also in the realms of information, economics, and the psychology of the target society.

Regional Response and Countermeasures

Countries around Russia are responding to geopolitical expansion and the spread of *Russkiy Mir* ideology with a variety of increasingly coordinated and systematic strategies. One of the most notable responses is the strengthening of national identity policies aimed at reinforcing the country's identity and reducing dependence on Russian symbols, language, and culture. In Ukraine, for example, the government has consistently implemented language laws that require the use of Ukrainian in education, public administration, and media. This step aims not only to strengthen national identity but also to serve as a form of resistance against Russia's efforts to maintain its cultural and political influence through Russian-speaking communities. In addition, the decommunization policy that removes Soviet symbols and renames streets or cities associated with Russia is part of a long-term strategy to build a historical narrative that is more independent from Moscow's influence (Taras Kuzio, 2015).

Restrictions on Russian media have also become one of the main measures taken by neighboring countries. The Ukrainian government, Baltic countries, and several Eastern European countries have blocked television broadcasts, news websites, and digital platforms deemed as tools of Russian propaganda. These efforts are being made to hinder the spread of disinformation and the *Russkiy Mir* narrative that can undermine social cohesion and trigger internal tensions. In Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, restrictions on Russian media are accompanied by media literacy campaigns and public education to make society more critical of circulating news, especially those sourced from abroad. In addition to domestic steps, countries in the region are also strengthening ties with Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO. The Baltic states and Poland are actively enhancing defense cooperation, reinforcing the presence of allied military forces in their territories, and participating in joint military exercises. NATO is responding to threats from Russia by increasing troop numbers, strengthening air defense systems, and building new military infrastructure in Eastern Europe. This policy aims to create a deterrence effect against the possibility of further aggression from Russia, while also demonstrating the solidarity and collective commitment of Western countries in maintaining the security of the region. (Maschmeyer et al., 2025).

However, the counter-narrative efforts against *Russkiy Mir* and Russian expansion strategies do not always go smoothly. The presence of significant Russian-speaking minorities in several countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, and Kazakhstan, presents its own challenges.

These communities are often the primary targets of Russian propaganda, which means that national integration policies must be implemented carefully to avoid triggering alienation or horizontal conflict. On the other hand, economic dependence on Russia, especially in the energy and trade sectors, also limits the space for neighboring countries to take a firm stance. Some countries still rely heavily on gas and oil supplies from Russia, so economic pressure or embargoes can have serious domestic repercussions (Detik News, 2022).

The regional response to Russia's expansion also includes efforts to diversify energy sources and develop new infrastructure to reduce dependence on Russia. The European Union, for example, is accelerating the development of LNG terminals, expanding cross-border gas pipeline networks, and encouraging investment in renewable energy. These measures are expected to strengthen the region's energy resilience and reduce Russia's political leverage in both bilateral and multilateral negotiations. At the diplomatic level, Russia's neighboring countries are actively building strategic alliances and strengthening their positions in international forums. They regularly raise the issue of threats from Russia at the UN, OSCE, and various other multilateral platforms, with the aim of gaining international support and strengthening the legitimacy of their domestic policies. In addition, several countries are also enhancing intelligence and cybersecurity cooperation to confront non-military threats such as espionage, digital sabotage, and cyberattacks (Naila Putri Azzahra & Tania Ananda Simanungkalit, 2024).

Although regional responses have shown some success in curbing Russian influence, long-term challenges remain. Domestic political dynamics, social fragmentation, and economic and energy pressures continue to impact the effectiveness of countermeasure strategies. Therefore, the response to Russian expansion requires a comprehensive, adaptive, and sustainable approach, involving all elements of the state and civil society. Only with a combination of inclusive national identity policies, strengthening democratic institutions, economic diversification, and close international cooperation can countries in the region effectively face the challenges posed by Russian geopolitical and ideological expansion (Stefanova, 2018).

CONCLUSION

This study underscores how Russia's strategic mastery of the *Heartland* concept and the deployment of the *Russkiy Mir* ideology not only shift the balance of power within Eurasia but also significantly reshape global security and political structures. By analyzing the Ukrainian conflict as a case study, the research highlights the broader relevance of Russia's approach, offering valuable lessons for other nations on the risks and opportunities that arise when geopolitical strategies intersect with identity-driven narratives in international politics. The findings provide both practical and theoretical insights for scholars, policymakers, and the global community, equipping them to better navigate the complexities of great power competition in the 21st century and to work toward a more stable, equitable, and sustainable world order. For future research, it is recommended to explore how similar combinations of territorial strategy and ideological narratives are employed by other emerging powers, as well as to assess the long-term impacts of these dynamics on regional and global governance.

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