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Who identifies with the "Russian World"? Geopolitical attitudes in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria

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ABSTRACT

The concept of the Russian world (*Russkii mir*) re-entered geopolitical discourse after the end of the Soviet Union. Though it has long historical roots, the practical definition and geopolitical framing of the term has been debated and refined in Russian political and cultural circles during the years of the Putin presidency. Having both linguistic-cultural and geopolitical meanings, the concept of the Russian world remains controversial, and outside Russia it is often associated with Russian foreign policy actions. Examination of official texts from Vladimir Putin and articles from three Russian newspapers indicate complicated and multifaceted views of the significance and usage of the *Russkii mir* concept. Surveys in December 2014 in five sites on the fringes of Russia – in southeastern Ukraine, Crimea, and three Russian-supported de facto states (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria) – show significant differences between the Ukrainian sample points and the other locations about whether respondents believe that they live in the Russian world. In Ukraine, nationality (Russian vs. Ukrainian) is aligned with the answers, while overall, attitudes toward Russian foreign policy, level of trust in the Russian president, trust of Vladimir Putin, and liking Russians are positively related to beliefs about living in the Russian world. In Ukraine, the negative reactions to geopolitical speech acts and suspicions about Russian government actions overlap with and confuse historical linguistic-cultural linkages with Russia, but in the other settings, close security and economic ties reinforce a sense of being in the Russian "world."

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Introduction

The current geopolitical standoff between Russia and NATO on the European continent has been described as the worst security crisis since the end of the cold war (Wilson 2014; Sakwa 2015). While the origins of the crisis go back more than a decade, it escalated dramatically in early 2014 with the flight of the democratically elected president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, in face of violent protests against his rule. This turn of events precipitated a decision by Russian President Vladimir Putin to authorize a stealthy Russian invasion of Crimea. At the same time, pro-Russian activists across southeastern Ukraine, most successfully in the Donbas area within Donetsk and Lukansk oblasts (regions), sought to exploit the vacuum of power and legitimacy crisis created by Yanukovych's departure to advance their own autonomy and separatist aspirations. By May 2014 the Ukrainian military, and an assorted collection of pro-Kyiv militias, were at war with Russian-backed separatists. An imperfect ceasefire arrangement largely stabilized the frontlines in the Donbas in a second Minsk Agreement in February 2015.

In December 2014, we organized simultaneous social scientific surveys in five locations in Russia's near abroad – in six oblasts of southeastern Ukraine (not including the Donbas war zone), in Crimea (the territory annexed to Russia in March 2014), and in the three "de facto" states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. We sought to examine how the violent and tumultuous events that year affected the (geo)political attitudes of the various nationalities living in these areas. This paper examines one of these questions; a query that asked respondents whether they believed their current location – oblast or de facto state – was part of the Russian world (*Russkii mir*). Part one of this paper explains our understanding of the term as a geopolitical frame and provides a brief history of its evolution and operation within the Russian political establishment. Part two looks at some media representations of the term in Russia. Part three examines the results from the five surveys about the relevance of this geopolitical framing in each setting.

What and where is *Russkii mir*? A geopolitical frame in post-Soviet space

The study of geopolitical cultures is, in part, the study of the rhetorical framing practices that organize and delimit the world political map into convenient categories and recognizable spaces (Toal 2017). At the outset of the cold war, in a speech before Congress on 12 March 1947, President Truman framed world affairs as a struggle between two ways of life. "One way of life," Truman argued, "is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression." The other way of life is based "upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio; fixed elections, and the suppression

of personal freedoms" (Truman 1947). The Truman Doctrine defined the cold war as a clash of opposing worlds. Geopolitical frames like "the free world" and "the West" gave this clash an abstract and moralized definition rather than geographic and material one (Craig and Logevall 2012). Cold war geopolitical culture was organized around a moralized dichotomy between free and enslaved states in Western geopolitical discourse and between capitalist imperialist states and worker republic states within Communist discourse (Westad 2005).

In rhetorical terms, geopolitical frames are performative (sentences that perform an action), although they may appear as merely constative (sentences that describe something as true or false) (Austin 1975). What this means is that their use helps create and constitute the very categorical scheme they proclaim. States become part of the "free world" or "the West" by being described as such, even if these states have characteristics that call such a designation into question (e.g. Turkey and Greece during the cold war as "the free world" or Japan as part of "the West"). Indeed, for many geopolitical frames, their definitional substance is fluid and ambivalent. It is the power of the act of categorizing and framing that matters, not whether it is accurate. Geopolitical frames work as protean signifiers that float above multiple categorical definitions, working largely as dichotomizing performatives; namely as speech acts that function to draw boundaries between "us" and "them." Mass media play a central role in the reproduction of historical myths and narratives in the public field. They legitimize particularistic interpretations of current events by representing them as an objective truth and mobilizing collective memory concerning historical injustices, thus strengthening a group identity by the confirmation of negative stereotypes (Laine 2017).

The term "Russian world" (*Russkii mir*) is one of many used historically to describe the Russian state and empire as a distinctive civilizational space. Medieval sources, for example, described the civilization of ancient Rus as a Russian world. The modern framing has a long genesis beginning with its initial promulgation in St. Petersburg in the 1870s. It was used by some intellectuals, including the classic Russian playwright, Alexander Ostrovskii (1823–1886), who understood it in spiritual terms, as a community of Orthodox Christians living in the unity of belief, rites, and traditions. His articulation distinguished the concept of the "Russian world" from the Pan-Slavic doctrine (MacKenzie 1964; *Khristianskaya* 2007). *Russkii mir* emerged anew as a gathering node for self-definition and meaning after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This renewed articulation has been conditioned by the geopolitical context of its emergence and by multiple overlapping understandings of the term. The collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia searching for a new "national idea" (Allensworth 1998). The socio-demographic realities of that collapse are well known. Up to 25 million ethnic Russians found themselves beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Some, like Russians in Central Asia and Moldova, were caught up in ethno-territorial turmoil while others were soon on the receiving end of discriminatory citizenship laws in newly independent nationalizing states, such as Latvia and Estonia (Smith 1999). Belonging to the dominant titular group

in the new states became a crucial advantage in competition for prestigious jobs, housing, and land. In many regions, like southeastern Ukraine, people with mixed ethnicities were labeled as Russian-speakers by Russian officials who advocated their language rights (Chinn and Kaiser 1996; Tishkov 1997).

Different factions across the Russian political spectrum worked out varied approaches to this geopolitical dilemma, some decidedly revisionist and imperialist in ambition. For example, in 1993 Dmitri Rogozin (currently Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation) initiated the creation of a Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) to organize reuniting Russian communities and NGOs in former Soviet republics and autonomous republics of Russian Federation. It served as a vehicle for advocacy on behalf on "stranded Russians" as well a political project articulating revisionist geopolitical schemes (Ingram 1999). In 1995 a liberal faction around the well-connected Russian political technologist Gleb Pavlovskii established a consulting agency, Foundation for Efficient Politics, whose first project was planning the KRO's unsuccessful electoral campaign. Nevertheless, this agency was soon involved in a number of Kremlin's projects including Boris Yeltsin's electoral campaign and the implementation of the Kremlin initiative to formulate a new Russian idea (Shchuplenkov 2012). Articles by two employees in Pavlovskii's public relations consulting firm, Petr Shchedrovitskii and Efim Ostrovskii, promoted the elaboration of the idea of a "Russian World" in the post-Soviet context (Laruelle 2015). Following the ideas of Shchedrovitsky's father, the Soviet liberal philosopher Georgii Shchedrovitskii who specialized in the field of semiotics, they viewed the common language as a tool to bridge different communities spread across the world. They further wanted to maintain interaction between divergent post-Soviet states and to promote bonds with other countries using the associations of Russian speakers who had left the Soviet Union/Russia at different time periods. Shchedrovitskii speculated about "intellectual network structures" having no center and independent of politics, and even about a new cosmopolitan form of statehood based on networks of diasporas and the principle of multiculturalism, though he did not ignore the role of these communities as a resource for Russian foreign policy (Shchedrovitskii 2000; Petro 2015).

While the definition of the cultural sphere was Russophone, the implicit definition was of a Russian ethno-scape (Appadurai 1996). The term Russian/*Russkii* (ethnic form) and not Russian/*rossiiskii* (civic form) enjoyed greater emphasis. This reflected a conscious effort to rehabilitate pride in matters explicitly Russian and move beyond what some perceived as the tarnished Westernizing of Rossian/*rossiiskii* as liberal multiculturalism. Large numbers of scholars and politicians were involved in debate about how to understand Rossian/*rossiiskii* political identity. Using the results of numerous surveys, authors claim that the Rossian/*rossiiskii* political nation – integrating citizens of different ethnic background, living together for centuries and sharing the same political, economic, and informational space – is a sociological fact, though a few authors associate it only with the Russian ethnic group (Drobizheva 2009, 2011, 2013; Semenenko

2010; Tishkov 2010, 2011, 2013). Others believe that the Rossian/*rossiiskii* political nation can emerge only in a truly democratic society (Pain 2003, 2013). Pavlovskii and colleagues likewise explicitly rejected the exclusivist ethno-nationalism of those on the political right in Russia (Clover 2016). The tension within the Russian world concept between a broad attempt to encompass all Russian speakers and a narrower ethnic Russian understanding of the term has thus never been fully resolved. Russian serves as the language of communication and social promotion for most ethnic groups and thus, it is very difficult to clearly separate Russian ethnic culture from the Rossian political definition.

Russkii mir is polysemous, a catchphrase that is sufficiently fluid, vague, and empty in substance, a sound bite with the useful quality of being ambiguous in substance but clear in its broad boundary – drawing identity-defining function. As used by Putin and other officials, the term "*Russkii mir*" has three interconnected sets of meaning: linguistic, biopolitical, and civilizational.

The first meaning as a cultural and linguistic definition ostensibly has little to do with politics. The Russian world is the cultural sphere of the Russian language and its productions. Just as there is a Francophone world well beyond France's borders, so also is there a Russian world, a community of a shared spoken language and culture. A language-centric definition, however, is inevitably entangled with the biopolitical and geopolitical situation of Russian "compatriots" (*sootechestvennik*) abroad (Zevelev 2001, 2014). Recognizing that Russian (national) culture was also being developed abroad, the first congress of compatriots was held exactly on the same days of the coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. "Compatriot" was a coinage of the late Soviet period as the Russian state came to terms with the new geopolitical order and its sense of responsibility to those beyond Russia's borders who looked to the country as a cultural hearth and for protection. "Compatriot" is what Foucault scholars view as a biopolitical term: it concerns the organization, management, and security of populations (Lemke 2011). All states, to different extents and degrees, use biopolitical techniques to manage and monitor their diasporas. For example, Croatia, Hungary, and Poland use biopolitical criteria for maintaining relations with their compatriots by issuing cards to them that provide the holders with access to considerable privileges. This support is inevitably geopolitical since these populations reside in the territory beyond "their homeland" within its present boundaries.

The notion of "compatriot" was legally defined in Russia in the federal law "On the State Policy toward Compatriots Abroad" adopted on 24 May 1999 and completed in 2002–2003 by a number of amendments. The Putin administration facilitated a Congress of Compatriots in October 2001 to address what Putin saw as a neglect of this diaspora. In his address to the Congress, Putin gave voice to what would be a consistent theme during his rule – the injustice of the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, Putin regularly acknowledged a firm intention to support "compatriots" in their struggle for civil rights and against discrimination and their aspiration to keep alive their language and culture. On

the other hand, he stated that as Russia was recovering its power, it needed the help of its diaspora. Putin explained that a compatriot is defined not by a legal category or status. Rather it is something that involves spirit and personal choice: it is a "question of self-determination. I would say even more precisely, spiritual self-determination" (Putin 2001).[1] From the beginning, this second biopolitical understanding of *Ruskii mir* is framed in a language of spirituality, of community that transcends the materiality of actually existing political borders. In one of his 2014 speeches on the Ukraine crisis, Putin noted "When I speak of Russians and Russian-speaking citizens I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the broad Russian community, they may not necessarily be ethnic Russians, but they consider themselves Russian people." (Putin 2014b). The notion of the Russian world, Putin explained, "from time immemorial went far beyond the geographical boundaries of Russia and even far beyond the boundaries of the Russian ethnos." A common cultural and information space is a key instrument of the interaction between the state and fellow countrymen abroad. "What matters is not where you live geographically, what matters is your mentality, your aspirations and, as I said, the person's self-identification" (Putin 2001).

Over the years, Putin's understanding of compatriots did not change. More than a decade later he defined compatriots as those who "share a common concern for Russia's future and its people, a commitment to be useful to your historical homeland, to promote its socioeconomic development and strengthen its international authority and prestige" (Putin 2012). Compatriots were the biopolitical substance – a substance, ironically, defined in terms of its spirit – of the idea of the Russian world. Russian leaders observe enormous diversity across the Russian world but always stress the need for its consolidation and solidarity. They consider relations with compatriots as an intrinsic element of the country's soft power (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013).

The two ostensibly separate understandings of the Russian World, linguistic and biopolitical, were officially bound together in June 2007 when Putin signed a decree establishing an organization called the Russian World Foundation (Gorham 2011). Its institutional mission was to promote the Russian language within Russia and abroad and to encourage interest in Russian history and culture. The establishment of the Foundation was inspired by the experience of organizations like *Alliance Française* or the British Council (Russkii mir 2007) and contribute to keeping or to strengthening Russian cultural influence. The Russian World Foundation established programs in 80 countries across the world. It has held international congresses in Russia annually for the last decade. At each Congress, the government regularly confirmed the commitment to support compatriots through the Russian World Foundation. In 2015 the Russian government adopted a new federal program, "Russian language," with a budget of about USD 100 million. There are also federal programs of compatriots' voluntary resettlement to Russia (though to peripheral regions) and a quota for them in Russian higher educational institutions.

As institutionalized in the Russian World Foundation, *Russki mir* is linguistic/ cultural, biopolitical, and spiritual. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is the only faith to have representatives on the Foundation's governing board – so the notion is sometimes considered equivalent to the community of believers of Russian Orthodoxy and a basic element on the ground of *Russkii mir*. (The ROC has myriad close ties to the Putin presidential administration and Russian state writ large.)

Critics of Russian foreign policy like Van Herpen (2016, 149) claim that *Russkii mir* is "part of a much more ambitious project that aims to give the Kremlin – again – the global ideological influence it had lost with the end of Communism." The term "Russian world" was part of the whole constellation of close notions designating the post-Soviet space as an area of particularly important to Russia's interests, such as "the near abroad," "historical space of Russia" (*istoricheskoe prostranstvo Rossii*), "the space of Russian language" (*prostranstvo russkogo yazyka*), and "the territory of Russia's responsibility" (*territoria rossiiskoi otvetstvennosti*). A number of authors insist upon Russophonie's apolitical and anti-colonial underpinnings and that the objective of this policy is to reunite, to integrate, and in some cases, to reconcile people of different ethnic, national, social, and ideological backgrounds (see the review in Gorham [2011]).

After Putin's return to the Russian presidency in 2012, the notion of a Russian world took on a more pronounced civilizational meaning (Laruelle 2015). In this sense, the term was a "global signifier" constituting Russia as a distinctive world power with its own civilizational space. Here the term functioned in opposition to competing global metageographic concepts like "the West" or "Atlanticism." "Russian World" is therefore an ideological foundation of the multi-polar world's concept as a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy. The official Foreign Policy Concept adopted by Putin soon after he came to power in 2000 proclaimed the need to oppose the establishment of the unipolar global structure and American hegemony. The most recent Concept included the mention of soft power, including the Russian World Foundation as an instrument of foreign policy (Grigas 2016), which should be backed by the potential of civil society, human communications, and contemporary IT and "other methods and technologies alternative to classic diplomacy." The Foreign Policy Concept stressed the growing importance of civilizational identity as an immanent manifestation of globalization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013). Even if it is not directly used in the Foreign Policy Concept, the notion of the Russian world became a justification of Russia's specific place and influence in the world, an organic and natural element of its soft power and a confirmation of the world's diversity and multi-polar structure.

All of these competing understandings of the term have been over-determined in recent years by Russia's actions in Ukraine. Taking a critical perspective in relation to the Ukraine crisis, Wawrzonek (2014, 760) stated that "The neo-imperialist goals of Russian policy toward Ukraine in recent years have received a doctrinal foundation – the concept of the Orthodox civilizational community – the Russkiy mir." Further, he claimed that "Russkiy mir … should be considered a pretext for Russian

political, economic, or 'security' policies toward Ukraine" (776). Kuzio (2015, 159) also accepts this geopolitical strategy behind *Russkii mir*, writing that "As Russian and Soviet identities were irrevocably intertwined in the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that the Russkii mir also mythologized the Soviet past." Saari (2014, 63) thinks that the *Russkii mir* project has inherited Soviet tactics and methods "without any ideology, values, long-term commitment of resources or any degree of responsibility." In a counteraction to Russia's perceived soft power action, in November 2016 the European Parliament supported a bill that listed and condemned the Russkii Mir Foundation as a propaganda arm of the Russian government along with RT television and the Sputnik news agency (Tass 2016).

In justifying soft and hard power actions in a set-piece speech on 18 March 2014, Vladimir Putin returned to the collapse of the Soviet Union as a trauma of sudden fragmentation for the Russian nation and those who identified with it.

> Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.

Putin compared the situation of Russia to that of Germany, a nation divided after World War II. Russia, he pointed out, "unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity." (Putin 2014a).

What Putin meant by the Russian world was given an environmental, biological, and super-cultural meaning a month later in his annual marathon *Direct Line* television event. Responding to a question – "what is the Russian people to you?" – he developed a distinction between Russia and the West that is worth quoting at length because of the biological and environmental determinism that it revealed:

> As for our people, our country, like a magnet, has attracted representatives of different ethnic groups, nations and nationalities. Incidentally, this has become the backbone not only for our common cultural code but also a very powerful genetic code, because genes have been exchanged during all these centuries and even millennia as a result of mixed marriages. And this genetic code of ours is probably, and in fact almost certainly, one of our main competitive advantages in today's world. This code is very flexible and enduring. We don't even feel it but it is certainly there. So what are our particular features? We do have them, of course, and I think they rely on values. It seems to me that the Russian person or, on a broader scale, a person of the Russian world, primarily thinks about his or her highest moral designation, some highest moral truths. This is why the Russian person, or a person of the Russian world, does not concentrate on his or her own precious personality … Western values are different and are focused on one's inner self. Personal success is the yardstick of success in life and this is acknowledged by society. The more successful a man is, the better he is. This is not enough for us in this country. … Death is horrible, isn't it? But no, it appears it may be beautiful if it serves the people: death for one's friends, one's people or for the homeland, to use a modern word. These are the deep roots of our patriotism. They explain mass heroism during armed conflicts and wars and even sacrifice in peacetime. Hence there is a feeling of fellowship and family values. Of course, we are less pragmatic, less calculating than representatives of other peoples, and we have bigger hearts. Maybe this is a reflection of the grandeur of our country and its boundless expanses. Our people have a more generous spirit. (Putin 2014c)

In these sentences, Putin seems to echo the idea of a "super-ethnos" (an alliance of different ethnic groups) championed by Lev Gumilev, a well-known historian and Eurasianist, although without using the term (Bassin 2016; Clover 2016). His argument, however, is squarely within the mainstream of Russian Slavophile discourse where dichotomies between "spiritual Slavdom" and an "individualistic West" are common (a dichotomy, ironically, that is transposed from nineteenth-century German Romantic thought). His understanding of patriotism (willingness to die for the homeland) is also recognizably Western. Indeed it perfectly illustrates Max Weber's classic definition of the nation as subjective belief in common descent, an affective community where the individual is expected ultimately to face death in the group interest (see Vujačić 2015).

To speak of the Russian world in this way is to potentially mobilize a variety of possible meanings in combination and interconnected. The survey research question we analyze here does not presume or test whether respondents know the different contextual meanings of the term. Rather it is a prompt that asks respondents to accept or refuse an act of identification with *Russkii mir*. In the context of 2014, a year of deepened polarization around geopolitics, it is understandable that many interpret this as a question asking them if they identify with the Russian state under Vladimir Putin as opposed to a Russo-phonic cultural sphere that does not involve endorsing one state or one ruler.

Russkii mir and three Russian newspapers

We have elaborated above the development and the use of the *Russkii mir* concept at the highest levels of the Russian government and the suspicions about its advocacy in a foreign policy sense. However, the public reception of the term and its salience in Russian media is quite uncertain. Is the term only a political ruse by the Kremlin and the subject of a scholarly discussion or does it resonate with the public? We examine three Russian newspapers that span the political spectrum for the years 2014–2016. A liberal newspaper *Nezavissimaya Gazeta* (Independent Newspaper) is compared to two further from the mainstream, *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), a national-patriotic outlet, and *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (Soviet Russia), which is close to the Communist party. As Laruelle (2015) noted regarding the term "Novorossiya," the political discourses of *Zavtra* and *Sovetskaya Rossiya* about geopolitical concepts surprisingly converge: their authors develop the same ideas, use the same arguments, and even the same specific colorful, threatening, and belligerent language. Both newspapers assert Russia's great-power status and messianic role in the world, the values of ultra-conservative Orthodoxy, and treat *Russkii mir* as a synonym for an alternative civilization at war with a hostile "Western civilization."

A common and often repeated point of the two newspapers is that current events in southeastern Ukraine are critically important for Russia: it is not only about this specific conflict but also about the future of Russia and *Russkii mir* as a civilizational space under constant threat of fragmentation and destruction by

the West and the US. "Donbas and Crimea have turned out to be on the edge of the clash of civilizations; they felt themselves the bang of the Western machine ready to absorb and to dig into Slavic lands" (Averyanov 2014). Igor Girkin (*nom-de-guerre* Strelkov, a field commander during the first stage of the war in Donbas) clearly explains this idea in *Sovetskaya Rossiya*:

> War is declared on Russia, and if it was not unleashed in the Donbas, it would begin in Crimea or somewhere else. This is a stage of the big war between the West aspiring to global dominance and the Russian world. (Samelyuk 2014)

Stories in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* are targeted at elderly Communist party voters nostalgic for the Soviet Union. They are imbued by an anti-Western and particularly anti-American stance (Boldyrev 2014), the psychology of the "besieged fortress" fighting against the American *diktat* for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence: "the language of Russian national philosophy is the language of resistance." (Nikitin 2007). *Sovetskaya Rossiya* repeatedly emphasizes the role of the "core," "state-shaping" Russian nation and declares that Russia is a nation-state "but not from the perspective of the ethnic composition of population" (Bobrov 2014).

In May 2014, at a critical moment in the development of the Ukrainian crisis, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* published a long article where it was noted that the ideologists of Russian nationalism who had been until recently *personae non gratae* in federal media were now regularly invited to talk shows on the main television stations. While recognizing the dangers of nationalism, Kirillov (2014) opted for the recreation of an empire as a means to avoid the risk of outbursts of Russian and other nationalisms. Like other newspapers, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* has never delimited the boundaries of the desirable hypothetical empire, or the Russian world. On the one hand, *Sovetskaya Rossiya* accepts the official concept of the Russian world as a community of all those who speak Russian and identify with Russian culture. They also define the Russian world as a network of large and small communities, defending Russian civilization and its spiritual culture without the single coordinating center, ready to act for the sake of the historical motherland. On the other hand, the newspaper reacted to the creation of the Russkii Mir Foundation by declaring that its official concept cannot be applied in practice. They suggested instead two options: to associate the Russian world with the national political space or to include "compatriots" abroad in it (Zakhar'yin 2007). The newspaper blames the Putin government for the "purposeful politics of compatriots' alienation from Russia, while at the same time opening the doors for immigrants" (Nikitin 2005; Anuchkin-Timofeev 2011). In other words, the paper includes in the Russian world former parts of the Soviet Union, neighboring republics, and territories with an important share of Russian speakers in population. According to *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians are a single people, and the paper separates the inhabitants of Western regions from the rest of Ukraine as "professional traitors of Slavs since ancient times" (Zadornov 2014). In the paper's opinion, the organizers of the coup in Kyiv wanted not only control over Ukraine but to involve Russia into the conflict.

Zavtra, in contrast to *Sovetskaya Rossiya,* rarely uses the term "Russian world" but its content clearly shows how its authors understand its extension and borders and what role this concept plays in their understanding of the 2014–2015 events in Ukraine. The overriding preoccupation of *Zavtra* is that Russians should strengthen the state (*gosudarstvennichestvo*) and maintain its sovereignty. They believe that the vocation of Russia is to be the core of an empire interpreted as a voluntary association of Russians and "small" neighboring peoples under the umbrella of a powerful common great power state. The founder and the editor-in-chief of *Zavtra*, the writer Alexander Prokhanov, emphasizes that "the idea that we live in a great power has always accompanied Russian history." The Russian (Tsarist) empire and the Soviet Union as its successor have never been a nation-state, their roots are in a "symphony of cultures" (Glushik 2014).

"Patriotic" ideologists dream about a restoration – at least, partly – of the borders of the former Soviet Union. Quite naturally, like Communists, they firmly support all forms of integration between post-Soviet countries and, in particular, its latest form – the Eurasian Economic Union. However, the patriots always stress the role of Russians as the "state-shaping" people, as "the spiritual, cultural, economic center of new integration's structures in the post-Soviet space." According to Prokhanov (2014), the Russian state is based on

> four powerful forces, four beliefs: Orthodoxy opening the way to endless azure from where divine paradise senses, the light of justice and love. … Russian culture, our great language and music that God awarded us, reuniting us through music and lyrics with the Divine mystery. … Oh God, what a happiness is to be Russian!

Russian civilization is thus a "big system based on the values which are radically different from the Western ones" (Prokhanov 2014).

A favorite xenophobic theme of *Zavtra*, as well as of *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, is the decrease in the number of ethnic Russians and the inflow of "Turkic-Muslim" migrants to Russian cities. An author in *Zavtra* declares that the Slavic civilization, despite "fragmentation," is a single civilization "sharing a common understanding of its destination" and totaling 200 million people (Vinnikov and Nagornyi 2014). "Ukraine and Russia are the same … it is a historical part of Big Russia under the form of the Soviet Union destroyed in 1991 as an integrated geopolitical space" (Nagornyi 2014).

By contrast to these two organs, *Nezavissimaya Gazeta* is a more high-brow newspaper with strong readership in Moscow and St. Petersburg and among the educated and liberal sectors of society. It is often critical of Putin government actions. A screening of the term "*Russkii mir*" shows its almost-complete absence until 2007–2008, when the Russkii Mir Foundation was established. Even then, the term is found in only 24 stories until 2013. With 11 occurrences in 2013, 48 in 2014, 52 in 2015, and 27 in 2016, *Russkii mir*'s frequency in the newspaper reflects the events in Ukraine and the discussion about the extent to which Russians and Ukrainians share an identity and the increased use of the term by government officials. Op-eds by academics and politicians debate the meaning of the *Russkii*

mir term and how it might be translated into concrete political actions. Authors are agreed about the political use of the term by the Putin government and the main elements of the concept, though much speculation is evident about its geo-political implications.

Nezavissimaya Gazeta's (2016) editorial at the end of 2016 recognized the growing importance of the *Russkii mir* term, from an abstract historical term to "a support mechanism of the Russian diaspora," but worried that the public did not understand the implications of the (geo)political use of the term nor indeed its specific elements.

> In fact, (*Russkii Mir*) advocates promoting the "Russian mentality" abroad. And it already means Christian values, and sports achievements, and musical, technical, or scientific accomplishments. This new approach requires the involvement not only of the Foreign Ministry in the ideological struggle, but also the wider public.

Other 2015–2016 articles about *Russkii mir* probed the support for the concept by the Orthodox church (Lunkin 2016), the critique of the *Russkii mir* project by the European parliament and Russia's possible reaction (Gorbachev 2016), and the deeper meaning of Russian identity (Malinova 2015). A prominent opposition figure, Vladimir Ryzhkov (2015), bemoaned the hijacking of the *Russkii mir* term by the Putin government and its oppositional framing to international values:

> Making the first post-Soviet territorial increment of Russian territory from the territory of another state (Crimea), and having widely used nationalist rhetoric ("Russian values", "Russian World"), Vladimir Putin has radically changed the ideological nature of the Russian state. Earlier, Russia appealed to the values of development, modernization, respect for international law, broad international cooperation, and human rights.

In sum, the term "*Russkii mir*" is not one that was particularly central to Russian geopolitical culture until 2014; it was known but not widely debated. That it has become a matter of controversy and debate is a function of how it has been used by the Putin administration to frame Russia's foreign policy vision and interests, particularly from early 2014 onward.

The relative silences about and the uncertainty around the term "*Russkii mir*" at the highest levels of the Russian state are reflected in a variety of media out-lets. Ranging from a vague cultural-language promotion project like the *Alliance Française* to a conspiratorial view from outside Russia of a geopolitical project to extend Russian territorial control, *Russkii mir's* meaning remains highly contro-versial. By asking about the salience of the term in a variety of settings outside Russia but which are heavily involved with Russia, we can probe the relevance of the concept in the context of the renewed confrontation between Russia and the West in the Black Sea-Caucasus region.

Survey data and definitions

Shortly after the annexation of Crimea into Russia and during a relative lull in the conflict in the Donbas after the intense August 2014 fighting, we conducted a

comparative and representative public opinion survey in five locations in the Black Sea and the south Caucasus region. The overall project was set in the context of the changing geopolitical relations between Russia and the West that featured the 2014 Ukrainian crisis as its fulcrum. What the "Russian world" means in this hostile political environment and where its margins are lie at the center of our interest in mapping and analyzing the new realities of the near abroad. By asking about the salience of the *Russkii mir* term in a variety of settings outside Russia but which are heavily involved with Russia, we can probe the relevance of the concept in the context of the renewed confrontation between Russia and the West in the Black Sea-Caucasus region.

In 2010–2011 we examined the beliefs and attitudes of residents in the four Russian-supported de facto states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorny-Karabakh (O'Loughlin, Kolosov, and Toal 2014). The later project from which this paper emanates examined three of these regions (Nagorny-Karabakh was excluded since Armenia is the patron state and Russia is a more remote supporter), the annexed peninsula (Crimea), and the broader swath of contested territory in the south and east of Ukraine. This large area, which revisionists in Russia labeled as "Novorossiya," consists of eight oblasts, including the two heavily involved in the Donbas war, those of Luhansk and Donetsk (see O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov 2017). Because of the ongoing conflict in these two oblasts, we were only able to conduct the survey in a reliable manner in six of the eight oblasts that comprise southeastern Ukraine. (The oblasts are listed in Table 1). Consequently, we use the term SE6 rather than "southeastern Ukraine" throughout the text to indicate this substantial but not complete coverage.

The five research sites offer an exploratory and useful *tour d'horizon* of the resonance of the concept of *Russkii mir* on the borders of Russia itself. The sites include two regions with large ethnic Russian minorities (Transnistria and SE6), a region with a large Russian majority (Crimea), and two regions with small (Abkhazia) or negligible Russian (South Ossetia) populations. In language terms, all of the regions have a strong Russian linguistic presence, and Russian is normally the language of "inter-ethnic communication." All sites were formerly in the Soviet Union and all have experienced disputes over the eventual disposition of the respective territories. In the case of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and parts of southeastern Ukraine, the territorial dispute was violent, while in the case of Crimea, the annexation of March 2014 was peaceful. Most significantly, Russian geopolitical interests and foreign policy actions in the near abroad over the past 25 years since the

Table 1. Responses to the question "Does your region belong to *Russkii mir*?" by oblast in Ukraine.

	Dnipro	Zaporizhzhia	Mykolaiv	Odesa	Kharkiv	Kherson
Strongly agree	3.17	6.12	0.00	11.92	11.67	5.75
Agree	13.99	6.80	20.63	13.21	16.96	5.17
Disagree	19.22	9.18	17.46	18.65	14.32	7.47
Strongly disagree	51.12	39.46	35.98	36.79	31.28	62.07
Don't know	8.77	38.10	14.81	15.28	23.35	11.49
Refuse	3.73	0.34	11.12	4.15	2.42	8.05

collapse of the Soviet Union have involved these five regions. (For comparisons of other geopolitical attitudes in the de facto states, see Toal and O'Loughlin [2016]).

Critical to the project was that the timing of the interviews in the five settings should be exactly the same. In an environment where the geopolitical atmosphere was changing rapidly and where the conflict in the Donbas region was not stable, comparison of the results would have been jeopardized if the interviews were staggered over time as contextual circumstances changed. All interviews were conducted in the last two weeks of December 2014 in the same manner of face-to-face doorstep interviews. Interviews were conducted in Russian (or Ukrainian, by respondent choice, in the SE6 Ukraine oblasts). The average interview lasted 52 min. Sample sizes were 2033 in SE6 Ukraine, 750 in Crimea, 800 in Abkhazia, 500 in South Ossetia, and 750 in Transnistria. The question about *Russkii mir* was the same in all settings and the predictor variables analyzing the responses to the *Russkii mir* question are also directly comparable across the samples.

The survey of about 127 individual questions was organized into three sections. The demographic section of 29 questions and the generic section of 80 questions about contemporary geopolitical developments were exactly the same in all settings. The third section of each survey was specifically oriented to the local conditions and consisted of about 18 questions. The sampling procedure design was a four-step process with random selection at each stage. First, the sample was divided by each of the main regions in each location proportionate to the most recent census population over 18. For each district, all settlements were stratified by size and type (village, small town, town/city), and the probability of each settlement being included in the sample is proportional to its size. Next, for each settlement or group of settlements, a random selection of voting precincts was made, and for each precinct, the initial address was selected with street, house, and apartment chosen randomly. Starting with the initial address, respondents were selected by the method of the modified route sample. Lastly, in the selection procedure for respondents, after getting the initial address, the interviewer made a list of potential respondents ("chain"), who lived in sequential apartments and questioned every third or fifth respondent from the list. Follow-up checks by supervisors were completed for 10% of the completed questionnaires. The response rate varied from 41% in SE6 Ukraine to over 75% in Crimea.

As we have indicated, the conception of *Russkii mir* can take on different hues from a vague and unthreatening promotion of Russian culture, language, and literature to a scripted and aggressive geopolitical vision of in-gathering of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers as well as unity with the territories where they reside. In this latter interpretation, the Crimean annexation was seen as the first of several such appropriations planned in the Kremlin. In the survey question, we did not specify a particular notion nor exclude others; each individual respondent answered based on his/her own understanding of what the term meant. Vladimir Putin's multiple uses of the term during 2014 and the highly divergent opinions of his actions during the year likely colored some if not most responses.

In our survey, we simply asked, "Do you believe that your region (oblast, republic) is part of *Russkii mir* (the Russian world)?" Respondents could give an answer that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" or could reply with a "don't know" answer. The ratio of refusals was low in all locations, but the rate of "don't know" at 20% in the SE6 oblasts differs dramatically from the very low rate in other locations. Unlike other parts in the survey where high rates of "don't knows" indicate a high level of sensitivity to a particular question, there is no evidence that respondents considered the *Russkii mir* subject as highly sensitive. In the Ukrainian case, the one-in-five response of "don't know" is more likely a reflection of a sense of uncertainty about the meaning of the term (a political vs. a cultural meaning) and the mismatch between the political boundary and the cultural one with Russia. Living in SE6 Ukraine where Russian is commonly spoken, where Russian television was available on cable (but is now banned), and where Russian history and culture have been prominent and widely studied can easily generate a sense of living in the *Russkii mir*, especially for older citizens. A rejection of this background can be made for political reasons and nationalistic motivations that privileges Ukrainian independence and wishes to erect a cultural barrier to the strong Russian influence in the region.

Summary results for the five study sites

It was in the six oblasts of southeastern Ukraine that the *Russkii mir* concept garnered the most varied responses due to the intensity of political discussions after the beginning of an extraordinary political mobilization and after an anti-Russian government came to power in Kyiv. A clear majority of respondents in the SE6 did not believe that their oblasts were part of the Russian world. However, the ratio of respondents (27.4%) who hold the opposite view varied considerably across the six oblasts (Table 1). The relatively low ratio of respondents in Ukraine who believe that they are in an area that could properly be labeled as *Russkii mir* could be due to a number of factors, including resentment at Putin's capture of the term and concern that it might be used to acquire evidence for a possible Russian occupation. With more than half of the respondents using Russian as the home language, a rejection of the *Russkii mir* appellation is probably a response to the contentious geopolitical circumstances of SE6 in late 2014.

Kharkiv, located close to the border with Russia, registered the highest ratio of respondents who feel that their oblast belongs to the Russian world. The 1989 Soviet census indicated that 53% of the city population (more than half of the oblast) were ethnic Russians. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union this ethnic Russia ratio fell to 33%; Ukrainians are 63% (Ukraina Segodnya 2016), but many of them are of mixed Russian-Ukrainian background (Kolosov and Vendina 2011). The city's population remains largely Russian-speaking, and as one of the largest city and industrial centers in the former USSR, its economy was based on large plants directed by all-union ministries. Until 2014 its economy remained closely

tied to the Russian market (Kolosov and Vendina 2011). In Odesa the situation is to some extent similar, with most inhabitants living in the Russian-speaking capital city. By contrast with Kharkiv and Odesa oblasts, Dnipro (petrovsk)[2] oblast, also containing a predominantly Russian-speaking city of about one million inhabitants, contained fewer respondents that think that their region is part of the Russian world. As a polycentric region, its urban population was recruited from the surrounding densely populated countryside and more broadly, from central Ukraine. As in most cities of SE6, ethnic Russians dominated in the city's population (they were 42% in 1926; Argument 2013), but unlike Donbas cities, their ratio decreased and now amounts to only 18%. Though 90% of the population speaks Russian, the city is to a large extent bilingual: about 40% speak Ukrainian fluently and another 30% believe that they speak the state language well. Over half of local printed media is in Ukrainian (Dnipro Gorod 2016). Since March 2014 the city has been dominated by the tycoon Igor' Kolomoisky, appointed as mayor by the new Kyiv authorities. Controlling the largest Ukrainian private bank and a large part of industrial activity, he quickly took the Kyiv government's side in the conflict, funding his own paramilitary units to protect the region and fight Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas. These rapid forceful moves in the oblast, close to the Donbas front line, determined the resulting political environment in the city.

In our survey, the concept of *Russkii mir* was not popular in Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, and Mykolaiv oblasts, despite sizable ethnic Russian populations living mostly in cities (about 30% in Zaporizhzhia oblast and 20% in two other regions). Russian is widely spoken, and a possible explanation of the apparent lack of correlation with the sense of belonging to the Russian world is the origin of population. In the last decades of the USSR, it was growing due to migration from the Ukrainian-populated rural hinterland. A high percentage of "don't know" answers and refusals is noticeable, particularly in Zaporizhzhia oblast (38%, compared to only 12% in Dnipro), indicating a hesitation or an uncertainty about the cultural or political meaning of the question.

The graphs in Figures 1–5 display the respective ratios across the five research sites for the level of agreement with the prompt about the region belonging to *Russkii mir*. The values for each location are compared for key socio-demographic groups – the main nationalities, four age groups, highest and lowest educational levels, and for one key ideological orientation – whether the respondent believed that the end of the Soviet Union was a "right step." We have shown before in multiple studies (e.g. O'Loughlin, Kolosov, and Toal 2014) that the choice by a respondent on the question about whether the end of the Soviet Union was a right or a wrong step is a powerful predictor of a wider set of beliefs about Russia and Russians, about President Vladimir Putin's motivations and actions, about geopolitical opinions on broader issues like NATO expansion, and about the fairness of the post-Soviet liberal economic order as it operates in the respective regions. Generally, individuals who judge that the end of the USSR was a positive development are pro-West, support a democratic political system, are fearful or
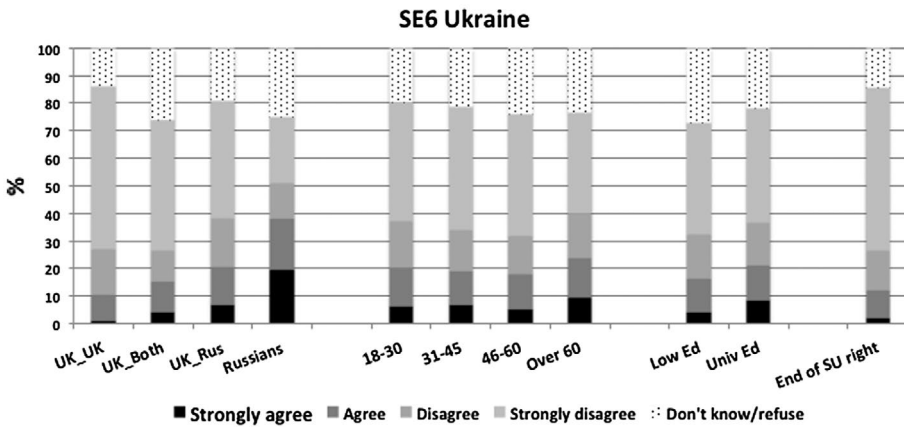
Figure 1. Ratio of respondents in southeastern Ukraine agreeing that their oblast is part of "*Russkii mir*," by national and language groups, age, education, and attitudes to the end of the Soviet Union. December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.
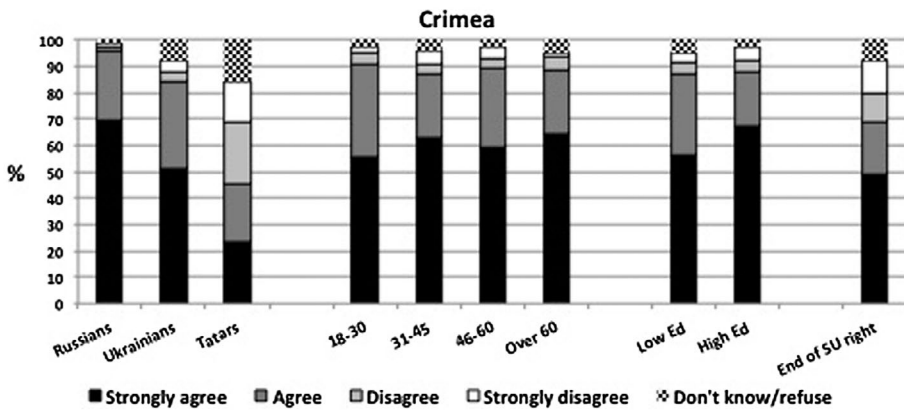

Figure 2. Ratio of respondents in Crimea agreeing that their region is part of "*Russkii mir*," by national groups, age, education, and attitudes to the end of the Soviet Union. December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

suspicious about Putin's intentions, and have seen a positive uptick or, at least, not a dramatic fall in living standards over the past quarter-century.

Respondents in SE6 Ukraine show the lowest overall rate of agreement (combined ratios of strongly agree and agree) at about 30% (Figure 1). The most visible features of the graphs in this region are the large differences between Ukrainian-speakers and Russians. The differences between the language groups within the Ukrainian population on this *Russkii mir* question are notable since our analyses of other political controversial questions – such as the support for political leaders (Toal and O'Loughlin 2015a) – shows no significant differences within the Ukrainian nationality based on home language. The 15-point differences between Ukrainian Russian-speakers and Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian or who speak
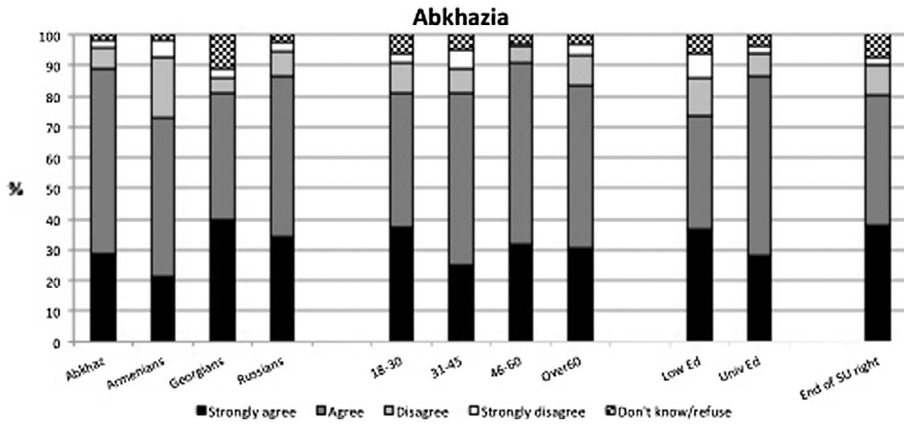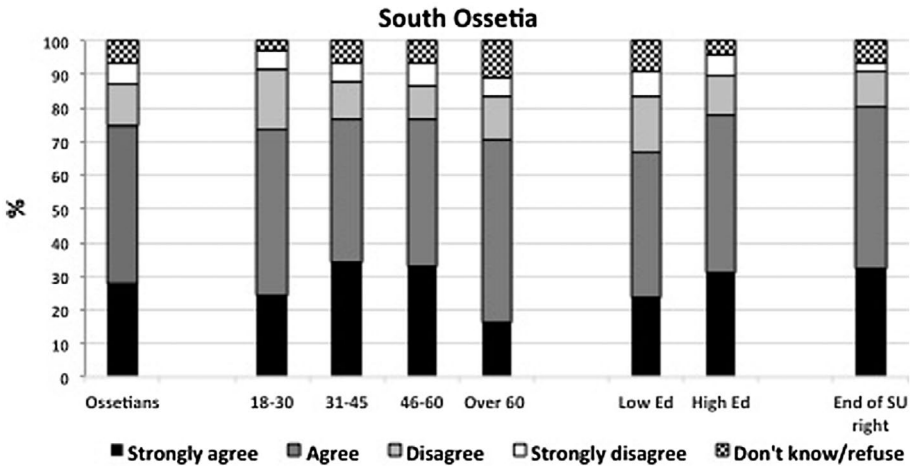
Abkhazia

Figure 3. Ratio of respondents in Abkhazia agreeing that their republic is part of "*Russkii mir*," by national groups, age, education, and attitudes to the end of the Soviet Union. December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

South Ossetia

Figure 4. Ratio of respondents in South Ossetia agreeing that their republic is part of "*Russkii mir*," by Ossetian population, age, education, and attitudes to the end of the Soviet Union. December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

both languages suggest that there is a sizable number of respondents who interpreted the question in a cultural-linguistic sense. Because the "don't know" ratio does not vary by linguistic or national group, it is thus unlikely to be politically motivated. As expected, just over 10% of those who believe that the end of the Soviet Union was a correct move agree that their oblast is part of *Russkii mir*. These respondents are most determined to put the Soviet past behind them and move away from the Russian orbit. On the other hand, it is rather surprising that there are no sizable differences between age or educational groups.

In stark contrast to SE6 Ukraine, the ratio that believes that their region is part of *Russkii mir* is three times higher, at over 90%, in Crimea (Figure 2). The level of
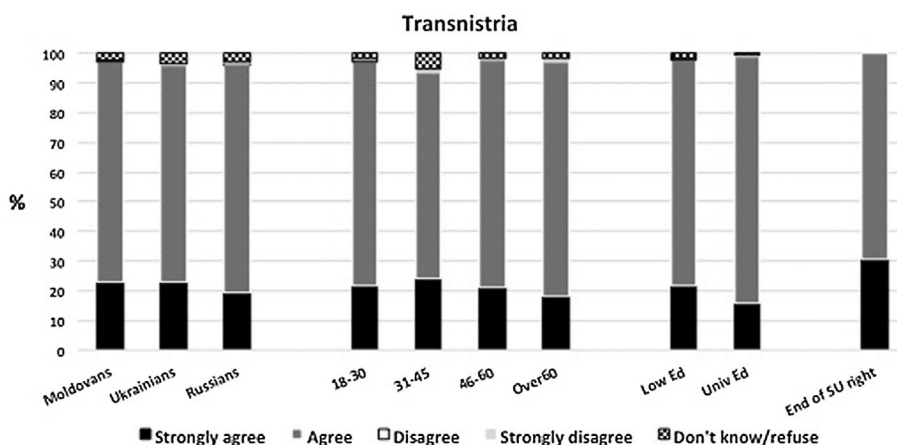
Figure 5. Ratio of respondents in Transnistria agreeing that their republic is part of "*Russkii mir*," by national groups, age, education, and attitudes to the end of the Soviet Union. December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

the strongest support (over two-thirds strongly agree) was the highest among the set of five survey respondents. The survey took place about nine months after the March 2014 annexation to Russia and only the Tatar minority (about 12% of the population) disagrees with the interpretation that the peninsula was part of the Russian world. The support for the annexation in the survey showed huge support for the Russian majority population and the Ukrainian minority, though Tatars showed a high ratio (over 30%) of "don't knows," indicating the sensitivity of the opinions about the annexation and the marginal position of this minority in the new political environment. The responses on the question about *Russkii mir* align well with the responses on the annexation. No differences between age or educational groups are noteworthy. Over two-thirds of people in Crimea believe that the end of the Soviet Union was a mistake; the minority who think it was a right step show about 20% less agreement that the peninsula belongs to *Russkii mir*.

Abkhazia has the most diverse nationality mix of the five study sites and the most complex politics based both on the different group interests and a significant split within the Abkhaz establishment about the strength of security, economic, and political associations with Russia. Like the other de facto states and Crimea, over 80% agreed that the republic is part of *Russkii mir,* with Armenians less likely than the other three groups to agree with the sentiment (Figure 3). As with other questions we have asked in Abkhazia in both 2010 and 2014, the ratio of Georgians saying that they were unable to give an opinion is higher than the other groups. At 12% in this instance, the "don't know" ratio was much lower than other questions about the direction of the republic or relations with Russia where the ratio approaches one in three respondents. No differences by age or educational level or by those who believe that the end of the Soviet Union was a correct move are evident in the graphs.

South Ossetia is now populated almost completely by Ossetians after the displacements of ethnic Georgians in the wake of the 2008 five-day war with Georgia. While there is a small Georgian minority in Akhalgori (Leningor) rayon, we did not sample this isolated population due to concerns about the reliability of responses and interviewer accessibility. About 75% of respondents in all demographic and other categories agreed that South Ossetia is part of *Russkii mir* (Figure 4), but like Abkhazia, this high level of agreement with the prompt hides differences about the scale of integration into Russia. After the 2008 war, Russia recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, but a strong minority in both republics prefers annexation to Russia. Both republics are heavily dependent on Russian economic and security guarantees.

Transnistria vies with Crimea as the region with the highest level of agreement with the *Russkii mir* statement, with over two-thirds of respondents accepting the "agree" option (Figure 5). This very high ratio is not surprising, as the republic is heavily Russified and since the brief war in 1992, most residents wish to be part of the Russian Federation (O'Loughlin, Toal, and Chamberlain-Creanga 2013). A referendum in 2006 confirmed that orientation with 98% support for annexation. After the Maidan revolt in Kyiv and the ratcheting of tensions between Russia and the Western alliance, the Transnistrian government tried to position the republic as a region of the Russian Federation. That is the line that is heavily pushed by local media and by all segments of the political establishment. Differences among groups are insignificant in the face of a widespread consensus that the republic's best option for economic development in the face of a crisis in the domestic employment sectors and a fast-declining population is full integration into Russia.

Modeling the responses to the *Russkii mir* question

Previous work by the authors and numerous other students of post-Soviet political attitudes have shown that a relatively small set of key predictors is consistently related to significant cleavages in the countries that emerged from the USSR. In the 1990s a sizable literature emerged on the social and regional cleavages that underlie the post-Communist party formations and the bases of their support. Countries such as Poland, where few questions about the survivability of the state or the extent of its borders emerged in the post-Communist period, stand in contrast with countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Russia, where geographic cleavages are as important as socio-demographic ones. In these latter countries, center-periphery differences related to both distance from the metropolis and regional ethnic and cultural dissimilarities from the majority populations – a geographic cleavage – need to be considered in addition to the usual compositional political factors. Building on the much-debated but widely-used Lipset-Rokkan (1967) cleavages for Western European politics, Kitschelt (1995) extended and modified the approach for the new electoral politics in the post-Communist states. Zarycki (2000) blended the Lipset-Rokkan and Kitschelt models to inform his analysis of Polish electoral

choices by studying axes of political alignment. We follow his model to understand the answers to our question about whether the region in which the respondent lives is part of *Russkii mir*. The theoretical axes motivate the selection of predictors. To allow proper comparison across the five research sites, all predictors are included in the model, whether significant or not.

The first axis, named the "citizenship" axis by Zarycki following Kitschelt, defines the elements of belonging to the state with full inclusive rights. It arranges inclusiveness from a sense of universal citizenship regardless of demographic characteristics to one that is based on ethnic identification where minorities are marginalized. In mixed ethnic societies like Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Russia, the majority-minorities question motivated fundamental political questions about the direction of the state. To animate the "citizenship" axis, we need to consider the nature of ethnic differences within the study sites. Due to population displacements at the end of the respective post-Soviet conflicts, South Ossetia is essentially homogenously Ossetian. In the other four sites, Russians are a majority (Crimea) or a large minority (Transnistria, Abkhazia, and SE6 Ukraine). We include ethnic Russian status as a predictor that helps to account for beliefs of belonging to the Russian world. However, where Russians are a minority, two predictors that measure the strength of attachment to and support of the state are potentially useful in the models. A measure of ethnic pride (respondents who reported that they were "very proud" of their ethnic group) and a willingness to defend the state (affirmative responses to the question about whether the respondent or a family member would take up arms to oppose an invasion) are direct and effective measures of attachment to the state. Those who answered these questions in the negative are likely to be alienated from the state. In our model, we expect Russian ethnicity to be positively related to the *Russkii mir* question while ethnic pride and propensity to fight are expected to be negatively related, except in Crimea, where Russians are a majority and the region is heavily Russified. We include a fourth predictor on this dimension – the level of ethnic distancing from Russians. Since all sites except South Ossetia have sizable numbers of Russians, since Russia is a powerful and omnipresent geopolitical power in the region, and since Russian media is readily accessible, personal attitudes to Russians ("warm to Russians") are expected to be important in influencing opinions about residence in *Russkii mir*.

The second axis is a "values" one. For Kitschelt and Zarycki, values relate to the political dimension of authoritarianism versus liberalism and is also connected to the conservative religious beliefs (the collective) opposed to Western ideals of individual liberties and practices. Our discussion earlier of the concept of *Russkii mir* stressed its communal appeal that is contrary to Western individualism. For post-Communist societies, one can substitute the continued appeal of communist ideologies and authoritarian principles that guarantee a modicum of material well-being against the Western liberal and political model. Our predictors emanating from this axis are four in number. As we have described before, the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly affects the range of opinions about current affairs,

both domestically and about relations with the other post-Soviet states, especially Russia. In the face of perceived Russian actions in its neighborhood – the near abroad – opinions about the supposed aims of President Putin are paramount. For this reason, we include a variable that measures whether the respondent trusts Putin (a binary measure). The other three measures are motivated by attitudes to the collapse of the USSR. The first asks whether it was a right move (a binary measure), and whether the respondent self-identifies a left-of center political preference (a binary measure). Lastly, we include a sense of the direction of the current prospects for the respondent's family, asking if they believe that they will be better off two years after the survey (a binary measure). We expect trust in Putin and a left of center ideology to be positively related and the other two measures to be negatively related to the sense of being included in part of the Russian world.

The third axis – the "interests" one – is generated by the uneven distribution of resources after the collapse of Communism. As has been well documented, a significant divide emerged between younger and older generations, and between status groups based on educational levels (Kolosov 1993; Pavlovskaya 2004; Kolosov and O'Loughlin 2011). The social fabric of Communist times was severely damaged by a capitalist model that provided little support to those whose livelihoods became tenuous with the end of the centrally planned model. The "interests" axis ranges from those who support the post-1991 economic model to those who oppose it because of its deleterious effects on their material status. In our models, we expect those who grew up and were socialized in the Soviet times (age over 65), those with a low level of education (less than high school), those with low incomes (can only afford food or worse off), and those who self-identified as being in a bad mood to have higher levels of agreement that they reside in the *Russkii mir*. Many theorists point to the centrality of emotions in conflictual environments. How to operationalize and measure this, however, is contentious. The current political situation is expected to influence a respondent's self-reported affective disposition – measured by the current mood (happy, normal, sad, anxious).

In addition to the three sets of variables based on the axes/cleavages visible in the post-Communist years, we also include four controls in the models. These variables are not of intrinsic predictive value in themselves since we have no theoretical justification for their inclusion. However, they might have confounding effects in the models. We include a gender control and one based on the respondent's self-reported interest (or lack of interest) in politics. We also include two controls based on television viewing habits, which we have demonstrated are significant in the information war regarding recent developments in Ukraine and Russian geopolitical actions since 2014 (Toal and O'Loughlin 2015b). Television as the main source of news and watching more than 20 h of television a week are expected to influence a respondent's view of Russia and the Russian world, but since the television sources are multiple, it is difficult to specify a particular relationship with a sense of being in the Russian world.

Models

The results of the modeling of belonging to *Russkii mir* for the five research sites are presented in graphical form in Figures 6–10. The lengths of the bars correspond to odds ratios from logit models where the outcome variable is agreement (combined strongly agree and agree) with the statement that the respondent lives in a region that belongs to *Russkii mir*. The odds ratios give the chances that a particular respondent of a certain group (e.g. ethnic Russians) will agree with the statement. A value of 1.75 indicates a 75% increased likelihood for this group (compared to the others, in this case non-Russians) holding other factors constant. Values less than 1.0, such as 0.75, indicate a 25% decreased likelihood of agreement. Significant values are shown as hatched bars.

Of the seventeen predictors (including the four control variables), only three of them show significant relationships in three of the sites. Attitudes toward Russia and level of trust in the Russian president are significantly positive (expected direction) in the SE6 Ukraine and Transnistria, while trusting Putin in Crimea and liking Russians in South Ossetia are positively related to the outcome variable (again in
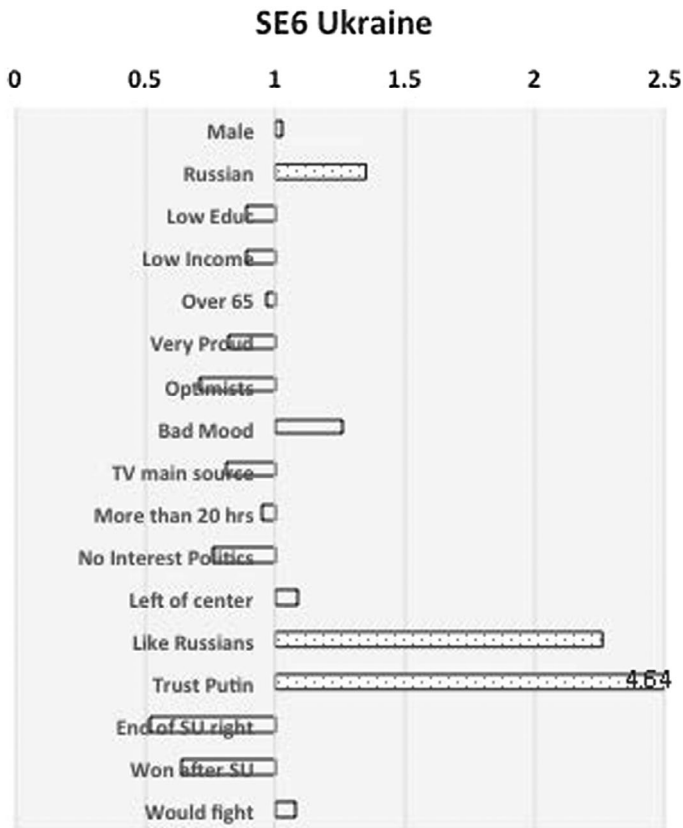

Figure 6. Odds ratio plot of predictive model of agreement with the belief that the respondent's oblast in southeastern Ukraine is part of "*Russkii mir.*" Data from December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.
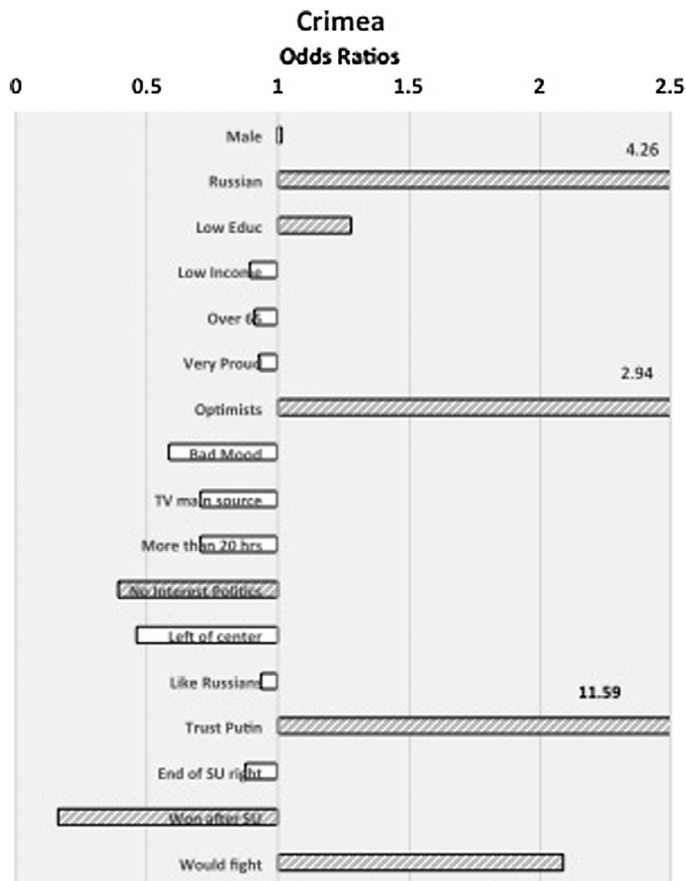
Crimea
Odds Ratios

Figure 7. Odds ratio plot of predictive model of agreement by respondent with the belief that Crimea is part of "*Russkii mir*." Data from December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

the expected direction). The other predictor that is significant in three of the sites is that for respondents who believe that they will be better off in two years (optimists). The distinction between SE6 (where ethnic Russians and pro-Russia attitudes are in a minority) and the other sites is seen in this indicator that is negatively related to the outcome variable but is positively related in Crimea and Abkhazia. These relationships are expected and provide further evidence of the different political and nationality contexts of the survey. In general, most respondents in SE6 are suspicious of Russian government intentions while elsewhere, respondents want closer relations with Russia and deeper incorporation into the Russian world.

The significant negative relationship for optimists in SE6 matches the same relationship for two predictors that measure attitudes toward the end of the Soviet Union. As hypothesized, respondents in this region who thought it was a right move and those who rate an improvement in their family material status after the end of the Soviet Union show a significant negative relationship with a sense of belonging to *Russkii mir* (Figure 6). In a sense, these relationships reflect a desire

Abkhazia
Odds Ratios

Figure 8. Odds ratio plot of predictive model of agreement by respondent with the belief that Abkhazia is part of "*Russkii mir*." Data from December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

to move away from the Russian world and for a stronger level of interaction with the West, including NATO and the European Union. The divide in SE6 is strongly along nationality lines, with Russians showing a significant positive value there. To some extent, the ethnic cleavage in SE6 spills over into the annexed territory of Crimea, where the same predictors (Russians with a positive value and respondents who report winning after the end of the Soviet Union with a negative value) show similar strength and direction (Figure 7). Similar groups line up in the same way about whether their region belongs to *Russkii mir*, though now they live in different countries after the March 2014 annexation.

Those who perceive that they have lost out since the end of the Soviet Union are expected to want to be part of the Russian world since for them it offers a nostalgic memory of social protection and a possible integration into Russia's security orbit. This feeling is evident in the significant positive value for those with low education in Crimea (Figure 7) and for those who report a bad mood in SE6 (Figure 6) and
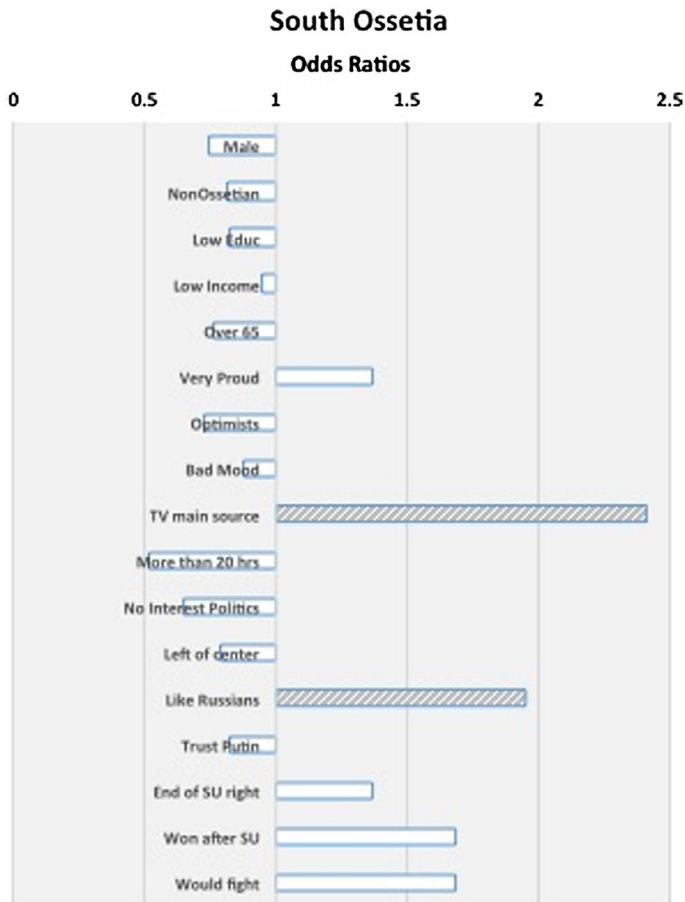
South Ossetia

Odds Ratios

Figure 9. Odds ratio plot of predictive model of agreement by respondent with the belief that South Ossetia is part of "*Russkii mir*." Data from December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

Transnistria (Figure 10). The significant negative value for poorly educated individuals in Abkhazia (Figure 8) is related to the ethnic division of labor and in-out group status in the political arena, with Georgians forming the "out group" in the republic. In the latter case, the opinion that they do not live in a region of the Russian world is a statement about their geopolitical orientation toward Georgia and the Western alliance.

Crimea is the only site where those who said that they would be willing to take up arms to defend their territory show a significant positive value (Figure 7). Most Crimeans remained in favor of the unification with Russia as reported elsewhere in our survey and a high level of political mobilization and pro-Russian sentiment is evident in other questions. Those who affirmed that they were willing to fight to defend their territory are a small minority – less than 25% in all sites – and in the Crimean case, their views confirm their advocacy of their new status as a subject of the Russian Federation and their opposition to a return to Ukraine. The control variables are generally unimportant in the models except in Abkhazia and South
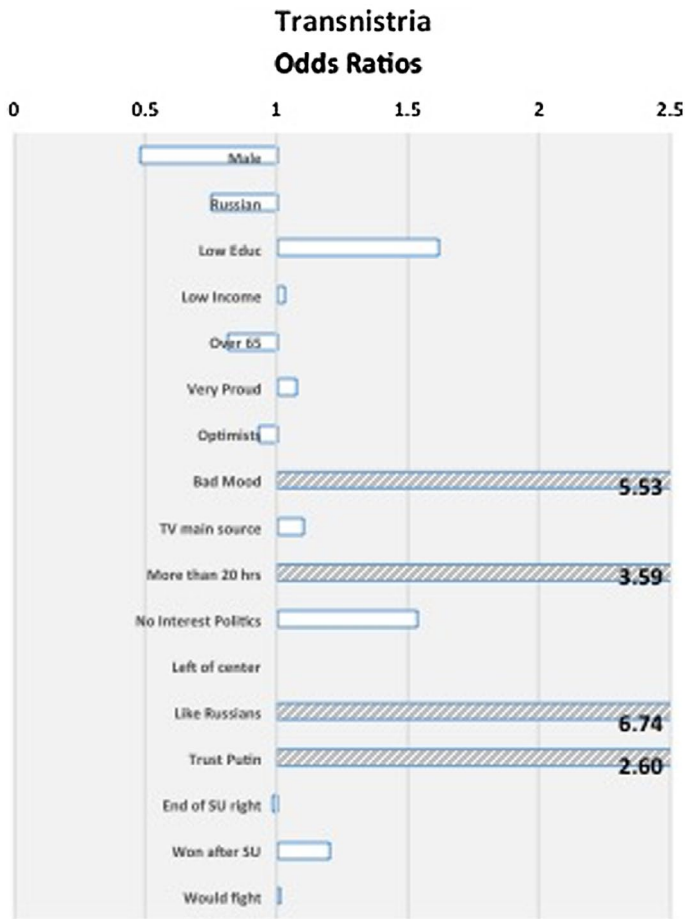
Figure 10. Odds ratio plot of predictive model of agreement by respondent with the belief that Transnistria is part of "*Russkii mir*." Data from December 2014 survey. Source: Authors' data.

Ossetia (Figure 9), where television viewing is significant and positively related to a sense of belonging to the Russian world, an anticipated finding since Russian television stations dominate the viewership.

Of the five sites, both SE6 and Crimea show seven significant predictors, Abkhazia and Transnistria have four each, while South Ossetia only has two significant variables. These comparisons reflect the divided societies in Ukraine and Crimea containing both substantial nationality differences and differing views about Russian geopolitical motivations and actions. South Ossetia is now quite homogenous and therefore few divides mark its society. While Abkhazia and Transnistria have heterogeneous ethnic mixes, both republics are closely aligned to Russia and depend on the Putin government for financial subventions that keep state services running.

In regard to expected relationships, all of the significant variables aligned as the hypotheses anticipated. But overall, only 22 of the possible 85 relationships

(including the control variables) show a significant value. The cleavages that have emerged in post-Communist societies about domestic political choices, still evident a quarter-century after the events of 1989–1991, are also relevant to foreign relations. In our case, the question about belonging to the Russian world is both a domestic and a foreign policy one. Its wording suggests a geopolitical orientation as well as a possible cultural direction. On the domestic political scene, opinion about the Russian world aligns with political party choices since they typically conform to the classifications from Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Kitschelt (1995) about resources distributions (left-right choice), governance rules (liberal vs. authoritarians), and citizenship policies (a civic vs. an ethnic definition). While the settings of the surveys are quite diverse in ethnic makeup and international legal status – only SE6 is part of an internationally recognized entity, the responses to the question about belonging to the Russian world are consistent across the sites given the contextual political circumstances in each.

Conclusions

Geopolitical framing practices are part of the everyday operation and practice of geopolitics. In 2014 the storyline developed by the Putin administration to justify its annexation of Crimea and interventionism in southeastern Ukraine framed the conflict in Ukraine as result of a "fascist coup" backed by the United States and NATO in order to wrest Ukraine from the longstanding partner nation that is Russia. According to this storyline, in history and demographics Ukraine was part of the Russian world, a Russophonic and cultural sphere at the least, a separate civilizational space in its grandest articulations. Large segments of the Ukrainian population were Russian speakers and ethnic Russians. Russia, in this storyline, had a responsibility to protect and defend the Russian world in its near abroad against resurgent fascism and NATO encroachment (Toal 2017).

This paper has sought to measure the degree to which this storyline of cross-border common community resonates in contested regions of Russia's near abroad. Reviewing differing understandings of the term *"Russkii mir,"* it underscores that the term has no fixed and essential meaning. Rather, it is a geopolitical speech act that either works or does not for individuals, both inside Russia and outside its borders. Drawing upon a simultaneous survey in five contested territorial locations beyond Russia's border, we presented evidence that select populations do indeed identify with the notion of a Russian world and see it as something to which they belong.

Unlike other questions about geopolitical matters in the neighborhood of Russia where strong correlations reflect divides along political, nationality, and ideological preferences, the answers about whether the respondent lives in the Russian world were not as predictable. A deep divide along ethnic lines among the residents of six oblasts in southeastern Ukraine about the direction of the country, about responsibility for the war, and about the orientation of the country to the EU/US/West or to the Eurasian Customs Union is not replicated in the Russian world question.

The partly cultural, partly geopolitical meanings embedded in the term "*Russkii mir*" generate a murkier picture of preferences. For a geographically wider set of locations on the borders of Russia, the de facto states, and the annexed territory of Crimea, less doubt is visible since Russia dominates these territories economically and in security terms. Becoming more embedded in the Russian world is the clear preference of the vast majority of their residents.

The term and concept "*Russkii mir*" has achieved a growing presence in political discourse at the highest levels in Moscow, and its implications for the support of compatriots abroad has alarmed many in the countries adjoining Russia. Our survey shows varying acceptance of the belief among respondents that they live in the Russian world, despite their location in heavily Russified areas. This reluctance to accept the moniker for their region indicates a high level of suspicion of the geopolitical implications in the term.

Notes

1. The Kremlin's English language translation of this speech is incomplete. The citations here are translations of the Russian text of the speech.
2. On May 19, 2016, Dnipropetrovsk was officially renamed Dnipro.

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