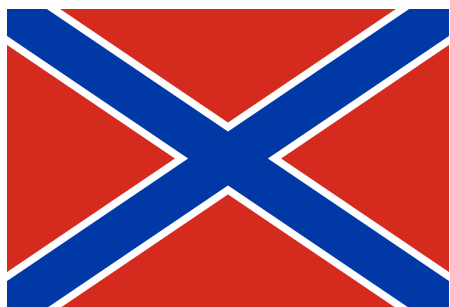


## A lost cause: why the New Russian state in Ukraine was never feasible

*by Ryan Martin Dillmann*



In 2014 a ‘Ukrainian spring’ occurred after the Euromaidan protest culminated into a full-blown revolution. Pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and his government were deposed. After widespread pro-Russian (counter-)protests, armed separatists broke away in the eastern Donbass oblasts of Lugansk and Donetsk. Then, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean Peninsula (Cosgrove, 2020). A confederation of the separatist oblasts was declared on May 22, 2014, and it was called *Novorossiia*, or “*New Russia*” (Babiak, 2014). The Russian Empire coined the name in 1764 when it annexed a similar stretch of land from the Cossacks and, later, the Ottomans (Senkus, 1993). No other oblasts ever separated and joined Novorossiia, so it ended as a political project in 2015 (Kolesnikov, 2015). I argue that Novorossiia never had any future as a well-founded, internationally recognized, sovereign nation. This is evident after reviewing three major obstacles to statehood that killed the Novorossiian idea: weak legitimacy, a void in international recognition, and the military situation at the front.

### **No legitimacy**

Novorossiia never had any recourse to international law on self-determination: the right of all peoples to freely determine their political status and pursue economic, social, and cultural

development (U.N. Charter art. 2). Novorossiya is not a colony, nor is it being colonised. There has also been no evidence to suggest that profound alienation, exploitation, or abuse is committed against the population residing within those claimed oblasts, which might have added credibility to a cry for independence (Henriksen, 2017). To illustrate the lawlessness of Novorossiya's separation, it is useful to look at the example from Canada. In 1998 the Canadian Supreme Court distinguished between **'internal' self-determination/autonomy** and **'external' self-determination right to statehood** when ruling on whether the province of Quebec had a right to secede from Canada. According to the ruling, a community must first attempt to achieve self-determination within the existing state through self-rule and autonomy delegated to it by their state. Only a gravely oppressed community that is denied self-rule may pursue 'external' self-determination i.e. secession (Henriksen, 2017). The latter is clearly not the case for Novorossiyan lands. Rather, the locals in Novorossiyan oblasts now occupied by the Russian army are likely faring worse than before Russian occupation (Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, 2022). Separation and uprising was also arguably not the proportional path, as less drastic, more peaceful measures for autonomy could have been attempted by the Novorossiyan oblasts. For instance, Russian is currently not recognised as an official state language (Constitution of Ukraine, art. 10), despite the fact that in the Donbass and Crimea it is their *lingua franca* – changes in language policy could have been pursued to start with (Bilaniuk & Melnyk, 2008). As another option, other oblasts could have requested the same status of Autonomous Republic that Crimea enjoys or even a drastic state transition to a federal model similar to that of the U.S., which would grant oblasts legislative and judicial powers. These are all avenues to self-determination that could have been pursued, short of unjustified violent separatism.

### **An absence of international recognition**

No sovereign state that is a member of the UN has recognised Novorossiya, not even Russia. The Donetsk and Lugansk Republics were only recognised by Russia, Syria, North Korea, and only since 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022). International law's *constitutive view on the effect of state recognition* preaches that a necessary condition for statehood is recognition by other states (Henriksen, 2017). With barely or virtually no diplomatic recognition, Novorossiya was inevitably not a state for the purposes of international law, and could not have had a future as one.

### **The overwhelming military odds stacked against Novorossiya**

Despite the lack of legitimacy and recognition, Novorossiya could have still pursued secession by military means. However, this would not have been practically feasible: Ukraine has 44 million inhabitants, and the sheer scale of the country is massive: it is larger than France or Spain, the size of two Germanies, six Icelands, or 15 Estonias (The True Size of). This presents an enormous challenge for the armies of the world, which have increasingly relied on a smaller cadre of volunteer professional soldiery and extensive technologically advanced weaponry (Burk, 1992). They generally do not have the manpower to occupy vast swathes of land and millions of inhabitants, especially when partisan activity is a tangible danger. The Ukrainian government has mobilised well over a million men in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and almost all adult males are prohibited from leaving the country. The Ukrainians are highly

motivated and grow better equipped and trained by the day, as the West and other powers provide it with military, financial, and humanitarian assistance (Watling & Reynolds, 2022). The Department of State periodically releases a fact sheet on the U.S. security assistance to Ukraine detailing the amount and type of tanks, vehicles, artillery, missiles, shells, weapons and ammunition that has been committed, and the numbers are staggering (Department of State, 2023). The recent offensives in Izyum and Kherson have proven that the Ukrainian army is growing in confidence and strength. On the other side of the fence, the Russian Army grows only in the number of desertions, disillusionment and erosion of its combat effectiveness. Specifically, troops are conscripted or uninspired, leadership is rigid and coercive, and munitions are running out (Lee & Kofman, 2022). The maths are cutthroat: the reality is that Russia and its Donbass puppet militias will not be in a situation to possess the military strength to conquer all claimed territories of Novorossiia.

### **An empty shell of an idea**

Ukraine is flogged by war, and its territorial integrity and sovereignty have been utterly violated by Russia. The old-school “strategic studies” view of states as entities vying for power still provides an accurate explanation for the events in Ukraine. The Russian leadership has chosen the sword over the pen, and still believes in an anachronistic code that *might is right*. However, in the current world, might needs an appealing veil to disguise its true nature. The veil could have been the establishment of Novorossiia as a new nation adjacent to, and let’s face it, puppet of, the Russian Federation. As I have argued, Novorossiia never had a future as a sovereign nation because it lacked legitimacy, recognition, and it could not have been secured militarily. Perhaps the position of Russian (speaking) citizens in Ukraine is sub-optimal or even

neglected. However, a far worse fate for them was as part of this veil of Novorossiya to justify the blatant aggression and expansionism of the mass-murdering, authoritarian man who resides at 103132, Moscow, Grand Kremlin Palace.

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