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Viewpoint

Russian spatial imaginaries and the invasion of Ukraine: Geopolitics and nationalist fantasies

Stefanie Ortmann

University of Sussex, UK

As Alec Murphy (this forum) argues, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine highlights the continuing relevance of the modernist territorial imagination – but this should not lead us to adopt simplistic explanations of Russia’s actions. Linear geopolitical assumptions about the link between territory and great power behaviour continue to dominate Western debates about the invasion and underpin an excessive focus on Russian national security perceptions and the role of NATO (e.g. Mearsheimer, 2022; for a more critical perspective see Megoran, this forum). Ironically, such a focus fails to capture the full significance of the modernist territorial imagination in this war. As has been pointed out, foregrounding NATO cannot account for the role of Ukrainian agency (see Vorbrugg and Bluwstein, this forum). But it also brushes over the complex entanglement of spatial and statist imaginaries that exist on the Russian side, with implications not only for the ongoing debate about the reasons for the invasion but also for predictions about possible outcomes of the war. We need to pay more attention to variants of modernist territorial imaginaries, especially when moving beyond the ‘core West’ of Europe and the US – while also acknowledging that these imaginaries continue to have wide emotional appeal and are not simply a residual of the way the international system operates (Penrose, 2002).

In this I argue, with Stuart Elden and others, for an understanding of ‘territory as a process, not an outcome, (…) continually made and remade’ (Elden, 2013, p. 35; cf. also Jackman et al., 2020). This does not mean that we should leave (nation-)statism behind when thinking about territory, but that we need to pay attention to the specifics of statist and spatial imaginaries and the way they co-produce geopolitical contexts. The invasion is both motivated by modernist territorial imaginaries and already changing them, including in an apparent re-territorialization of ‘Russia’ whose ultimate significance is not yet clear. Great power-ness (derzhavnost’) in current Kremlin discourse and practices is best understood as part of the visceral political affect of nationalism. To the Kremlin, Ukraine’s relationship with NATO matters primarily for its affective and symbolic value, a geopolitics of identity that is co-produced at different scales between Russia, Ukraine and the West. Ultimately, what may be at stake is not so much Russian national security but regime security and the surprisingly fragile domestic (self-) legitimization of the Kremlin, which in recent years has increasingly relied on a set of narratives and conspiracy theories based on spatial imaginaries that resonate with ordinary Russians (Ortmann, 2017; Greene, 2022).

1. Ukraine in Kremlin spatial imaginaries

The foregrounding of NATO in so many Western assessments of the invasion is not surprising. Putin said in his speech on February 24, 2022 that NATO enlargement to Ukraine is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation (…) not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty.’ (Putin, 2022a). Nevertheless, the invasion is unlikely to have been triggered by concrete national security concerns (Fink & Oliker, 2020; Popova & Shevel, 2022). Putin formulates the significance of Ukraine in terms of a widespread ethno-cultural idea of ‘Russia’ mixing imperial nationalism, Eurasianism and Soviet influences (Putin, 2021). An ‘almost mystical attachment to the territory “from where [Kievan] Rus’ had originated” is part of this, grounding not only the origins of Russian Orthodoxy but also claims to a 1000-year continuity of Russian statehood which was later translated into a spatially ambivalent understanding of ‘Russia’ as encompassing the whole of the USSR (Solchanyk, 1992, pp. 31–45; Torbakov, 2018, p.227). This spatial ambivalence is not limited to Putin or his entourage. After the Soviet collapse, the sense that full Ukrainian independence was intolerable and ‘Russia’ without Ukraine would be an incomplete ‘rump state’ was shared widely by Russians, including the ‘democrats’ around Yeltsin (Solchanyk, 1992).

Arguably, the invasion represents a shift towards re-territorializing the idea of ‘greater Russia’. Except for the annexation of Crimea, previous Russian strategies towards Ukraine stopped short of full territorial control and retained a deliberate spatial ambiguity. For example, ‘passportization’, the policy of giving Russian citizenship to people living in the self-proclaimed ‘republics’ of Donetsk and Luhansk, was a form of ‘making territory through bodies’, while avoiding full...
political geography (Smith et al., 2016; Burkhardt, 2020). This ambiguity has been abandoned as Putin seeks the full annexation of occupied territories into Russia. While previous Kremlin strategies aimed to use the ‘breakaway republics’ to gain leverage over the Ukrainian government and its geopolitical choices, now there is a much more direct focus on the territory itself, the ‘borderization’ of an extended ‘Russia’.

2. ‘Western encroachment’, colour revolutions, and the re-territorialization of ‘Russia’

This process of re-territorialization operates across different identity registers in which the territory of Ukraine has become intertwined with a broader geopolitical imaginary of ‘the West’. The Russian idea of spatial ambiguity predates the Soviet experience and has always had ambivalent connotations; celebrated by some as expression of imperial greatness, it also conveys anxiety around Russia’s unruly, uncontrollable vastness (Medvedev, 1997; Suslov, 2018). Anxious political affect around ‘boundlessness’ is expressed in another Kremlin identity narrative: the conspiracy theory of ‘Western encroachment’ aiming to destroy Russia (Ormann, 2017). This conspiracy theory formulates a Western threat to the very existence of the Russian state, not in terms of military security, but understood as the Kremlin’s hold on power, its sovereign independence of action, and Russia’s ‘civilizational distinctiveness’ (Verkhovskii & Pain, 2012). Democratic revolutions across the post-Soviet space are invariably ascribed to Western manipulation, with the ultimate aim of staging a revolution in Russia and transforming it into a liberal democracy. Narrated as existential threat and impending chaos, they are associated with an uncontrollable spatial ‘openness’ and the fear of Western penetration via the ‘near abroad’ of the former Soviet space (Herd, 2005).

The Western threat has become a central strand of the Kremlin’s identity narratives, not least because it is an effective strategy of political legitimization and control. It presents the Kremlin as guarantor of stability against the chaos of state breakdown associated in Russian collective memory with the ‘democratization’ and economic liberalization of the 1990s. Here, the spatial imaginary of openness as threat co-produces the bordering of ‘Russia’ at a different scale: as a strong, independent state, where sovereign control over territory and resistance against ‘Western encroachment’ ensure stability and order. This image has an external side, great power-ness (dershmavost), which also has considerable public support (Levinson, 2022). At its core is sovereign independence, with sovereignty understood as agency, not simply as territorial control (Lewis, 2020). Geopolitical competition over territory and military action such as the invasion perform independent agency spectacularly and are events easily readable through the modernist territorial imagination, also by Russian domestic audiences.

This co-production of sovereign agency and bordering underpins action in Ukraine, where the geopolitics of identity has become entangled with nationalist affect around insulating ‘Russia’ against Western influence. Intersecting narratives depict the democratic Euromaidan revolution of 2013/14 and the associated ‘westward turn’ of Ukraine as an existential threat to ‘Russia’ itself, mobilizing imaginaries of ‘openness of space’ as well as the designation of Ukraine as part of ‘Greater Russia’. These narratives underpin Putin’s statements that post-Maidan Ukraine is a ‘puppet state’ controlled by the West and that ‘true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia’ (Putin, 2021). The re-territorialization of ‘Russia’ in Kremlin nationalist narratives thus goes hand in hand with an existential choice for Ukraine: recover ‘true sovereignty’ by turning towards Russia, or lose its sovereign statehood altogether by turning to the West. Mixing conspiracy theory and Great Power imaginaries, Putin currently depicts Ukrainian resistance to the invasion as a proxy war of the West, ‘fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian’ (Putin, 2022b). Putin’s acolyte (and former ‘liberal’ Russian president) Dmitri Medvedev has stated that Ukraine ‘may lose the remnants of its sovereignty and disappear from the world map’ because it favoured Western over Russian hegemony (Medvedev, 2022).

3. Conclusion: the ‘return of territory’?

The Kremlin’s framing of the war matters, and so does its ultimate focus on regime security and political legitimacy. It matters for the ongoing debate over whether security guarantees should have been given to the Kremlin over NATO or whether this would have encouraged the Kremlin to further indulge its nationalist fantasies. It also matters for understanding the future implications of possible Russian defeat in Ukraine. Given the multiplicity and malleability of the (geo-)political imaginaries at the Kremlin’s disposal, Putin has considerable scope to shift his war aims. In terms of domestic legitimacy, the invasion did not have the same level of popular support as the annexation of Crimea, but it achieved a noticeable upswing in support for Putin – and is not clear that this support depends on particular territorial gains. Significantly, the narrative of an existential struggle for survival with the West seems to resonate with large parts of the Russian public and is increasingly being leveraged by the Kremlin to frame the war, providing an alternative reading of any potential military defeat. While the decision to wage a war of territorial conquest has spectacularly enacted the myth of dershmavost, territorial control in Ukraine is not essential to perpetuating it, and neither is territory necessary for the narrative of an existential struggle with the West.

Much as territory continues to have a central place in the nationalist imaginaries currently resurgent in Europe and across the world, its material importance should not be overestimated. The ‘re-territorialization’ of Russia resulting from the invasion may well turn out to be a step towards a post-imperial condition, a long-delayed stage of the Soviet collapse, rather than a sign of resurgent Russian power. Russian independence of action in international relations may be diminished by the fallout from this war, increasing its dependence on China and challenging its great power identity. However, this will ultimately be decided not on the battlefield in Ukraine but by the global, de-territorialized dimensions the war is now acquiring, especially the consequences of a developing economic conflict between Russia and the West. These de-territorialized dimensions of the war form a complex system with non-linear effects and are entangled with processes of re-territorialization; at present it is unclear how non-compliance to the sanctions regime by most non-Western states or the domestic political fallout in Western countries will play out in the long run. What seems clear is that modernist territorial imaginaries will continue to be part of this complex assemblage and have significant effects, not least because of their emotive force.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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