

# The Role of Irredentism in Russia's Foreign Policy

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This article examines the role of irredentism in contemporary Russian foreign policy and the future steps of Russian politics regarding territorial expansion and territorial disputes in the Soviet Union's "near abroad." It also examines the historical background of Russian territorial enlargement in order to explore connections between Russia's current irredentist claims and the roots of expansionist Russian foreign policy. The article examines the case of Crimea through the lens of irredentism and discusses the future of Russia's territorial expansion after the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula followed by Western sanctions. It debates whether irredentism acts as an effective tool in Russian foreign policy for the purposes of further Russian territorial expansion, that is, the acquisition of lands that Russia deems to be its own based on historical and ethnic ties.

Keywords: irredentism, Russia, Crimea, territorial claims, Near Abroad



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### ***Introduction***

Territory continues to play a significant role in contemporary international politics. It is at the core of many interstate and interethnic clashes where all sides involved claim their own rights over the disputed territorial areas.<sup>1</sup> In the 1990s, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, post-Cold War Europe experienced a flourishing of irredentist arguments. Many former republics started to make claims toward the sovereign territories of neighbouring states based on “ethnic kinship.”<sup>2</sup> It seemed, however, that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union the newly established states did not pursue such claims with the exception of the violent Azerbaijan–Armenia conflict caused by Armenia’s irredentist claim over Azerbaijan’s Armenian-populated region of Nagorno-Karabakh.<sup>3</sup>

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The contemporary concept of irredentism implies “state support for annexing neighbouring territories inhabited by ethnic kin.”<sup>4</sup> Saideman further clarifies that the “territorial expansion of a country is considered irredentist only in cases where a country has ethnic and historical claims over [the] territories in question.”<sup>5</sup>

Ever since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been perceived as a serious irredentist threat to its neighbouring countries due to the fact that more than twenty million Russians live in the border areas of the other former Soviet Republics.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the Yeltsin administration was not predominantly irredentist despite being nationalist-oriented. Sideman explains this lack of irredentist sentiment in the early years of post-Soviet Russia as owing to the differences in preferences of Yeltsin’s key supporters, who were more occupied by economic issues rather than a desire to protect Russians in the near abroad.<sup>7</sup> However, Russia’s current foreign

1 Kim, G. “Irredentism in Disputed Territories and Its Influence on the Border Conflicts and Wars,” *The Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 1, January 2016, pp. 87–101.

2 Saideman, S. “Inconsistent irredentism? Political competition, ethnic ties, and the Foreign policies of Somalia and Serbia,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3, December 2017, p. 51.

3 Ambrosio, T. *Irredentism: Ethnic Conflict and International Politics*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001, pp. 2–3, 7.

4 Saideman, *op.cit.* p. 53.

5 Saideman, *op.cit.* p. 53.

6 Saideman, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

7 Saideman, *op.cit.*, p. 90.

policy is significantly focused on territorial acquisitions of areas populated by ethnic Russians. Vladimir Putin's administration has come to be considered as highly irredentist and expansionist, especially after the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014.

Pain argues that modern Russia has re-embraced the doctrine of "official nationality," which implies "the concept of protecting 'the Russian world' (*Russkii Mir*) on the territories that once comprised the Russian Empire" and consequently assists in creating "the ideological basis for annexing Crimea and all-round support for the Donbas separatists."<sup>8</sup> The doctrine of official nationality was introduced in 1833 with the famous slogan "*Pravoslaviye, Samoderzhaviye, i Narodnost*" ("Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality") by Count Sergey Uvarov, the emperor's minister of education. This was supposed to act as a principle to counteract corrupting Western ideas.<sup>9</sup> Official nationality became the formal ideology of Nicholas I's imperial cabinet (1825–55), according to which Russian people could follow Russia's "original path" and tradition, which would not be possible according to the leading European philosophical schools of thought and doctrines of that time.<sup>10</sup>

Contemporary Russian politics exercises "official nationality" partly through an irredentist campaign where the protection of ethnic Russians and their lands has become one of the country's foreign policy priorities. Therefore, this paper investigates the role of irredentism in Russia's current foreign policy and its effect on Russian territorial enlargement. The annexation of Crimea has shown that irredentism has been used effectively as a foreign policy means for further Russian territorial expansion. Harding argues that, if Russia continues to pursue a new "Greater Russia" plan, Russian-speaking areas such as south-eastern Ukraine, Transnistria (a breakaway region of the Republic of Moldova), the Russian-populated parts of all three Baltic countries, and the

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8 Pain, E. "The imperial syndrome and its influence on Russian nationalism," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, eds. PålKolstø, HelgeBlak-kisrud (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 72–73.

9 Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Orthodoxy-Autocracy-and-Nationality> (Accessed: December 4, 2019).

10 Pain, *op.cit.* p. 49.

north of Kazakhstan will become potential hotspots for Russian irredentism.<sup>11</sup> However, taking into account Russia's declining economic situation, such claims might be less realistic in the near future.

### *History of Russian Territorial Expansion*

Even though Russian irredentism relates to the irredentist claims of post-Soviet Russia to parts of the former Soviet Union, the history of Russian territorial acquisition before the USSR could reveal the roots of Russia's expansionist foreign policy and therefore the contemporary emphasis on irredentist claims that include the incorporation of territories populated by kin-nationals. In order to understand why and how territorial expansion, and with it irredentism, has become one of the priorities in Russia's current foreign policy, we have to explore the historical background of Russia's desire to expand and conquer territories that it deems to be its own. The end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the end of Golden Horde rule and the establishment of the centralized Russian state. The new state that arose after almost two and a half centuries of submission to the Mongol Empire became a predominantly Orthodox, highly autocratic, and isolated political entity.<sup>12</sup>

During the Mongol occupation (1237–1480), Russians were exposed to the harsh and chaotic steppe culture, where borders were an unknown concept, plunder and enslavement normal events, and the nomadic lifestyle a desirable way of existence. In such an insecure, savage environment Russians were desperate and torn apart. After the Mongols had left, the fear of being conquered and subjugated again made Russians believe that only territorial expansion and the exercise of the absolute power over their neighbours<sup>13</sup> would secure them from any future invasion. For the next several centuries Russia managed to invade many of its surrounding areas. The pace of conquest was incredibly

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11 Harding, L. (2014), "Irredentist appointment," *The Guardian*, 28 March, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/28/vladimir-putin-crimea-changed-world> (Accessed: October 10, 2019).

12 Trenin, D. (2019), "Russia's Changing Identity: In Search of a Role in the 21st Century," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 18 July, Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/79521> (Accessed: October 15, 2019).

13 Henry Kissinger, *World Order*, New York: Penguin Books, 2014, p. 52.

fast. Kissinger describes this extraordinary expansion as an unstoppable force that was expanding each year, occupying territories that were often larger than some European states.<sup>14</sup> And with each new territory, Russia would do the same thing—impose its absolute power onto the occupied land and people.

The Tsardom of Russia, later the Russian Empire (1721), practiced an expansionist foreign policy from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1917 when it ceased to exist and soon became part of the Soviet Union. By the late 19th century, Russia had managed to expand southward from Siberia and eastward from the Caspian Sea, reaching the borders of Afghanistan, Iran, and India.<sup>15</sup> The Russian Empire's size was impressive; it covered almost one-sixth of the earth's landmass including modern Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Finland, the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), the Baltic Republics (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), substantial parts of Poland and Turkey, even expanding into Alaska and California in North America.<sup>16</sup> Territory has played a significant role in Russian politics. Territorial expansion brings resources, wealth, and power, but it is also at the core of the irredentist claims that modern Russia exercises in order to acquire more land.

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### ***Annexation of Crimea as Russia's Irredentist Intervention***

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, fifteen new states appeared and among them the largest in terms of territory and population was the Russian Federation. Following the dissolution of the USSR, the Kremlin recognized all new independent post-Soviet states with their Soviet-era administrative borders.<sup>17</sup> Even though around 25 million ethnic Russians stayed outside the borders of the new Russia, the Russian Federation did not, at

14 Ibid., p. 53.

15 MacKenzie, D. "Turkestan's Significance to Russia (1850-1917)," *Russian Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 1974, p. 167.

16 Trepanier, L. (2017), "The Russian Empire (1721-1917)," *Vogelin View*, 27 February, Available at: <https://voegelinview.com/russian-empire-1721-1917/> (Accessed: October 10, 2019).

17 Trenin, *op.cit.*

least officially, pursue irredentist politics within the first decade of independence. As Russian President, Boris Yeltsin did not raise irredentist claims during his tenure and managed to maintain good relations with the neighbouring countries, especially in terms of respecting border demarcation within the post-Soviet region. During the Yeltsin regime, Russia mainly remained uninvolved in the internal affairs of its near abroad, and this is particularly evident in the case of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. On May 31, 1997, Ukraine and the Russian Federation signed the "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership" that explicitly obliged both sides to respect and acknowledge "each other's territorial integrity and ... the inviolability of the borders existing between them."<sup>18</sup> However, throughout the Yeltsin era, Russia-Ukraine relations were not without political setbacks.

Yeltsin's political actions, particularly toward Ukraine, were more practical due to the fact that at that time any irredentist tactic would probably cause bloodshed and violent conflicts similar to those already affecting the former Yugoslav republics. Additionally, Russia was struggling with its own internal problems such as a serious economic crisis and the separatist movement in Chechnya. The Kremlin did not practice an active irredentist policy during the Yeltsin era possibly because economic issues were more pressing and key supporters were more interested in strengthening economic ties with the West and recovering domestic markets than in protecting kin-nationals

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living outside Russia's borders.<sup>19</sup> Correspondingly, political reasons, such as the need for consolidating power within the territory of Russia and resolving the separatist threat in Chechnya, made any irredentist attempt highly unfeasible.<sup>20</sup> Irredentism smouldered for almost the next two and a half decades, reaching its peak with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

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<sup>18</sup> Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership Between Ukraine and the Russian Federation (1997), Article 2.

<sup>19</sup> Saideman, *op.cit.*, p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Khineyko, I. (2007), "Boris Yeltsin and Ukraine," *Ukraine Analysis*, 24 April, Available at: <https://ukraineanalysis.wordpress.com/2007/04/24/boris-yeltsin-and-ukraine/> (Accessed: October 4, 2019).

contemporary international political discourse. Indeed, the takeover of the Crimean Peninsula has become one of the main post-Cold War geopolitical challenges for the West.<sup>21</sup> Such a takeover of land in Ukraine was a signal to the West that Moscow was starting to put in motion its new “Greater Russia” plan that implies territorial expansion in the post-Soviet region and future geopolitical challenges in Eurasia. Russia partially justified the seizure of Crimea with the irredentist claim that the peninsula mostly comprises ethnic Russians<sup>22</sup> and thus should be part of the parent state. Russia’s act is partially associated with Ukraine’s desire to join NATO and the EU, the restriction of the use of the Russian language in the country, and attempts to “nationalize” the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.<sup>23</sup> The Kremlin was concerned that the further westernization of Ukraine would bring NATO to Russia’s immediate backyard and jeopardize the geostrategic position of the Russian Navy in the Black Sea. Putin’s motivation may have been to act as a defender of Russia’s security interests against NATO’s further expansion in the region, or as an imperialist who wanted to restore Russian prestige in the international arena.<sup>24</sup> Moscow would not be able successfully to conduct the annexation without the irredentist justification that the Crimean Peninsula, populated by an ethnic Russian majority, should be integrated with Russia on the basis of common ethnicity. The annexation of Crimea boosted Vladimir Putin’s approval rating at home to 86 percent.<sup>25</sup> In the Crimean case, irredentism proved to be an effective foreign policy tool that successfully justified Russia’s territorial expansion and defense of national interests that also include protecting ethnic Russians living outside the country’s borders.

According to Pain, contemporary Russian politics follow the doctrine of “official nationality,” where the President is responsible for protecting “the Russian World” (*Russkii Mir*), i.e., territories that once encompassed the Russian Empire and

21 Harding, *op.cit.*

22 Popovici, A. (2018), “Why Russia Wants Crimea,” *History*, 30 August, Available at: <https://www.history.com/news/crimea-russia-ukraine-annexation> (Accessed: October 12, 2019).

23 Trenin, *op.cit.*

24 Treisman, D. (2016), “Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-russian-president-putin-took-crimea-from-ukraine> (Accessed: October 12, 2019).

25 Kolesnikov, A. (2019), “Five Years After Crimea, Russia Has Come Full Circle at Great Cost,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 5 February, Available at: <https://carnegie.ru/2019/02/05/five-years-after-crimea-russia-has-come-full-circle-at-great-cost-pub-78301> (Accessed: October 13, 2019).

protected the Russian-speaking population from the anti-Russian hostilities coming from the West.<sup>26</sup> Irredentism has supported this idea of “official nationality,” particularly in the case of Crimea, since it has provided strong reasoning for why the peninsula should be merged with the mainland of Russia. Moscow claimed that the Russians in Crimea were threatened by anti-Russian sentiment and that Russia intervened in order to protect its co-nationals who, by ethnic and historical ties, rightfully belong to the parent nation. Russia’s Minister of Defense, Sergei Shoigu, stated that Russian military actions in Crimea were a “necessary response to threats to the lives of civilians in Crimea and to the danger of possible seizure of Russian military infrastructure by extremist organizations.”<sup>27</sup> Vladimir Putin, in a speech that followed the referendum in Crimea, noted that the Ukrainian crisis had endangered the rights of Russian-speaking Crimea and that Russia was obligated to respond and protect Crimea’s distressed residents.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Moscow used a historical explanation to justify the incorporation of Crimean territory by evoking the time of the Russian Empire, when the peninsula was part of the Empire’s territory. The President of Russia emphasized the importance of historical heritage and connection to Crimea by stating:

*Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol – a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet.<sup>29</sup>*

26 Pain, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

27 Krasilnikov, S. (2014), “Shoigu: actions of the Russian Ministry of Defense in Crimea were caused by a threat to the life of civilians”, *TASS Russian News Agency*, 24 April. Available at: <https://tass.ru/politika/1097051> (Accessed: December 5, 2019).

28 Kremlin.ru (2014), *Address by President of the Russian Federation*, President of Russia: Events, 18 March, Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> (Accessed: December 5, 2019).

29 Ibid.



Crimea fulfils both the historical and the ethnic conditions required for invoking irredentist claims. The peninsula is predominantly populated by ethnic Russians – almost 1.5 million out of the total population of 2.2 million. On the subject of territorial affiliation, Crimea was part of the Russian Empire from 1783 and, as an integrated part of the USSR, it was transferred from the Russian Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954.

### ***Potential Cases of Russian Irredentism***

The concept of *Novorossiya* (New Russia) that Vladimir Putin introduced during the television show *Direct Line* in April 2014, just a month after the annexation of Crimea, raised new fears of further irredentist claims on Ukraine. In the live television broadcast, President Putin, regarding the rights of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and the notion of *Novorossiya*, stated the following:

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*The essential issue is how to ensure the legitimate rights and interests of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the southeast of Ukraine. I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiya (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows? They were won by Potyomkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars. The center of that territory was Novorossiysk, so the region is called Novorossiya. Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained. Today, they live in Ukraine, and they should be full citizens of their country.<sup>30</sup>*

This statement signified future irredentist claims to the southeast of Ukraine and the need to protect the interests of ethnic Russians living in *Novorossiya*— an area that, according

30 Kremlin.ru (2014), *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, TV Program Direct Line, 17 April, Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796> (Accessed: October 17, 2019).

to Putin, belongs to Russia on the basis of historical and ethnic connections. Putin claimed that Ukraine is an artificial country created by Bolsheviks who attached large regions of the historical South of Russia to the Republic of Ukraine.<sup>31</sup> The aim of the Kremlin's *Novorossiia* campaign was to create a suitable environment for another irredentist move with the argument that Ukraine does not have either historical or ethnical bonds to the south-eastern part of its territory and thus has no right to claim the land as its own.

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Even though *Novorossiia* received political support from the Russian side and had the potential to provide historical and security validations for secessionist sentiments in southeast Ukraine, the project failed to gain wider local support. John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov (2016) conducted an opinion survey in the targeted six oblasts of south-eastern Ukraine (Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovs'k, Odessa, Mykolaiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhia) in December 2014 in order to evaluate local attitudes toward the *Novorossiia*

project. The survey showed that the project did not yield wider local sympathies. Between 20 and 25% of the examined population supported the *Novorossiia* project, but around half of the sample agreed that the concept of *Novorossiia* was a "historical myth" and merely a creation of "Russian political technologies" rather than a genuine expression of a wish for independence or a belief that could attract extensive support.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, due to international sanctions imposed on Russia because of its actions in Ukraine and the collapse of global oil prices that have greatly harmed Russia's domestic economy, the *Novorossiia* project has, for the time being, lost its appeal for the Russian authorities.<sup>33</sup> However, the unsettling possibility that *Novorossiia* might be resurrected and could act

31 Cassidy, J. (2014), "Putin's Crimean History Lesson," *The New Yorker*, 18 March, Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/putins-crimean-history-lesson> (Accessed: October 20, 2019).

32 O'Loughlin, J., Toal, G. and Kolosov, V. "The rise and fall of 'Novorossiia': examining support for a separatist geopolitical imaginary in southeast Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2017, p. 124-144.

33 Hirst, T. (2015), "Putin's dream of reuniting the Russian empire is falling apart," *Business Insider*, 26 May, Available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-puts-novorossiia-project-put-on-hold-2015-5> (Accessed: October 30, 2019).

as a symbolic justification for future Russian irredentist claims over south-eastern Ukraine should not be discarded yet.

Russian irredentism has been a threat to other post-Soviet republics besides Ukraine. After the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan felt vulnerable, especially in the north of the country where the ethnic Russians were in the majority. In the 1990s, the Kazakhstan government started to relocate Kazakhs from the south to the north of the country and encouraged a repatriation program for ethnic Kazakhs living abroad who wanted to return to the country's north in order to dilute the predominantly Russian ethnic structure there, so preventing potential pro-Russian separatist movements in the North.<sup>34</sup> Kazakhstan and Russia have managed to maintain good bilateral relations ever since becoming independent post-Soviet republics. However, the annexation of Crimea and the obviously aggressive Russian foreign policy toward its near abroad have left many open questions regarding future Russian irredentist targets, especially in the case of the north of Kazakhstan.

Even though Kazakhstan's then president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, accepted Russia's actions in Crimea, probably acting cautiously in order not to alienate the Kremlin, he later became more assertive of Kazakhstan's independence,<sup>35</sup> especially after Putin questioned Kazakhstan's sovereignty by declaring that "the Kazakhs had never had statehood" prior to 1991.<sup>36</sup> The Kazakhstan government has never officially specified that policies concerning the bolstering of the ethnic Kazakh population through the repatriation program, or the introduction of Kazakh as the official state language,<sup>37</sup> or the decision from 2014 to pass a new, harsher law for separatist activities<sup>38</sup> were enacted because of concerns over potential Russian irredentist claims targeting the northern part of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless,

34 Kim, G. *op.cit.*, p. 95.

35 Ambrosio, T. "The rhetoric of irredentism: The Russian Federation's perception management campaign and the annexation of Crimea," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, April 2016, p. 483.

36 Michel, C. (2015), "Take Note, Putin: Kazakhstan Celebrates 550 Years of Statehood," *The Diplomat*, 14 September. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/take-note-putin-kazakhstan-celebrates-550-years-of-statehood/> (Accessed: October 26, 2019).

37 Diener, A. "Assessing potential Russian irredentism and separatism in Kazakhstan's northern oblasts," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 56, No. 5, October 2015, pp. 10–11.

38 Hirst, T. (2015), "Putin's dream of reuniting the Russian empire is falling apart."

a certain degree of caution is inevitable, especially in the time of a Putin agenda that praises the protection of Russian-speaking populations in the borderlands of neighbouring countries and questions the territorial integrity of “disobedient” post-Soviet republics with substantial ethnic Russian communities.

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Russia has been militarily present in Transnistria as a peacekeeper and has financially supported this separatist formation ever since it broke away from Moldova in 1992.<sup>39</sup> Transnistria might become another Russian irredentist project on the grounds of being one of the “Russian-speaking territories assigned to non-Russian union republics within the Soviet Union.”<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Russia could invoke

the same historical argument as in the case of Crimea that Transnistria was once part of the Russian Empire’s territory. Even though Transnistria does not share a common border with Russia, it still could become a specific case of irredentism that fulfils both historical and ethnicity criteria but without a direct land connection with the mainland, potentially resulting in another exclave territory in addition to Kaliningrad, which is under Russian authority. Additionally, Russia might raise the ethnicity argument, since a considerable number of ethnic Russians live in Transnistria. Another potential location for Russian irredentism could be the Baltic States due to the significant percentage of Russian-speaking minorities, especially in Latvia (27%) and Estonia (25%).<sup>41</sup> However, Russian irredentism is less likely toward the Baltic countries, especially since this would be an attack on NATO and EU member states that might prove to be a very costly and risky political move.

### **Concluding remarks**

The annexation of Crimea has shown that irredentism plays a

39 Trenin, *op.cit.*

40 Socor, V. (2014), “Putin’s Crimea Speech: A Manifesto of Greater-Russia Irredentism,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 25 March. Available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/putins-crimea-speech-a-manifesto-of-greater-russia-irredentism/> (Accessed October 27, 2019).

41 Chemla, N. (2019), “Baltic States’ Russian Disquiet,” *The New Federalist*, 26 March, Available at: <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/baltic-states-russian-disquiet> (Accessed: October 30, 2019).

significant part in the contemporary Russian foreign policy. It has proved to be a useful tool in the territorial expansion of the Russian Federation and an effective means for questioning the territorial integrity of post-Soviet countries that have considerable Russian-speaking populations concentrated in their borderlands with Russia. Today, the annexation of territory requires an irredentist justification, which modern Russia practices in order to legitimize past and future territorial expansion on the basis of protecting its co-nationals and the lands inhabited by them. The history of Russia shows that the constant expansion of Russian territory represents the key feature of Russian statehood, a feature that may have been triggered by the long and traumatic submission to Mongol rule.

In the early years of post-Soviet Russia, irredentism was not overtly present in the official political discourse while economic issues and separatist movements within the territory of Russia were the priority and of immense interest to the Russian political elite. However, contemporary Russia has started extensively practicing an irredentist policy, aiming for greater territorial enlargement and the protection of co-nationals in its near abroad. The takeover of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, as well as irredentist attempts on south-eastern Ukraine, was a wakeup call for the West to acknowledge that Russian irredentism is very much active. The West responded with sanctions and strong disapproval of the annexation of Crimea and started increasingly to scrutinize Russia's politics towards its near abroad, where it may potentially resurrect other irredentist campaigns targeting Russian-speaking communities in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Transnistria, and the three Baltic states. On several occasions, the Kremlin has questioned Ukraine's and Kazakhstan's territorial integrity and sovereignty while suggesting that the protection of ethnic Russians, as well as their interests and lands in the post-Soviet region, is one of the primary missions of Russia's foreign policy.

Even though irredentist actions could be very costly and risky political moves, they could bring the necessary justification for territorial expansion and, if successful, they might bring more resources and power to the irredentist country. Irredentism aligns with the idea of protecting "the Russian world" (*Russkii*

*Mir*), which implies the incorporation of territories that were once encompassed the Russian Empire and are inhabited by Russian-speaking communities that are allegedly threatened by the anti-Russian propaganda coming from the West and need defending. However, some scholars and experts on Russian studies consider the idea of *Russkii Mir* as Russia's failed attempt to justify and popularize territorial expansion through the need to defend ethnic Russians and their land in Russia's near abroad. The concept of "official nationality" paved the way for the active irredentist policy that has become an integral part of Russian foreign policy. Irredentist rhetoric brings the necessary justification for the acquisition of territory inhabited by co-nationals and may prove to be an effective political tool for Russia's territorial enlargement strategy.