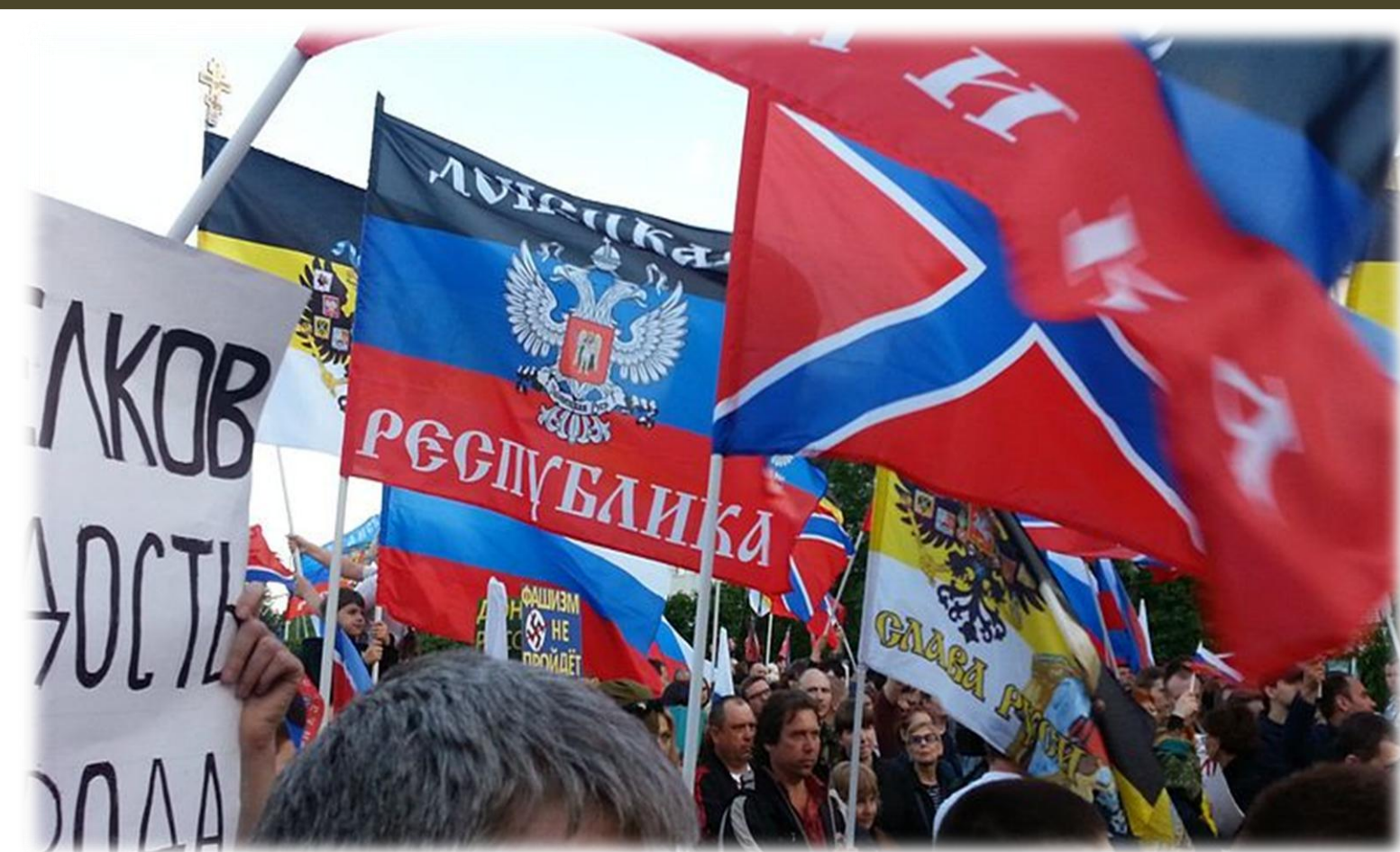


## BRANDING NOVOROSSIYA



# **Branding Novorossiya**

**Dr. Ieva Bērziņa**

## **Introduction**

A brand is an image associated with a product, a corporation, a destination, a celebrity, a political movement or any other phenomena that is intended to be communicated and differentiated from similar entities. Branding is a powerful tool for influencing mass consciousness, because targeted and sophisticated image building creates a shortcut to people's minds, attitudes and behaviour. The principles of branding allow for packaging complicated political ideas into symbols that are easily perceived by the masses. Of course, one can debate whether the concept of Novorossiya, as it has emerged in the context of Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, can be defined as a brand. Nevertheless, outlining the idea of Novorossiya from the perspective of branding reveals its communicative strength. The aim of this strategic review is to discover which elements construct Novorossiya as a brand from the viewpoint of the project's promoters.

## **Brand identity**

Brand identity is a suitable perspective for the purpose of analysing the concept of Novorossiya, because it focuses on the main building blocks of a brand. There are a variety of theoretical models of brand identity in the academic literature (for example, Aaker, 1996; Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 1997), but the analysis of the Novorossiya brand is based on the destination brand identity model as developed by Konecnik, Ruzzier and de Chernatony (2013). This approach was chosen, because Novorossiya, as a brand, may most closely be attributed to place branding, since it refers primarily to a certain territory. The model is also useful, because it contains aspects that can be relevantly applied to the specific case of Novorossiya as a political brand. According to the model, brand identity consists of six main elements – mission, vision, values, personality, distinguished preferences, and benefits (Table 1).

Together, the elements of brand identity fulfil the brand promise in the form of the experiential promise, and the emotional and functional value. An integral part of the brand identity model is also the relationship between the different stakeholders of the brand. (Konecnik Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013: 47). The analysis of the Novorossiya brand is primarily focused on the core elements of brand identity.

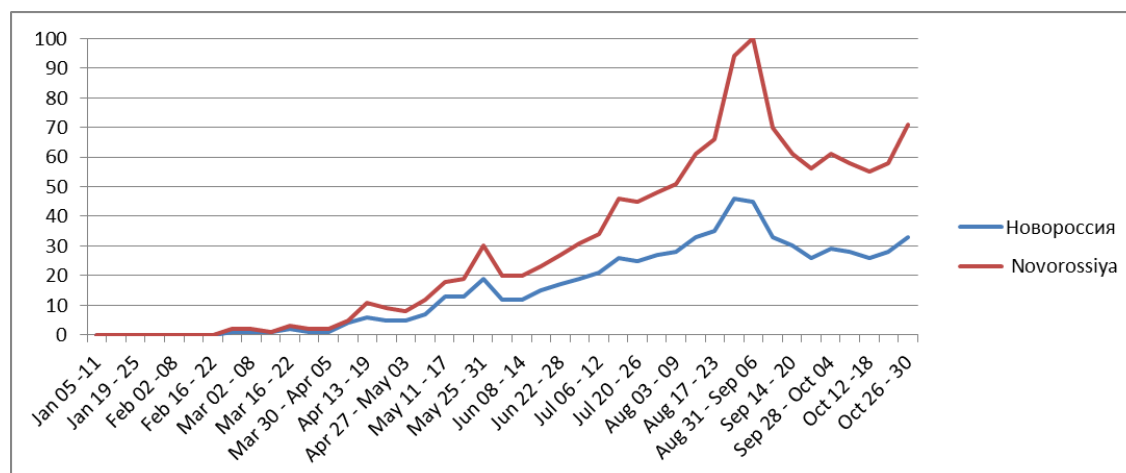
**Table 1. Brand identity elements**

(Konecnik, Ruzzier & de Chernatony, 2013: 47)

Elements	The meaning
<i>Mission</i>	The mission statement relates to the unique purpose of the existence of the brand that distinguishes it from competing entities. It answers the question of why the brand exists.
<i>Vision</i>	It is a forward-looking statement that answers the question of what the brand wants to achieve. What is the future environment that the brand aims to bring about?
<i>Benefits</i>	The rewards that the brand can offer.
<i>Values</i>	Strong and lasting beliefs or ideals shared by social groups. Values drive behaviour, influence attitudes and serve as broad guidelines.
<i>Personality</i>	Brand personality refers to a set of personality traits that are attributed to it. It also relates to the personalities of people who constitute and live the brand.
<i>Distinguishing preferences</i>	Functional and psychological attributes that differentiate the brand.

### The Novorossiia brand – rising fast, falling faster?

It can be seen from the Google keyword trends and the Yandex keyword search data (Figure 1 and Figure 2), that interest about Novorossiia in Russian and English has risen significantly from April to September 2014. The peak in Novorossiia brand awareness was reached at the end of August 2014 when Russian President Vladimir Putin officially used the term “Novorossiia” in his address to pro-Russian militia in south-eastern Ukraine (Kremlin, 2014, August 29). After this statement, media and opinion leaders in Russia and in the West began speculating on the subject of what V. Putin was actually thinking in using this concept (for example, Sonne, 2014, September 1; ITAR-TASS, 2014, August 31).



**Figure 1. Relative frequency of queries on “Новороссия” and “Novorossiia”**

Source: [www.google.com/trends](http://www.google.com/trends)

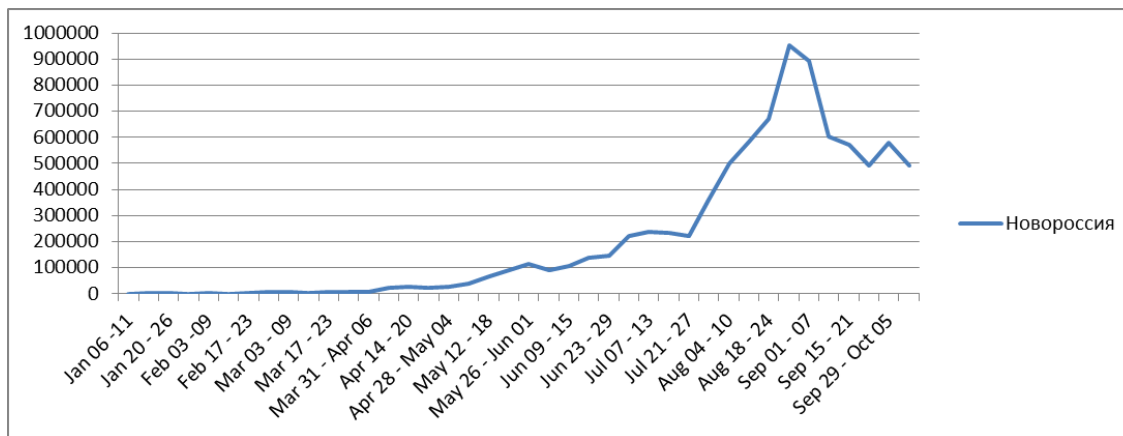


Figure 2. **History of the keyword “Новороссия” search.** Source: [www.yandex.ru](http://www.yandex.ru)

However, in early September, discussion began in Russia about whether V. Putin would abandon the idea of Novorossiia, as a result of the sanctions against Russia (for example, *Telegraf*, 2014, September 10; Dugin, 2014, September 19). The differences in opinion have continued until now with an article by Boris Nemtsov, one of V.Putin’s most prominent political opponents “The Novorossiia Project is Closed” (Nemtsov, 2014, October 12), and a quick response by pro-Putin political scientist Sergey Markov, that nobody quits the Novorossiia project (Markov, 2014, October 13).

### **The identity of the Novorossiia brand**

The labelling of south-eastern Ukraine as “Novorossiia” is closely intertwined with other concepts used by Russia, in information warfare about Ukraine. For example, the “Russian Spring” as a reference to the “Arab Spring” protests in the Middle East and North Africa; the “Russian civilization” as being fundamentally different from the cultures of the West and the East; the “Russian world” as a concept which stands for a transnational community of people belonging to the Russian culture and marking the territory that Russia considers to be the sphere of its legitimate influence. In the context of the current crisis in Ukraine, the concept of Novorossiia emerged along with the beginning of the armed conflict in the Donbass region. Thus, it can be considered as a brand which is being used for the achievement of war objectives, particularly to supply moral grounds for Russia’s involvement in the crisis in Ukraine. The core functions of the Novorossiia brand are to mobilize allies, to intimidate adversaries and to claim a territorial change. Consistent brand identity helps to do this effectively.

### ***Mission***

Why does the Novorossiia brand exist and what does it stand for? The answer to this question can be found in the programme of “The Party of Novorossiia” socio-political movement, which aims to create an independent federal state of Novorossiia. According to the party programme, Novorossiia will be a sovereign, democratic state, founded by the will of people; it will be based on the principle of direct democracy for making critical decisions that determine the future of the nation and the state. In the view of the Novorossiia state-builders, they are now in the process of creating a new, truly fair,

scientifically and technologically advanced state, in which all of the resources, in fact, belong to the people and are fully utilized for their benefit (Novorossia.su, 2014, May 23).

According to “The Party of Novorossiia”, Novorossiia is also necessary for the withdrawal of all south-eastern Ukrainian lands from the jurisdiction of the Kiev authorities and liberation from “the yoke of the fascist junta” (Novorossia.su, 2014, May 23). It is also seen by some other authors as the best way out of the Ukrainian crisis (Kalashnikov, 2014, May 31). So, the mission of the Novorossiia brand is twofold – to create an attractive future vision and to construct and sustain an enemy image, thus justifying the separatist activities.

Still, the idea of an independent Novorossiia state should be considered to be an intermediate step. If the Novorossiia project is not abandoned, there are two possible scenarios for the future. One is the union of Novorossiia with Russia by applying a similar scheme as was used in the case of the Crimean annexation. The other one is using Novorossiia to push the idea for transforming Ukraine from a unitary to a federal state. The federalization scenario would end up with Ukraine comprised of autonomous regions with rights to determine their own budgets and even an independent foreign policy course (Kendall, 2014, April 2; Zn.ua, 2014, February 6). The latest scenario is even more desirable for Russia, than just grabbing part of Ukraine’s territory, because federalization would give it a tool to influence Ukrainian politics through regions loyal to Russia and without further damaging Russia’s international image as being an aggressor state.



Figure 3. **Modern regions once wholly or partly within the Russian Empire’s “Novorossiia”.** Source: [www.edmaps.com](http://www.edmaps.com)



## Vision

Novorossiia is a project for the future, but its brand strength lies in the historical roots of the term. In the interpretation of the promoters of the idea, the name stands for a historical territory in the northern Black Sea region, annexed to Russia as a result of the Russian-Turkish wars in the late XVIII century. Historical Novorossiia included Kherson, Ekaterinoslavskiy, Tauride, Bessarabia, Stavropol province, as well as the Kuban region and the Province of the Don Cossacks (Figure 3). In its contemporary meaning, the term Novorossiia covers a region that combines Donetsk, Zaporozhye, Nikolayev, Odessa, Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv and the Luhansk region (Figure 4), (Novorossia.su, 2014, May 23).

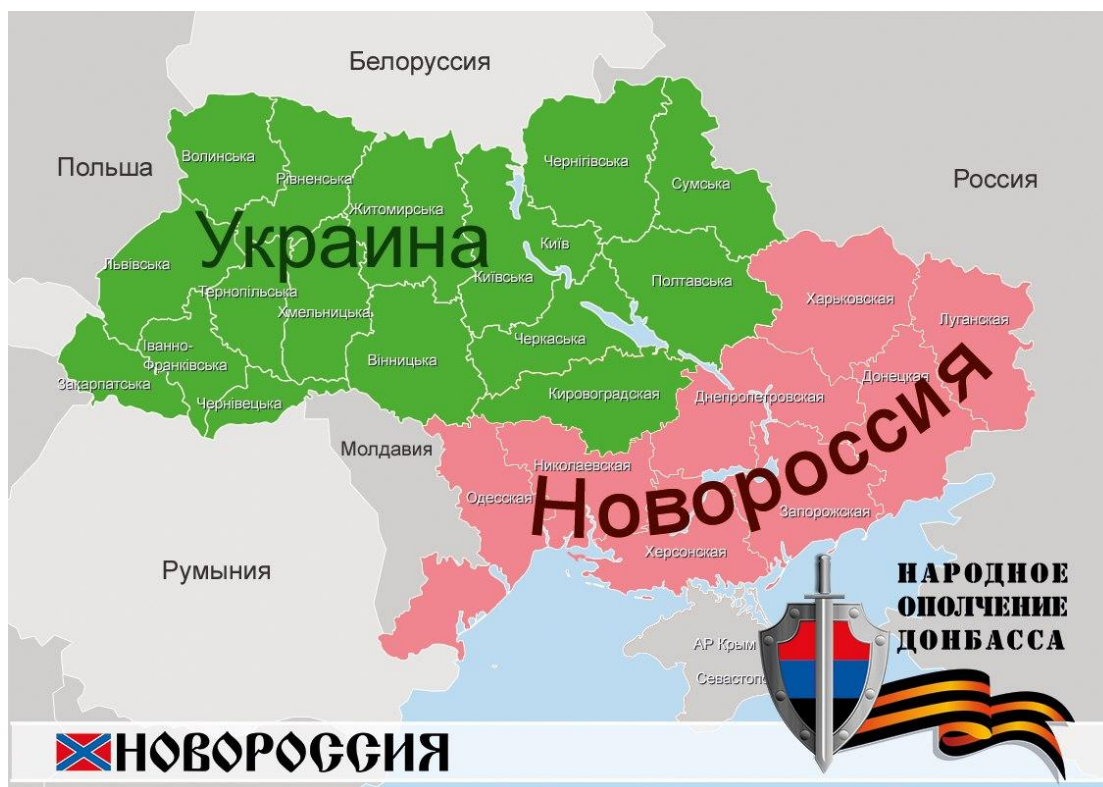


Figure 4. **Federal Republic of Novorossiia.** Source: [www.edmaps.com](http://www.edmaps.com)

The impact of the use of a historical term in a contemporary context can be explained with the concept of the semiotic triangle developed by Ogden and Richards (1923). The concept describes how the meaning of linguistic symbols is formed. The triangle consists of three elements: a) symbol – word or other symbol for the reference object; b) thought or reference – mental concept, emerging from associations; c) referent – real thing, the existence of which is consciously noticed (Amaglobeli, 2012: 38). All elements are connected to the formation of the meaning, but it is important to note that there is only an indirect relation between the symbol and the referent, “which consists in its being used by someone to stand for a referent” (Ogden&Richards, 1923: 11). The semiotic triangle of the Novorossiia brand is shown in Figure 5.

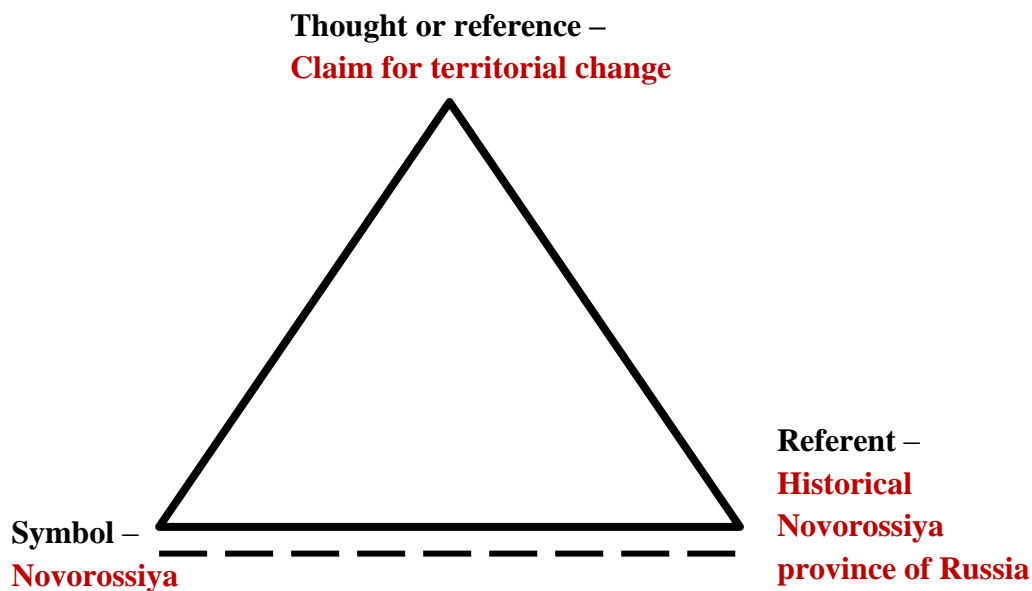


Figure 5. The semiotic triangle of the Novorossiya brand

Using the name of a former province of the Russian Empire for the description of a part of the territory of contemporary Ukraine transcends the boundaries of merely territorial description. The referent of the symbol relates to the history of Russia, but it does not currently exist as an administrative territory, therefore, the reference first of all is a claim for territorial change, because the establishment of the new “Novorossiya” state requires territorial space. The reference “Novorossiya” can exceed the territorial boundaries of the referent “Novorossiya”, because the project is not about re-establishing the former Russian Empire, but primarily about the creation of the new state. Historical “Novorossiya” is a stepping stone and source of legitimacy for claims to a “Russian world” outside the borders of the current Russia, but the current concept of “Novorossiya” can be very flexible in terms of territorial extension.

For example, the Kharkiv region was not part of historical Novorossiya, but in the current understanding, it is a part of the project. Another example of how the idea of contemporary Novorossiya can transcend its historical territorial understanding is the emergence of the “Baltic Novorossiya” Movement in Riga (Baltija.lv, 2014, June 30). From a historical perspective, the term “Baltic Novorossiya” is absurd, because the Baltic States have never been part of the province of Novorossiya, due to their geographic location. But it has meaning as a claim for territorial change. Therefore, the extension of the Novorossiya brand to the Baltic States can be reasonably regarded as a threat to their national security.

The historical Novorossiya, put in different context, turned out to be a successful brand name for political games, because “New Russia” is a brand with a double meaning. On the one hand, it has historical roots and grounds, but at the same time it is also a future project, using a similar linguistic analogy as the “New Left”, “New Labour” etc. In the sense of the “New”, the idea of Novorossiya can also be understood as a Russian world view, which has

been formulated in recent years to provide a counterweight to the dominant world view of the West. Of course, the Novorossiia project does not include the idea of rebranding the whole of Russia, but it marks a new trend in Russia's behaviour in international politics. The concept of "New Russia" already is, and can be further used for the revision of territorial boundaries and influence, whenever Russia sees such opportunities.

At the same time, the duality of the meaning allows for manoeuvring at a political level, because there is always a possibility to step back and refer to the historical meaning and to deny any aggressive intentions. The retreat path can be used if the geopolitical situation for Russia changes in a way that is beneficial for it to abandon the concept of Novorossiia.

### ***Benefits***

Novorossiia itself is a future vision, therefore the benefits it can offer are also part of a vision for the future. In M. Kalashnikov's view, if Novorossiia becomes an independent state, it will be free from maintaining the currently hostile Kiev and Galicia. He states further that in this way, Novorossiia will be able to provide the average Russian standard of living, and will have an opportunity to grow and prosper. Crimea will solve its problem with water supply, energy supply and transportation, through the territory of Novorossiia. Transnistria will be unlocked, and can then become either a region of the Russian Federation, or join a federal Novorossiia (Kalashnikov, 2014, May 31).

The benefits of a union between Novorossiia and Russia are also already being formulated and promoted. For example, the Russkaya Pravda web site has published an impressive list of benefits for Novorossiia and Russia if the two were to unite. According to the article, such changes for Russia would provide an increase in military and strategic opportunities, a solution of the problems associated with the transportation and isolation of Crimea and Transnistria, protection for the 200,000 Russian citizens in Transnistria, and this would also stimulate Moldova to become a part of the Customs Union etc. For Novorossiia, the union with Russia would provide an increase in salaries, pensions and other social payments, a decrease in taxes, utility payments, and prices, open the Russian market for companies from Novorossiia, decrease the cost of energy and raw materials and foster investments in infrastructure etc. (Russkaya Pravda).

### ***Values***

The definition of the ideology and values of Novorossiia is an important element in building the new state. One of the cornerstones of identity in Novorossiia is national hatred – the Ukrainian state is being perceived as "anti-Russian", and therefore, the Novorossiia project first of all is "anti-Ukrainian" (Novorossiia.name 1). The basic values of Novorossiia centre on Russian culture, language, identity, and the concept of a Russian civilization (Novorossia.su, 2014, May 23). But the formulation of a more thorough value system is in the process. A round table of experts was organized on July 2, 2014 in Moscow, dedicated to the development of a history textbook and an ideology for Novorossiia.

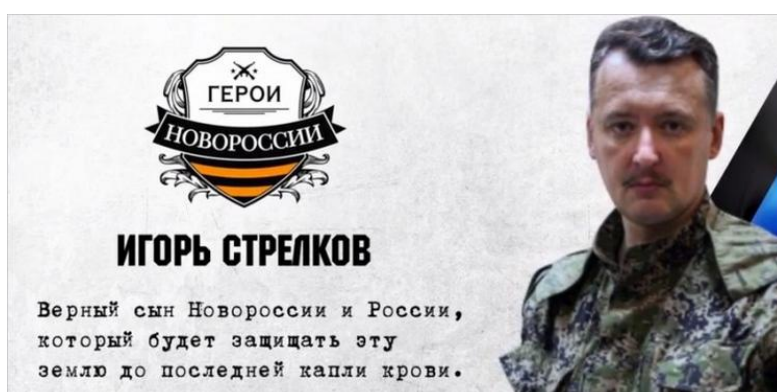


During the roundtable, the idea was expressed that Novorossiia would be “a bastion of traditional humanistic values on the western border of the Russian state” (Dergachev, 2014, July 2). In the discussions, it was also mentioned that Novorossiia would amalgamate around “traditional Russian values” (Russkie.org, 2014, July 3). Some of their most important elements are: the Russian Orthodox religion; obedience to authorities; the state and the collective as being superior to the individual; a denial of human rights and freedoms in their Western understanding (for example, the negative attitude towards homosexuality as one of the indicators) etc..

### ***Personality***

First and foremost, Novorossiia is a brand of the pro-Russian militia in south-eastern Ukraine, which is now considered to be a professional and motivated army. In the view of writer A. Prohanov, Novorossiia militias are heroes who know how to fight, how to burn tanks, take aircraft and counter the enemy. They are building a state of divine justice, establishing a fair relationship between man, nations, people and the rest of the cosmos. It is a new pattern of behaviour which is an alternative to the liberal project which has brought wars, crisis, violence and massive global lies. (Izvestia, 2014, September 15). The vision of Novorossiia as a more fair and just society might be attractive, as are all utopias. Still, history reveals that attempts to implement utopias usually end up with bloodshed and oppression. Currently, the brand personality of Novorossiia is primarily a military force implementing Russia’s strategic interests in the region, lightly masked with ideas rooted in the longing for spiritual and socialist ideals.

The mysterious and charismatic personality of the former Defence Minister of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” Igor Strelkov (real name Igor Girkin) can be mentioned as one of the manifestations of the Novorossiia brand (Picture 6). During his lifetime, I.Strelkov has taken part in fighting in Transnistria, Bosnia, Chechnya, and performed special tasks in other regions of Russia (Novrossiya Informacionnoye Agenstvo, 2014, June 18). During the current crisis in Ukraine, he was one of the charismatic and authoritative military leaders in the pro-Russian separatist forces, who also attracted considerable interest in Ukraine and the West, as an enemy, terrorist and criminal (Marples, 2014, June 13). I.Strelkov’s resignation from the post of Defence Minister of the “Donetsk People’s Republic” on August 14, 2014 was controversial, and raised many interpretations regarding the further development of the Novorossiia project.



**Figure 6. Igor Strelkov – the hero of Novorossiia ‘who will defend this land until the last drop of blood’.**

Source:

[www.novorosinform.org](http://www.novorosinform.org)

### *Distinguishing preferences*

The state building of Novorossiia also involves the development of its symbols – a flag, a coat of arms, an anthem and other elements. However, there is no consensus yet as to what exactly the elements of the visual identity of Novorossiia are, because the historical Novorossiysk did not have its own symbols. In May 2014, the Governor of Donbas, P. Gubarev held a vote on a flag on the internet. From the options provided, the red flag crossed with diagonal blue lines was the winner (Figure 7). The prototype for the Novorossiia flag was the flag of the Russian Navy which played a significant role in establishing the historical Novorossiia (Novorossiia.name 2). Currently this is the most widespread symbol of Novorossiia.



Figure 7. **Novorossiia flag** (Novorossiia.name 2)

The functional attributes of Novorossiia are also its institutional formations. On May 24, 2014, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics signed an agreement about the Union of People's Republics of Novorossiia which will be governed by a special council, consisting of three representatives from each republic (RIA Novosti, 2014, May 24). Around the same time, the "The Party of Novorossiia" socio-political movement and the Popular Front of Novorossiia were also established (Interfax, 2014, May 24). On September 16 2014, the formation of the Joint Armed Forces of Novorossiia began (Rusvesna.su, 2014, September 16). Along with the formation of the Novorossiia state, various support structures and foundations (the most significant – the "Novorossiia" Humanities Battalion) and other organizational initiatives also emerged.

But Novorossiia is mainly a communication project using possibilities offered by new communication technologies. An approximate assessment of the breadth of Novorossiia brand communication can be done by taking a look at a number of web sites and social media accounts used for the promotion of the idea:

- More than 15 Novorossiia news agency web sites that generated at least 100,000<sup>1</sup> daily visitors by the end of September 2014 (novorossia.su; novorossy.ru; novorossiia.name; novorosinform.org; novorossia.today; novorus.info; novorossia.org; novorossiia.su республикановороссия.пф; novorossiatv.com; newslava.info; voicesevas.ru; novorospolk.ru; maloros.ru; antimaydan.info etc.).

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<sup>1</sup> The estimation is based on the internet traffic metrics on the websites having included these.

- About 10 related websites where the idea of Novorossiya is being promoted (rusvesna.su<sup>2</sup>; spasionbass.ru; europeanfront.info; anti-global.ru; rossia3.ru; odnako.org; interbrigada.org etc.).
- About 5 YouTube channels with almost 90,000 subscribers by the end of September 2014 (НОВОРОССИЯ TV; Новороссия Подразделение Мотороллы; Движение Интербригады; REPUBLIC OF NOVORUSSIA (АРХИВ); Новый Канал Новороссии etc.)
- More than 20 accounts on the VKontakte social network with a total number of followers and members at around 1,800,000<sup>3</sup> by the end of September 2014.
- More than 60 accounts containing the keyword “Новороссия” in the name or description with more than 200,000 followers in total on Twitter, by the end of September 2014.
- About 5 pages on Facebook having more than 500 likes each, and huge number of accounts containing the keyword “Новороссия” in the name.

Internet communication channels provide a platform and a considerable audience for the promotion of the Novorossiya concept. The easy availability and flexibility of new media allows for the presentation and promotion of the ideology of Novorossiya. Anyone who wants to get information about the Novorossiya project can quickly obtain it on the internet. These communication tools are also useful for providing a flow of information about the actual events in south-eastern Ukraine, framed in the interests of the Novorossiya project. Social networking platforms serve to attract new supporters to the project. Thus, there are two important components present in the communication of the Novorossiya brand – the message and the channels by which this message is being propagated.

### **The problem of the Novorossiya brand**

The Novorossiya concept has all the brand identity elements that are necessary for communicating the concept, winning supporters and intimidating enemies. Still, the actual performance of the brand and the different interests of stakeholders may jeopardize the project. First of all, the implementation of the concept has ended up with long-term violence and the collapse of normal daily routines for the inhabitants of the regions where the fight is taking place. Is “the bright future” of the Novorossiya state so attractive and reliable for people that they would be ready to sacrifice their lives, cities and villages, and flee from their homes?

It is also possible to identify different and even controversial interests with respect to the Novorossiya project. For example, there is a version that the project was initiated by the influential Donetsk entrepreneur, Rinat Ahmetov, for the purpose of strengthening negotiating position with the Kiev authorities. Obviously, his oligarchic motives are different from those of the combatant pro-Russian militia actually fighting in south-eastern

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<sup>2</sup> The Web site had more than 300,000 visitors on October 2, 2014. According to internet statistics LiveInternet.ru, it was the second most viewed website in Russia in the Politics category on that day.

<sup>3</sup> The actual number could be less, because one person can be a follower and member of several accounts.

Ukraine. There is also no unanimity between pro-Russian separatists with regard to the strategic development of Novorossiia. Russia has its own interests, and in the current geopolitical situation there is a high probability that the Novorossiia project will be abandoned. Taking into account the effort that has been put into the project and the sacrifices already made, such a scenario would damage the image of Russia in south-eastern Ukraine considerably, because the separatists will then feel rightly betrayed. For Ukraine, Novorossiia is obviously a direct threat to its territorial integrity and independence. Thus, for the time being, the Novorossiia project is a complex puzzle for all the parties involved.

## Conclusions

The case of Novorossiia provides evidence that it is possible to create a political brand in a short period of time. It took only a few months to make “Novorossiia” a reality in the sense that it became a recognizable concept used by the pro-Russian militia in south-east Ukraine, its supporters and critics of the idea in Russia, Western journalists, analysts and others. At the moment, the Novorossiia brand is an asset that can be used in geopolitical trade – one side can intimidate and insist on pushing it forward, the other can demand for it to be abandoned. The main lesson from the Novorossiia branding case is that comprehensive and consistent political branding is a political tool. This is because people are first and foremost mobilized by ideas. Would separatism in Ukraine exist in the long-term, if not for the idea that it was necessary to secede from Ukraine? The Novorossiia brand serves the purpose.

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