



## The Russian Geopolitical Imaginaries and the War on Ukraine

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### **Abstract**

This article analyzes how Russian elites construct geopolitical imaginaries of Ukraine that shape the perception of threat from the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to the ongoing war. Moving beyond mega-narratives such as NATO expansion, the study applies critical geopolitics to examine how spatial, historical, and civilizational narratives are deployed in political discourse to define territory, legitimacy, and adversaries. Using geopolitical discourse analysis of presidential speeches, doctrinal texts, and state media narratives, the article illustrates that Ukraine is imagined as a civilizational core, strategic buffer, and historical territory. These imaginaries affect policy choices, justify invasion, and normalize confrontation with the West. The findings demonstrate that Russia's war in Ukraine is as much about the construction of space and identity in geopolitical terms as it is about material power, offering a nuanced insight on the impact of elite narratives and their policies.

**Keywords:** *Russian; Geopolitical Imaginaries; War on Ukraine*

### **1. Introduction**

The Russia–Ukraine war represents one of the most significant geopolitical events since the end of World War II. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, involvement in the Donbas conflict, and full-scale invasion in February 2022 have profoundly reshaped European security and international geopolitics. Realists analyses often emphasize NATO enlargement and shifts in military balances (Mearsheimer 2014; Charap and Colton 2017). While these materialist accounts illuminate structural pressures, they are insufficient to shed lights on the non-material reasons.

This article applies **critical geopolitics** to examine how Russian elites construct **geopolitical imaginaries** of Ukraine that define the meaning of territory, threat, and historical legitimacy (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003; Dodds and Dalby 2000). In this framework, Ukraine is not merely a neighboring country but a **civilizational core, strategic buffer, and historical space**, whose alignment with the West is interpreted as an existential threat to Russian spatial and political order. Geopolitical imaginaries—elite-produced spatial representations that articulate the relationship between “us” and “them,” here and there, historical and contemporary space—shape both the perception of threat (Laruelle 2015; Tsygankov 2016).

Through **geopolitical discourse analysis** of presidential speeches, doctrinal texts, and state media narratives from 2014 to 2025, this study traces how Russian elites construct Ukraine as a site of historical, cultural significance. The Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing war are understood not only as reactions to material developments but as **spatial and discursive phenomena** embedded in long-standing historical imaginaries (Fathollah-Nejad 2021; Mishalova et al. 2024).

The study addresses three main questions:

1. How do Russian elites construct geopolitical imaginaries of Ukraine in official discourse?
2. How do these spatial narratives define the meaning of Ukraine as a civilizational space?
3. How have these imaginaries shaped the range of actions taken by Putin from 2014 to 2025?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the **critical geopolitics framework**, clarifying how spatial discourse shapes threat perception and strategic behavior. Subsequent sections examine the historical evolution of Russian geopolitical imaginaries, the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion from 2022 to 2025. The conclusion discusses the broader implications of spatially constructed threat for understanding contemporary conflicts in Europe.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Critical Geopolitics and Geopolitical Imaginaries**

Critical geopolitics examines how political elites construct **geographical and spatial narratives** that shape foreign policy behavior. Rather than assuming that threats are objectively determined by material capabilities, critical geopolitics emphasizes that **territory, borders, and political space are socially and discursively produced** (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003; Dodds and Dalby 2000). In this view, foreign policy is inseparable from the **geopolitical imaginaries** through which elites define who belongs where.

**Geopolitical imaginaries** are elite-produced **spatial representations** that articulate the meaning of territory, historical continuity, and cultural belonging. These imaginaries do not simply reflect objective conditions; they **actively construct the perception of threat**. In the Russian case, Ukraine is imagined as a civilizational core, historical territory, and strategic buffer whose orientation toward the West threatens Russia's spatial and political order. NATO and EU expansion are interpreted not merely as security threats but as challenges to Russia's **civilizational and territorial legitimacy** (Laruelle 2015; Tsygankov 2016).

Critical geopolitics emphasizes that these imaginaries operate at multiple levels:

- **Elite discourse:** Presidential speeches, doctrinal texts, and state media articulate spatial narratives.
- **Historical memory:** References to Kyivan Rus, imperial expansion, and Soviet integration produce a sense of continuity.
- **Relational identity:** The West is represented as an encroaching "other," whose influence challenges Russian claims to civilizational authority (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003).

Through repeated articulation, these narratives become institutionalized, guiding both domestic perception and foreign policy behaviour. They define **what constitutes legitimate intervention**, justify military action, and structure the cognitive space within which strategic options are considered (Laruelle 2015; Mishalova et al. 2024). In other words, Russian actions in Ukraine are not only responses to material developments but **manifestations of a spatial and discursive construction of threat**.

This framework allows us to understand the Ukraine war as a conflict rooted in **spatial imagination**: Russia seeks not only territorial influence but the **control and moral authority over a**

**civilizational space**, which it perceives as historically and culturally contiguous with its own (Fathollah-Nejad 2021).

In addition to Western scholarship, a growing body of Persian-language research has examined Russian geopolitical thinking and the strategic significance of the Ukraine conflict. Iranian scholars have frequently interpreted the crisis through frameworks emphasizing great-power competition, NATO expansion. For instance, **Elaheh Koolaee** (2017) highlights the historical and geopolitical factors shaping Russia's perception of the post-Soviet space, emphasizing how Russian elites view Ukraine as a strategically connected region within Russia's broader security environment. Similarly, **Kayhan Barzegar** (2022) argues that the Ukraine crisis reflects deeper structural tensions between Russia and the Western alliance system, particularly regarding NATO expansion and the balance of power in Eurasia.

Other Iranian scholars emphasize the role of geopolitical narratives and strategic culture in shaping Russia's policy toward Ukraine. **Shahram Chubin** and **Abdolrasool Divsallar** have analyzed Russia's regional strategy and its confrontation with Western institutions, arguing that Russian policymakers interpret NATO's eastward expansion as a security threat to Russia's security architecture. Meanwhile, Persian-language studies published in academic journals such as *Faslnameh-ye Ravabet-e Khareji* (Foreign Relations Quarterly), *Motale'at-e Rahbordi* (Strategic Studies Quarterly), and *Pazhuheshnameh-ye Olum-e Siasi* (Political Science Research Journal) emphasize how Russian political discourse draws on historical memory, civilizational narratives to justify its actions in Ukraine.

These perspectives complement Western critical geopolitics scholarship by highlighting how Russian policy is interpreted within broader Eurasian geopolitical dynamics. By incorporating both Western and Persian-language research, the literature demonstrates that the Ukraine conflict is widely understood as a product of competing geopolitical imaginaries and security narratives rather than purely material considerations.

### **3. Historical Foundations of Russian Geopolitical Imaginaries**

Understanding Russia's behavior in Ukraine requires situating contemporary events within **historically layered geopolitical imaginaries**. These imaginaries are rather elite-constructed spatial narratives that define territory, historical continuity, and civilizational belonging. Russian discourse does not treat Ukraine as merely a neighbor; it is imagined as a **civilizational and strategic space** whose relations with the West represents a rupture in Russian spatial order (Ó Tuathail 1996; Laruelle 2015).

#### **3.1 Kyivan Rus and the Origins of Civilizational Space**

Russian geopolitical imaginaries frequently trace their historical roots to **Kyivan Rus**, the medieval polity centered in Kyiv between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. In contemporary Russian discourse, Kyivan Rus is portrayed as the **shared origin of East Slavic civilization**, forming the spatial and cultural foundation linking Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The baptism of Rus in 988 under Prince Vladimir is invoked as a **civilizational milestone**, anchoring Russia's claims to cultural influence over Ukraine (Lukyanov 2025; Tsygankov 2016).

From a critical geopolitics perspective, references to Kyivan Rus are **not neutral history** but constitute a **spatial imaginary** that frames Ukraine as **inherently linked to Russia's historical territory**. This narrative renders Ukrainian sovereignty symbolically ambiguous: contemporary separation is framed as **externally imposed by the West**, rather than organically legitimate, situating Ukraine within a continuum of Russian civilizational space (Laruelle 2015; Mishalova et al. 2024).

#### **3.2 Imperial Expansion and the Civilizational Mission**

During the Tsardom of Muscovy and the Russian Empire, territorial expansion was intertwined with narratives of **civilizational guardianship**. The doctrine of Moscow as the "Third Rome" framed

Russia as the successor to Byzantine civilization and protector of Orthodox Christianity (Hosking 2001; Lieven 2006). In geopolitical terms, imperial expansion was a **spatialization of historical mission**, legitimizing control over neighboring states as part of a civilizational continuum.

Ukraine's integration into the Russian Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was retrospectively framed as **reunification**, not as conquest. This produced an enduring spatial imaginary in which Russian elites perceive Ukraine as **geographically and historically contiguous**, forming a buffer and integral component of Russian power (Laruelle 2015; Tsygankov 2016).

### 3.3 Soviet Integration and Spatial Continuity

The Soviet period replaced Orthodoxy with Marxist-Leninist ideology, but it **retained key spatial structures** of imperial governance: centralized authority, vast territorial control, and superpower status. Ukraine's formal status as a Soviet republic did not disrupt the **spatial imaginary of a unified political and cultural space** centered on Moscow. Administrative transfers, like Crimea in 1954, were largely symbolic, as the **imagination of contiguous Soviet space normalized Ukrainian inclusion** (Lukyanov 2025).

Victory in the Great Patriotic War further cemented spatial imaginaries linking resilience, moral authority, and territorial control. The war narrative became a **shared civilizational myth**, providing cognitive anchors for later claims over post-Soviet spaces (Hill 2018; Sakwa 2015).

### 3.4 Post-Soviet Geopolitical Rupture (1991–2000)

The collapse of the USSR created a profound **geopolitical rupture**. Russia lost not only territory but the symbolic continuity. Ukraine's independence challenged elite imaginaries that previously assumed contiguous East Slavic civilizational space (Tsygankov 2016).

Competing narratives emerged:

- Westernizers emphasized integration
- Statists prioritized sovereignty
- Civilizational nationalists emphasized **distinct cultural-spatial identity**.

NATO expansion and Ukraine's Western alignment were interpreted by nationalist imaginaries as **encroachments into Russia's historically and strategically defined space**, intensifying perceptions of threat (Laruelle 2015; Ó Tuathail 1996).

### 3.5 Putin Era: Consolidation of Geopolitical Imaginaries

Since the early 2000s, Russian discourse has emphasized **continuity, territorial restoration, and civilizational responsibility**. The concept of **Ruskiy Mir** (Russian World) emerged as a **transnational spatial imaginary**, linking Russian-speaking populations abroad to the homeland and blurring boundaries between citizenship and civilizational belonging (Laruelle 2015).

Ukraine, within this framework, is a **civilizational core and strategic buffer**. Its orientation toward the West is framed as a rupture threatening Russia's spatial and historical order. Simultaneously, Western liberal values are represented as an encroaching "other," solidifying relational geopolitical identities and justifying intervention (Tsygankov 2016; Mishalova et al. 2024).

### 3.6 Enduring Spatial Themes

Across centuries, several **geopolitical imaginaries** persist in Russian discourse:

- Ukraine as **historically contiguous space and civilizational core**

- Russia as **great power**
- The West as a **recurring encroaching “other”**
- Survival and moral resilience as justifications for **territorial claims**

These imaginaries provide the framework within which contemporary crises are interpreted, shaping elite discourse, domestic legitimacy, and policy options (Laruelle 2015; Sakwa 2015; Tsygankov 2016).

#### 4. *The Ukraine Crisis and Geopolitical Discourses (2014–2025)*

Russian political elites interpret Ukraine not merely as a neighboring state but as a **geopolitical space imbued with historical, civilizational, and strategic significance**. Critical geopolitics emphasizes that threat is **discursively and spatially constructed**, and that political actions are framed by elite-produced imaginaries of territory and legitimacy (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003). The crises of 2014 and 2022 illustrate how Russia mobilized these imaginaries to justify intervention and consolidate domestic support.

##### 4.1 *The 2014 Maidan Revolution as a Cognitive Shock*

The Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 were interpreted in Russian discourse not as a domestic political development, but as a **rupture in the historically constructed East Slavic civilizational space** (Sakwa 2015). Pro-Western Ukrainian movements were framed as **Western-engineered demonstrations**, confirming pre-existing narratives of encroachment into Russia’s strategic and civilizational sphere.

Three spatial dimensions of this interpretation stand out:

- **Civilizational threat:** Ukrainian alignment with the West and NATO was portrayed as rejection of a shared historical and territorial continuum, undermining Russia’s imagined civilizational narrative (Laruelle 2015).
- **Historical rupture:** The revolution was framed through selective memory of Kyivan Rus, imperial expansion, and Soviet integration, representing a break in the continuity of Russian influence (Tsygankov 2016).
- **Strategic loss:** The event challenged Russia’s perceived buffer space and strategic depth, intensifying the sense of Western encroachment (Hill 2018).

In this framework, Maidan acted as a **cognitive shock**, prompting Russian elites to reinforce discourses of territorial, civilizational, and strategic unity.

##### 4.2 *Crimea: Symbolic Restoration and Spatial Legitimacy*

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was framed domestically not as aggression, but as **restorative spatial justice**—reclaiming territory imagined as historically and strategically Russian separated by external actors (Motyl 2015; Laruelle 2015). Three key dimensions of the Russian spatial narrative were emphasized:

- **Historical legitimacy:** Crimea’s integration was framed as correction of historical disruption, referencing imperial incorporation and Orthodox heritage.
- **Protection of contiguous populations:** Russian-speaking communities were represented as integral to the **Russian World**, legitimizing intervention as a civilizational and moral obligation.
- **Domestic consolidation:** Linking contemporary policy to historical narratives reinforced resilience and moral legitimacy, despite international condemnation (Sakwa 2015).

Crimea thus became a **spatial symbol of Russia's historical and civilizational claims**, justifying assertive foreign policy.

#### 4.3 Eastern Ukraine and Cultural-Spatial Solidarity

Conflict in Eastern Ukraine was framed as **defense of contiguous space and cultural affiliation**, rather than a purely local or separatist movement. Russian discourse emphasized:

- **Transnational belonging:** Russian-speaking populations were positioned within a shared **civilizational and geopolitical space**, contiguous with Russia (Laruelle 2015).
- **Western intrusion as threat:** Ukrainian reforms and integration with Western institutions were interpreted as encroachment into Russia's imagined sphere of influence (Tsygankov 2016).
- **Moral-spatial responsibility:** Intervention was justified as safeguarding populations historically integrated into Russia's civilizational and geopolitical map (Hill 2018).

#### 4.4 NATO Expansion and Relational Geopolitical Identity

Russia's perception of NATO and EU enlargement reflects the **geopolitical imagination of territorial encroachment** rather than solely material security concerns. Western institutions were discursively framed as **external rivals** threatening Russia's civilizational order. Key elements include:

- **Existential spatial threat:** Ukraine's Western alignment symbolically challenged Russian authority over contiguous space (Tsygankov 2016).
- **Identity-driven security calculus:** Threats were interpreted through **spatial narratives of civilizational continuity** rather than purely military capabilities.
- **Reinforcement of historical imaginaries:** The West became a recurring "other," situating Russia as a defender of historically contiguous space (Hill 2018; Ó Tuathail 1996).

These discursive constructions of space and threat guided Russian responses, shaping both the **range of policy options** and domestic legitimacy.

### 5. Geopolitical Imaginaries as a Policy Driver

Russian actions in Ukraine illustrate that **geopolitical imaginaries often guide policy more than material calculations alone**. Critical geopolitics emphasizes that elite-produced spatial narratives define both the **perception of threat** and the **boundaries of legitimate action** (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003; Dodds and Dalby 2000). In this context, Russian discourse constructs Ukraine as a **civilizational core, strategic buffer, and historically contiguous space**, shaping domestic legitimacy and strategic choices.

Three mechanisms link geopolitical imaginaries to policy:

#### 1. Spatialized Threat Perception

Historical and civilizational narratives amplify perceived threats from Western encroachment and Ukrainian divergence. Ukraine's alignment with the EU and NATO is interpreted not merely as political realignment but as **violation of Russia's imagined territorial and civilizational order** (Laruelle 2015; Tsygankov 2016). These spatial imaginaries produce a **cognitive map** within which threats are amplified, guiding policy toward assertive or interventionist options.

#### 2. Legitimacy Framing through Space and History

Foreign policy decisions are justified as **restoration of historical continuity, protection of contiguous populations, and defense of civilizational space**, rather than purely as security

interests (Mishalova et al. 2024; Sakwa 2015). For instance, the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine are framed as **moral obligations arising from the integrity of the Russian World** (Laruelle 2015). By embedding these actions in a discursive construction of space, elites secure domestic and symbolic legitimacy.

### 3. Institutionalization of Spatial Narratives

State institutions, education, media, and policy documents reinforce these geopolitical imaginaries, producing broad societal acceptance. Strategic texts such as Russia's **2036 national policy strategy** explicitly link territorial and cultural claims to the **construction of geopolitical space**, framing Russian intervention as both rational and necessary within the imagined spatial order (Zagorski et al. 2025; Lukyanov 2026).

Through these mechanisms, Russian geopolitical imaginaries operate at multiple levels—elite discourse, institutional frameworks, and societal perception—**structuring both how threats are seen and what actions are considered legitimate**. In this sense, the Ukraine war is not only a contest over material power but also a **struggle over the spatial and civilizational imagination of Eastern Europe** (Ó Tuathail 1996; Agnew 2003).

### 6. Discussion: Historical Memory, Geopolitical Narratives, and Policy Implications

The analysis of Russian discourse from 2014 to 2025 demonstrates that **geopolitical imaginaries grounded in historical memory** play a central role in shaping foreign policy and strategic behavior. Several interlinked patterns emerge:

#### 1. Selective Historical Memory as Spatial Legitimacy

Russian discourse selectively mobilizes historical narratives—Kyivan Rus, imperial reunification, and Soviet integration—to construct a **sense of spatial continuity and moral legitimacy** over Ukraine (Hosking 2001; Lieven 2006; Laruelle 2015). These narratives do not simply justify policy retrospectively; they **constitute the cognitive map** within which elites interpret events and delineate acceptable actions.

#### 2. Civilizational Framing of Space

Ukraine is represented not only as a geopolitical entity but as the **civilizational core of Russian influence**. Its political and economic orientation toward the West is framed as an existential rupture in the spatial and historical order, transforming ordinary geopolitical developments into **civilizational threats** (Mishalova et al. 2024; Laruelle 2015).

#### 3. Relational Geopolitics with the West

Western institutions—NATO, the EU—are discursively constructed as an **encroaching “other”**, whose actions threaten Russia's territorial and civilizational space. This relational framing reinforces the **perceived necessity of assertive intervention**, situating Russia as a defender of contiguous space and historical legitimacy (Ó Tuathail 1996; Tsygankov 2016).

#### 4. Institutionalization and Societal Resonance

Educational curricula, state media, and strategic policy documents embed these narratives, normalizing interventionist actions and shaping domestic perception. Spatial and historical imaginaries are thus **institutionalized**, producing broad societal acceptance of assertive foreign policy (Sakwa 2015; Zagorski et al. 2025; Lukyanov 2026).

Together, these patterns illustrate that Russian policy in Ukraine cannot be fully explained through material or structural accounts alone. **Geopolitical imaginaries construct both the perception of threat and the limits of legitimate action**, guiding strategic decisions and domestic mobilization. From Crimea

to the Donbas, and in the ongoing war, spatial narratives provide the **moral and cognitive justification** for intervention, framing conflict as a contest over civilizational space rather than mere state interests.

## 7. Conclusion

The Russia–Ukraine conflict illustrates that foreign policy cannot be fully understood as a response to material concerns alone. By applying a **critical geopolitics framework**, this study shows that Russian political elites construct **geopolitical imaginaries** that define Ukraine as a **civilizational core, strategic buffer, and historically contiguous space**. These imaginaries, rooted in selective historical memory and civilizational narratives, **shape perceptions of threat, legitimate policy options, and domestic mobilization**.

In sum, Russian foreign policy behaviour toward Ukraine is **as much about controlling the imagination of space and civilization as about material security**. This study demonstrates that critical geopolitics provides a robust framework for understanding contemporary conflicts: **territory, threat, and legitimacy are discursively constructed**, and these constructions directly shape the range of strategic behaviors available to states.

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