

Negative Connotations of the “Russian World” Concept Against the Backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian War 2022

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Abstract. For a long time, the idea of the so-called “Russian world”, a civilization united according to linguistic, ethnocultural, and religious principles, has been the subject of numerous interdisciplinary studies. It is primarily due to the aggravation of the geopolitical situation in the sphere of Russian influence, such as Ukraine. Existing studies are devoted to historical, cultural, and philosophical aspects. However, there are still not enough linguistic ones since there is still no single definition of the essence of this phenomenon and the features of its functioning in various discourses. Today, in the scientific space, there are three main theoretical approaches to understanding the “Russian world” – civilizational, geopolitical, and religious. In this study, the task is to conceptualize the presented “Russian world” notion as well as to identify newly developed connotations in connection with the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict of 2022, utilizing semantic analysis, component, and contextual analysis methods. The media texts of the Russian-language Ukrainian media were used as the material of the study, reflecting the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine and mentioning the “Russian world” concept. The study showed that the “Russian world” concept had acquired numerous negative connotations, such as “war, destruction, death”.

Keywords: Russian world concept, sociocultural community, Russian-Ukrainian war, media discourse, negative connotations.

Introduction

The mention of the *Russian world* concept today increasingly attracts the attention of researchers and has become the subject of many interdisciplinary discussions.

Within the framework of this article, we will not focus on the historical aspect of the notion under study. However, we will only note the beginning of the formation of the *Russian world* in its modern sense, which we will refer to, namely as an “international, interstate, and intercontinental civilization” (Kravchenko, 2017, p. 8), pursuing the goal

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of “uniting disunited Russian-speaking compatriots” is determined by the beginning of the 1990s (Alejnikova, 2017, p. 6).

The Russian world notion was used solely as a theoretical doctrine for some time. It was first introduced into the socio-political discourse on April 26, 2007, by Vladimir Putin during the annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (The annual Presidential Address, 2010). The Russian president emphasized the compatriots’ cultural, linguistic, and civilizational unity with Russia. Over the next five years, political elites’ usage of this notion has slightly decreased, but it has become increasingly occurring in the “rhetoric of the Russian Orthodox Church” (Krivopuskov, 2016, p. 114). However, it can also be interpreted as cultural, rather than religious, propaganda for further introducing the *Russian world* as the ideology of the Russian Federation.

In 2010 (On the creation, 2010), the metamorphosis of the *Russian world* began from a doctrine to a political course that could be used to win the political struggle within Russia. It has been used as an ideology of power to strengthen its legitimacy and defeat the political battle.

Today, the *Russian world* means a precise community of people, which exists due to the presence of certain features shared by the members of this community. Among them are the Russian language and culture, common historical heritage and values, loyalty to the modern Russian Federation, and Orthodoxy.

The *Russian world* notion is also used to refer to “the policies of the Russian Federation in the CIS countries”, which is of the utmost interest in connection with the geopolitical conflict in Ukraine – the traditional zone of influence of Russia and the presence of the *Russian world* (Narochnickaya, 2015, p. 13).

Thus, throughout its historical development, the notion we are studying has been filled with diverse definitions and acquired new forms. However, we are interested in the negative connotations that emerged against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict, which began in 2014, the subsequent annexation of Crimea. Since then, the emphasis of the authorities and the state media in Russia has been placed precisely on “the Russian diaspora and Russian-speaking groups,” which in turn fall under the definition of the *Russian world* (Volhonskij, Muhanov, 2019).

However, the greatest filling with the negative meanings of this notion was initiated in 2022 due to Russia’s recognition of the LDNR¹ by Russia and the attack of the Russian army on the territory of Ukraine. Consequently, within the framework of this study, we set the task of endeavouring to conceptualize the *Russian world* notion and evaluate the prospect of filling it with negative connotations against the background of the events mentioned above. As research material, it was decided to analyze the texts of the Russian-language Ukrainian media, in which the *Russian world* concept is used.

The analysis showed the *Russian world* as a sociocultural space, a group of people united by the Russian language or Orthodox Christianity, and the state policy of the Russian Federation. The subject matter of the research is the *Russian world* concept,

¹ The Luhansk People’s Republic and the Donetsk People’s Republic are Ukrainian breakaway states.

which is necessary for adequate reflection of its vision in the current dynamic sociocultural circumstances.

The theoretical and methodological approach in the article is founded on the research of Russian and foreign scientists in the field of studying the *Russian world* concept, the “Russian diaspora of near and far abroad”, and Russian-speaking communities (Suslov, 2017, p. 6).

The complexity and multidimensionality of the topic under study require an interdisciplinary approach. The principal methods used in the study were semantic analysis, followed by a cognitive-semantic description, and a sociolinguistic method for analysing the use of the *Russian world* concept in Russian-language media texts in Ukraine, taking into account the social, psychological, and linguistic characteristics of the audience the publications are meant for.

The scientific novelty of the study is defined both by the relevance and nature of the problem, by the inconclusive terminological and conceptual development of the *Russian world* notion, and by an endeavour to specify new negative connotations that have not previously been actively researched and remained on the semantic periphery.

1. Genesis of the *Russian world* concept

One of the substantial issues requiring clarification is the problem of conceptualization of the *Russian world* notion since there is still no single comprehensive definition of it. All presented definitions are occasionally founded on mutually exclusive views.

Despite extensive and intense discussions, the *Russian world* has been slightly studied in modern science, both as a concept and as a social reality. Different authors actively utilize this notion but fill it with subjective meaning. The essential characteristics of the *Russian world* that are crucial for understanding are presented to a greater extent, not by distinct definitions but solely by opinions.

Since, in the framework of our study, we are interested in the linguistic side, we would like to mention that in semiology and linguoculturology, the *Russian world* as a civilized narrative or cognitive concept was carried out by D. S. Likhachev (1980), Yu. M. Lotman (1994), N. A. A. G. Dugin (2000), Narochitskaya (2007), V. Averyanov (2005), and V. A. Tishkov (2007).

A substantial phase of the research is the definition of the conceptual core of the *Russian world* notion, i.e., those properties attributed to it by most researchers within a specific paradigm, and the conceptual periphery, i.e., the intersection with identical concepts. Below, we consider the most comprehensive and widely used definitions of it.

Of course, there is no consensus in the expert community regarding the content and boundaries of the *Russian world*. Consequently, the *Russian world* concept constructed regarding a spiritual community over state borders allows, on the one hand, to raise the issue of observing the rights of Russians outside of Russia in a mild form and, on the other hand, to avoid a direct discussion of the problem of “a divided people” (Barash, 2011, p. 152).

According to the research of V. A. Tishkov, dedicated to the ethnocultural genesis of the *Russian world*, its constitution and unification are due to “the Russian language and the Russian-speaking Russian/Soviet culture, together with historical memory” (Tishkov, 2007).

In the studies of M. A. Volkhonsky and V. M. Mukhanov, the *Russian world* concept in the part in which it is addressed to the post-Soviet Russian communities involves reconciliation with division, fixing it as a stable, “eternal” state of Russians. The emphasis is on supporting the Russian language and culture abroad and on the “return” of compatriots who want this (Volkhonskij, Muhanov, 2019, p. 59).

Separately, it is necessary to point out that V. A. Nikonov’s² broad understanding of the *Russian world* implies the inclusion of “all ethnic Russians living both in Russia and abroad, as well as people who have a different ethnic origin, but who are aware (and often declare) that they belong to Russian history and culture” (Nikonov, 2014, pp. 895–896). At the same time, the criteria for belonging can be distinct and mutually complement each other: in addition to Russian nationality, this includes belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church, the constant use of the Russian language in significant areas of life, a deep interest in Russian history and culture and identification with them. The critical role, in this case, is played by the Russian language, which is the primary tool for staying in the space of Russian history and culture.

Our position on the representation of the nuclear part of the semantic field of the *Russian world* concept coincides with the opinion of a political scientist, O. N. Batanova, according to which the *Russian world* is “a global cultural and civilizational phenomenon, consisting of Russia as a mother state and the Russian diaspora, uniting people who, regardless of nationality, feel Russian, are carriers of Russian culture and the Russian language, are spiritually connected with Russia and are not indifferent to her deeds and fate” (Batanova, 2008, pp. 83–91).

Consequently, from the presented definitions, it is possible to single out some crucial meanings of the concept under study, namely the *Russian world* as a civilization, as a linguistic community, and, in a rare case, as an Orthodox community.

The civilizational approach refers to the vision of the *Russian world* as a “historically established set of cultural and spiritual values” (Gaponenko, 2016). Therefore, in this context, the *Russian world* appears as an original phenomenon with its values and characteristics that make up a single holistic image.

The linguistic approach focuses on the knowledge of the “Russian language as a key sign of belonging to the *Russian world*” (Ostrovsky, Shchedrovitsky, 2006). Thus, the Russian world is presented as an integral structure consisting of groups speaking the Russian language, while their ethnic, religious, and territorial affiliation is not considered. However, in this case, the question arises about the required level of the Russian language to concern the *Russian world* since this aspect is practically never touched upon either

² Russian politician and public figure, Doctor of Historical Sciences and Chairman of the Board of the Russian World Foundation.

in research papers or the politicians’ speeches, as well as ideologists and supporters of the Russian world.

Even though the *Russian world* is presented as a multinational and multi-confessional community, at present, we cannot ignore the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on the formation of the *Russian world* concept, which is the idea of the unity of the peoples of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, namely Holy Russia. According to this, kinship lies in the unity of the Russian language and culture, the Orthodox faith, history, and common origin. These statements quite often appear in the media space, are used in sermons, including those of Patriarch Kirill, as well as in recent prayer appeals, against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict of 2022 (*братоубийственный конфликт, дарованная Богом общность, близкая и родная Украинская земля, наши воины защищающие нашу землю, люди и народы Святой Руси, наши братья и сестры, на Святую Русь ополчающимся*³) [fratricidal conflict, God-given community, near and dear Ukrainian land, our soldiers defending our land, people and peoples of Holy Russia, our brothers and sisters, taking up arms against Holy Russia].

Thus, considering the *Russian world* as a sociocultural space, we assume it as an integrative field of culture, having boundaries outlined by values and norms and based on the sociocultural, social, and personal interactions of its subjects.

The events of the 2010s brought the *Russian world* concept out of the scope of its intended use since the policy implied and represented a “soft power” eventually turned into a military and political conflict (Laruelle, 2015).

2. The *Russian world* concept in the Modern Information Space against the background of the Geopolitical Conflict 2022

This part presents an analysis of the language means that make up the contexts of the use of the *Russian world* concept. Separately, we will introduce the *Russian world* concept in Russian and Ukrainian media discourses and the features of its functioning.

2.1 *The Russian world* concept in Russian media discourse

As we mentioned earlier, in the second half of the 2000s, the *Russian world* category became firmly established in Russian political and media discourses. The appeal to this concept on the part of the Russian authorities was primarily due to the establishment and maintenance of relations with numerous ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking communities in the post-Soviet space, which, one way or another, feel connected to Russia its history and culture. It required a response and actions from the Russian authorities to maintain an impact throughout the *Russian world*. In addition, a settlement of the language issue was also required since the appeal of local authorities to popularize national languages

³ The material is taken from the information website of the Moscow Patriarchate.

and reduce the functioning of the Russian language was reflected in the above diasporas and contributed to the reduction of Russia's influence in this space.

Besides, the significant role of the Russian language in the post-Soviet area is due to the economic, political, and cultural contacts of the once unified cultural and civilizational space. Constantly in the Russian media, the *Russian world* is presented as a community of people united by their adherence to Russian policy and the Russian diaspora abroad. Still, the most frequent representation of the *Russian world* is based on the Russian language. For example:

ST (1) Тема защиты «русского мира», поддержки русскоязычного населения за границей, конечно, не специфична для России (Mahonin, 2014).

TT (1) The issue of protecting the “Russian world” and supporting the Russian-speaking population abroad, of course, is not precise to Russia.

ST (2) *Беспорной частью Русского мира являются те, кто, выехав из страны в разные исторические периоды, сохранил знание русского языка, а вместе с ним – в разной степени – лояльность и привязанность к России* (Tishkov, 2021).

TT (2) The fundamental part of the Russian world are those who, having left the country in different historical periods, retained knowledge of the Russian language and with it – to varying degrees – loyalty and affection for Russia.

ST (3) *Россия теряет главное – Русский мир. Сухая статистика показывает, что за границей тех, кто может прочесть Пушкина без перевода, становится все меньше и меньше* (Alfimov, 2021).

TT (3) Russia is losing the main thing – the Russian world. Statistics show that there are fewer and fewer people abroad who can read Pushkin without translation.

Thus, the *Russian world* in the political and media discourse of Russia is reflected in the quality, ideology, and way of restoring the sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, as a way to support the Russian diaspora and Russian-speaking communities, and as a whole of management elements and possible further expansion.

However, we are interested in the functioning of the *Russian world* notion against the background of current geopolitical events, namely the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

2.2 The Russian world concept in Ukrainian media discourse

The material for the study, primarily media discourse, was modern Ukrainian bilingual publications from February 24 to April 30, 2022. This time limit is mostly since, at the time of writing, the armed conflict is still ongoing, and this means that we are unable to analyze its usage in dynamics, but our research allows us to determine the emergence of the *Russian world* concept and the contexts of its use at the time of the conflict's early beginning.

At the same time, newspapers were selected following the popularity and variety of discourses. To do this, it was decided to select five of the most popular media, namely from the media rating prepared on the eve of 2022 by specialists from the PRNEWS.IO⁴ content marketing platform.

Thus, five of the most popular bilingual news resources duplicating news texts of the same content in two languages were selected: *TSN.ua*, *Українська правда* (Ukrainska Pravda), «24», *Новое Время* (Novoe Vremya), *Обозреватель* (Obozrevatel).

The total coverage of media resources is more than 600 million views. In this analysis, only Ukrainian media resources are involved. First of all, this is due to the task of the study, namely, to look at the conceptualization of the *Russian world* concept against the backdrop of an armed conflict and an attempt to discover new connotations. The second reason is that since the end of February 2022, strict censorship of the Russian media has begun, up to criminal liability for providing information contrary to the authorities’ actions. Hence, a comparative analysis of the functioning of the *Russian world* concept in Russian and Ukrainian media is currently impossible.

It should be noted that narrow verbal contexts containing the language environment of the studied language unit within the heading or one sentence from the media text were chosen as the research material. The selection was carried out according to the hashtag #русский мир (russkij mir) based on relevance.

The total number of detected uses of the *Russian world* concept is 45. It is substantial to remark that when analyzing its functioning, it is found in the headlines much more often than in the texts of the news articles, namely 30 times.

It may be due to the need to form an image of the event in the addressee’s mind already at the stage of reading the title. These headings are reference points that show the most crucial textual information, namely, the reflection of the consequences of the armed invasion through the prism of the *Russian world* concept.

The discovered examples can be divided into several categories regarding newfound negative connotations.

2.2.1 *The Russian world as a destructive force*

The first category, the most numerous, includes headlines linking the Russian world with “wreckage, destruction of cities, ruin, looting, and destruction of infrastructure”. In this case, it is possible to see an example of homonymy when the *Russian world* concept is understood as one of the meanings of *мир* in the Russian language, as opposed to war. However, in all examples, the emphasis is on the community that, being representatives of the *Russian world* as a sociocultural space, brings destruction.

⁴ In the preparation of the top 20, according to the information provided by the PRNEWS.IO platform, SimilarWeb service data was used, as well as resources from the PRNEWS.IO catalogue – from the section dedicated to news sites. The study period was from January to November 2021.

ST (4) “Русский мир” уничтожает все живое в Луганской области: оккупанты обстреляли Северодонецк, горят 10 домов (Gajdaj, 2022).

TT (4) “Russian world” destroys all living in the Lugansk region: the invaders shelled Severodonetsk, ten houses are on fire.

ST (5) Воронки на дороге, вражеские снаряды: журналисты показали, как выглядит трасса возле Демидова после “русского мира” (Berezhanskij, 2022).

TT (5) Funnels on the road, enemy shells: journalists showed how the track looks like near Demidov after the “Russian world”.

ST (6) Вот такой у нас “русский мир”: Арестович показал разруху в Чернигове и объяснил, как два города спасли Киев (Kurpita, 2022).

TT (6) This is the “Russian world”: Arestovich showed devastation in Chernigov and explained how two cities saved Kyiv.

Similar connotations are widely presented directly and in media texts, establishing the *Russian world* as “demolition of residential buildings, destruction of infrastructure, ruins”. For example:

ST (7) Представители так называемого “русского мира” во время одной из атак разрушили местную церковь (Timchenko, 2022).

TT (7) Representatives of the so-called “Russian world” destroyed the local church during one of the attacks.

ST (8) фото из Google, сделанные до войны, а снизу – страшные последствия прихода “русского мира” (Raguckaya, 2022).

TT (8) photo from Google, taken before the war, and below – the terrible consequences of the arrival of the “Russian world”.

ST (9) После того, как ВСУ отбросили оккупантов, видны ужасающие последствия “русского мира” (Berezhanskij, 2022).

TT (9) After the AFU pushed back the invaders, the horrific consequences of the “Russian world” are visible.

In the examples given, the *Russian world* is used in the context of the consequences of “shelling by artillery, destruction by the army”. That is, it acts as a destructive force leaving behind visible traces.

2.2.2 *The Russian world as violence and death*

The next category, important for defining negative connotations, is the representation of the *Russian world* as “death, murder, injury, rape, mutilation”. Examples include the following headings:

ST (10) “Русский мир” убил в Мариуполе 14-летнюю тяжелоатлетку, чемпионку Украины (Romanenko, 2022).

TT (10) “Russkiy Mir” killed a 14-year-old weightlifter, champion of Ukraine in Mariupol.

ST (11) “*Вот что значит русский мир*”. В Мариуполе оккупанты несколько дней насиловали женщину на глазах у ее шестилетнего сына (Vasilenko, 2022).

TT (11) “That’s what the Russian world means.” In Mariupol, the invaders raped a woman for several days in front of her six-year-old son.

In contrast to the active use of the concept under study in the headlines, its above-mentioned connotations were infrequently reflected in the texts of articles.

ST (12) *Изнасилование, насилие, убийства – вот что значит “русский мир”, – сообщили в Минобороны* (Vasilenko, 2022).

TT (12) Rape, violence, murders – this is what the “Russian world” means, the Ministry of Defense said.

2.2.3 *The Russian world as genocide*

Very rarely, but it is possible to find a parallel between the forthcoming of the *Russian world* and the use of the concept of the *genocide* of the Ukrainian people:

ST (13) “*Это не просто война, это геноцид*”: Шевченко категорично высказался о “русском мире” (Chekanov, 2022).

TT (13) “This is not just a war; this is the genocide”: Shevchenko spoke categorically about the “Russian world”.

ST (14) *но сейчас у меня позиция однозначно отрицательная по отношению к “русскому миру”... – это война против украинского народа, которую ничто не может оправдать* (Chekanov, 2022).

TT (14), but now my position is unequivocally negative regarding the “Russian world” ... – this is a war against the Ukrainian people, which nothing can justify.

Understanding the *Russian world* as a genocide of the Ukrainian people was initially used excessively rarely and mainly as a subjective opinion. However, after the numerous facts of the massacre of civilians and the adoption by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine of the resolution on the commission of genocide by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, mentioning the *Russian world* concept and genocide appears much more often.

2.2.4 *The Russian world as Russian policy*

It should also be noted that the use of the *Russian world* as the original concept of *Russia*, for example, in the headings below, the mention of this notion characterizes precisely “the Russian speakers and the army of Russia”. At the same time, in the examples presented, there is a connection between the Russian world and the Russian speakers, who are presented as the target audience of the ideology of the Russian authorities.

ST (15) *Войны России за последние десятилетия и последствия “русского мира” для стран, куда приходили русские* (Hmelnickaya, 2022).

TT (15) Russia’s wars in recent decades and the consequences of the “Russian world” for the countries where the Russians came.

ST (16) *Для русскоязычных «русский мир» обернулся ужасом* (Vasileva, 2022).

TT (16) For the Russian speakers, the “Russian world” turned into horror.

2.2.5 *The Russian world as “liberators”*

Separately, we would like to note the use of the *Russian world* concept and the lexical unit – *liberators*. It is due primarily to the rhetoric of the Russian authorities, who are trying to present the current geopolitical situation as “a special operation to save people from suffering, from genocide and is the main, main reason, motive, and purpose of the military operation in the Donbas and Ukraine”⁵. Thus, the semantic field of this lexical unit, and the *Russian world* concept, acquire a negative connotation directly opposite to the original meaning. For example:

ST (17) *Но пришел «русский мир», который «освободил» ее от этого будущего...»* (Romanenko, 2022).

TT (17) But the “Russian world” came, which “freed” her from this future ...”

ST (18) *после себя россияне оставили отвратительные следы “русского мира” – руины, воронки, нехватку продовольствия и воспоминания о жестокости “асвабадителей”* (Berezhanskij, 2022).

TT (18) The Russians left disgusting traces of the *Russian world* – “ruins, funnels, a lack of food, and memories of the cruelty” of *asvabaditeli* (liberators).

Of particular interest is the last fragment of the media text where an example of a satirical spelling error is found, namely in “*асвабадумели*” (liberators). We can assume that this technique is used to reflect the antipathy toward the Russian army and their actions.

Conclusion

Thus, media discourse creates and maintains a holistic, detailed picture of the world. The formative property of mass media texts is expressed in their ability to influence the system of assessments and the formation of public opinion, that is, to influence ideologically through repeated repetition and wide dissemination of concepts and stereotypes.

In this work, we had a goal to analyze the semantic potential of the *Russian world* concept. The study made it possible to identify additional semantic nuances and

⁵ The purpose of the special military operation in Ukraine, according to V. Putin, was to free people from genocide, which he stated during a concert in Luzhniki on March 19, 2022, held in honour of the eighth anniversary of Crimea’s entry into the Russian Federation.

connotations that are not included in the existing interpretations but appear in particular contexts.

Consequently, headlines using the *Russian world* concept under study have a high degree of information content. As a result, these headings actualize it and fill with new negatively evaluative semantic components “war, armed invasion, destruction, and death”, which in the addressee’s mind is associated with a large-scale danger. Furthermore, the limited use of this concept directly in the media text, and its inclusion mainly in the headings, may indicate its functioning framework to draw the reader’s attention to the problem and thereby fill the concept with new connotations that are easily guessed.

Thereby, in the modern Ukrainian media discourse against the background of the armed Ukrainian-Russian conflict, there is a tendency to use the concept precisely in the meaning of negative connotations, such as “war, destruction, death”. It can be assumed that this trend will only continue to develop.

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