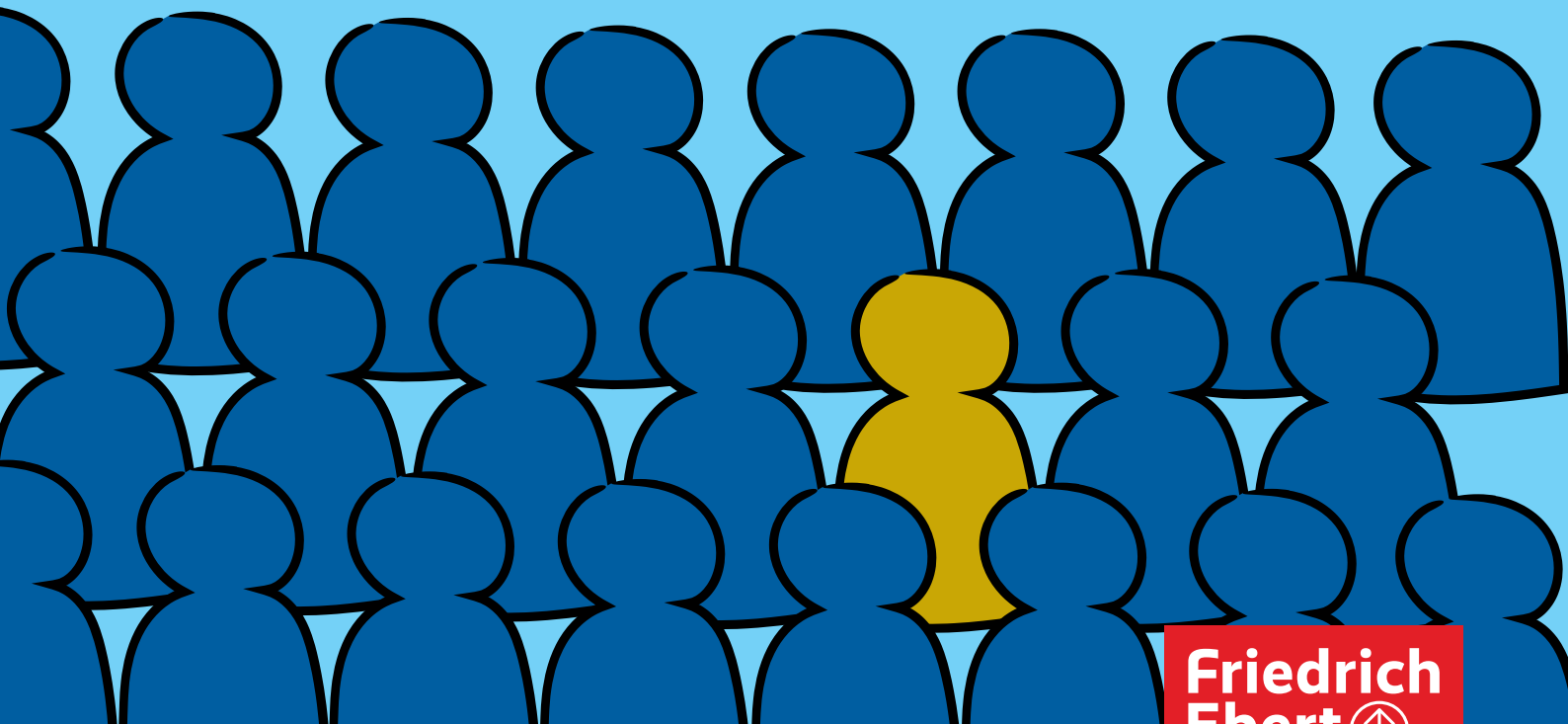


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A New Russia that is not Russian



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A New Russia that is not Russian

According to the principal narrative of Russian propaganda, protecting the Russian population in the Donbas is the central moral imperative that justifies the so-called “special military operation” against Ukraine, at least from the Kremlin’s perspective. According to Vladimir Putin “the goal is to protect people in Ukraine who are part of Russian culture”. In this article, we attempt to analyse the demographic situation in the so-called “new territories” (the occupied territories of Ukraine).

A New Russia that is not Russian

The term *Novorossiia* (“New Russia”) arose after Tsarist Russia’s victory over the Crimean Khanate in the middle of the eighteenth century and the establishment of the *Novorossiyskaya Guberniya* (“New Russia Governorate”). This referred to all the southern territories of today’s Ukraine, from Odesa to Donetsk.

The first population census conducted in the Russian Empire, in 1897, found that the population of the Kharkiv Governorate was 80 per cent Ukrainian and 18 per cent Russian; that of the Yekaterinoslav Governorate (today’s Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia regions) 69 per cent Ukrainian and 17 per cent Russian; the Taurida Governorate (Melitopol, Berdyansk and the left bank of today’s Kherson region, excluding Crimea) comprised 60 per cent Ukrainians, 25 per cent Russians and 4 per cent Jews. While in Crimea, 36 per cent of the population were Crimean Tatars, 33 per cent Russians, 12 per cent Ukrainians, 6 per cent Germans and 4 per cent Jews.

In the Bakhmut District (which included Donetsk), Ukrainians made up 58 per cent of the population and Russians 31 per cent. In the Mariupol District, 46 per cent were Ukrainians, 19 per cent Greeks and 14 per cent Russians. In the Taganrog District, 61 per cent were Ukrainians and 31 per cent were Russians (this was later divided between the RSFSR and the USSR). In the Slavyanoserbsk District (today’s Luhansk and its surroundings), 50 per cent were Ukrainians and 45 per cent Russians.¹

In other words, there has never been an ethnic “Russian New Russia”.

In the twentieth century the proportion of Russians increased in the population of these areas. This was because

of the massive resettlement of industrial workers and the partial russification of Ukraine. Nevertheless, according to the census of 1989, in all regions – with the exception of Crimea – Ukrainians continued to make up the majority over Russians.

For example, in the Luhansk region (then known as Voroshilov), 51.9 per cent of the population were Ukrainians and 44.8 per cent were Russians; in the Donetsk region, the figures were 50.7 per cent and 43.6 per cent, respectively; in the Kherson region, 75.8 per cent were Ukrainians and 20.1 per cent Russians; in the Zaporizhzhia region, 63.1 per cent and 23 per cent; and in the Odessa region, 54.6 per cent were Ukrainians and 27.4 per cent Russians. As for Crimea, the number of Russians there already exceeded that of Ukrainians by a factor of three during the Tsarist era, and this ratio remained unchanged until the collapse of the Soviet Union: 67 per cent Russians versus 25.7 per cent Ukrainians.

Despite the contemporary narrative pushed by Russian propaganda concerning an alleged “Ukrainisation” in the Soviet period, the proportion of Russians in Ukraine rose from 9 per cent in 1926 to 22 per cent in 1989, while the proportion of Ukrainians fell from 80 per cent to 73 per cent.²

After Ukraine gained independence the situation changed. The proportion of Ukrainians began to rise once again. In the Luhansk region it rose to 58 per cent, in Donetsk to 57 per cent, in Kherson to 82 per cent, in Zaporizhzhia to 71 per cent and in Odesa to 63 per cent. These figures come from the 2001 census, the last census conducted to date.

At the same time, up to half of the respondents who identified as Ukrainian cited Russian as their native language. This means that for many people who identify as Ukrainian, it is not their language but their ethnic identity that is decisive, similar to the Irish or Americans, who speak English but certainly do not see themselves as “English”. This explains the widespread Russification in Ukraine. In 2020, 64 per cent of theatre performances in Odesa were staged in Russian, 63 per cent in Kharkiv, 60 per cent in the Donetsk region, and 30 per cent in Zaporizhzhia. In Kyiv, there were nearly 1,200 theatre performances in Russian. Even ceremonial events in the Donbas continued to be held in Russian until the start of the war. There are numerous videos online from the 450th anniversary

¹ Итоги переписей/ Census Results, <https://www.statmuseum.ru/ru/results/>.

² Ibid.

of Bakhmut, the city festival in Vovchansk, or the Victory Day celebrations on 9 May in Mariupol, at which the official speakers addressed the crowd in Russian.

The situation in the eastern parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions was unusual. Before the October Revolution (1917) these areas belonged to the so-called Don-Host Oblast, a territory settled by Russian Cossacks and attached to the Donetsk region only in the Soviet period. Historically, Russians made up the majority in this region. However, this makes up only a narrow strip of land bordering the Rostov region, extending barely 50 km from the border.

How many Russians live in Ukraine?

In 1989, 22 per cent of the inhabitants of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) identified as Russian. This proportion fell after Ukraine gained independence, standing at 17.3 per cent (8.3 million people) at the time of the 2001 census. The proportion was even lower among those under 40 years of age, standing at around 14.7 per cent.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 reduced the number of Russians in Ukraine by 1.5 million, and the imposition of the so-called People's Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk ("DNR" and "LNR") by at least another 2 million.³

In tandem with this, the population of Ukraine itself fell as a consequence of high mortality and emigration. The estimate of renowned research institute the Rating Group⁴ according to which around 2.7 million Russians – around 8 per cent of the population – were living in Ukraine in 2021 thus seems realistic.

A collapse in the birth rate

Birth rates plunged dramatically in the so-called "Russian Donbass" following its de facto complete annexation in 2014. The war Putin launched in 2022 on the pretence of "protecting" the Russians made this region a textbook example of demographic ruin.

The region of Luhansk

Some 20,531 children were born here in 2013, when peace still prevailed.⁵ After the imposition of the so-called "People's Republic of Luhansk" the birth rate had fallen to

8,379 children by 2021.⁶ By comparison, 13,024 children were born in this region even at the height of the Second World War. The obvious inference is that conditions were thus even worse than during that bloody conflict.⁷ Even according to the official data of the "LNR" the birth rate up to 2021 had fallen to 3.5 per 1,000 inhabitants; in other words, just over a third of the Russian average of 9.5.⁸

If anything, the outbreak of the war "to protect the Russians in the Donbass" made this already catastrophic situation even worse. In 2024 only 4,963 children were born in the region of Luhansk.⁹

Absorption into the "Russkii Mir" (Russian World) lowered the Russian birth rate to a quarter of its previous level. In Luhansk region today it stands at only a ninth of the mortality rate.

The region of Donetsk

In 2013 41,031 children were born in the region of Donetsk. By 2021 this had fallen to only 18,203, and that is in the entire territory, including the areas under the control of Ukraine, as well as the so-called "People's Republic of Donetsk" ("DNR"). In 1944, by stark contrast, 31,348 children were born here. That means that, as in the case of Luhansk, the birth rate among the Russian-speaking population has fallen to a level even below that of the post-War period. As might have been expected, the situation has continued to deteriorate since the beginning of the war: in 2024 only 9,081 children were born.

In the region of Donetsk within ten years the birth rate has plummeted to below a quarter of its former level, and today stands at only a fifth of the mortality rate.

Comparisons

Birth rates have also fallen in other regions, but much less dramatically. For example, the birth rate in Donetsk fell by 56 per cent between 2014 and 2021 and by 59 per cent in Luhansk over the same period, but for example in the region of Odesa the figure is "only" 34 per cent. The difference between the areas invaded in 2014 and the rest of Ukraine is all too evident.

Crimea represents a special case in this context. Between 2014 and 2021 the birth rate there fell by only 25 per cent. In this instance, however, it has to be taken into account

³ Население Донецкой Народной Республики – Рувики: Интернет-энциклопедия / Population of the People's Republic of Donetsk – Ruwiki: online encyclopedia, https://ru.ruwiki.ru/wiki/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%B%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%94%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%86%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9_%D0%A0%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%B%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8.

⁴ Research as the base for system solutions, 04.2022, https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_ua_1000_ideological_markers_ua_042022_press.pdf.

⁵ All-Ukrainian population census, Table 3.1 / Таблица: 3.1. Народжуваність (0,1).

⁶ Demographic news and thoughts, Telegram: View @RakshaDemography.

⁷ Demographic indicators of the USSR, Natural population change in the regions of the Soviet Republics (excluding the RSFSR), 1933–1976 / Демоскоп Weekly – Приложение. Справочник статистических показателей.

⁸ «Региональная программа Луганской народной республики по борьбе с сахарным диабетом на 2023–2025 годы», лист 3 (Luhansk People's Republic Regional Programme for the Prevention and Control of Diabetes Mellitus for 2023–2025), Gazette 3, 72_24.pdf

⁹ LNR Registry Offices in the First 11 Months, Органы записи актов гражданского состояния (ЗАГС) ЛНР за 11 месяцев... | Луганская Народная Республика (ЛНР) | Дзєн.

that around 350,000 people moved to the peninsula from Russia during this period, while around 260,000 natives left. With a total population of 1.8 million in 2014 this clearly indicates major changes in the population structure, with the increasing replacement of residents from the Ukrainian period with new ones.

Changing birth rates after the outbreak of war

As already mentioned, since the beginning of the war birth rates have fallen by 41.3 per cent in the region of Donetsk and by 24 per cent in the region of Luhansk.

Similar developments can be observed in other areas deemed to have been “liberated” by the Kremlin.

In southern Zaporizhzhia around 5,000 births were registered before the invasion; in 2024 this was down to 2,040, a fall of 58 per cent.¹⁰

In the so-called “Left-bank” part of the Kherson region, 3,490 children were born in 2021, that is, before its absorption by the Russian Federation;¹¹ by 2024, the number had fallen to just 876, a 70 per cent decline.¹²

Population shrinkage in the Donbass and in “New Russia”

The Telegram channel Art_insides, which conducts precise analyses of comprehensive population data from the east and south of Ukraine, reports on the situation in 2024, drawing on official Russian and Ukrainian sources.¹³

Some 314,000 people lived in the part of Donetsk region controlled by Ukraine. Around 1.85 million lived in the “DNR”, making a total of 2.164 million. In 2013, by contrast, the region still had 4.362 million inhabitants. This means that the population has halved.

The population of the “People’s Republic of Luhansk” (“LNR”) totalled 1.36 million people (a mere 45 persons lived in the territory controlled by Ukraine), in contrast to a figure of 2.25 million in 2013; this represents a fall in the number of inhabitants of 45 per cent.

In 2021, 1 million people lived in the region of Kherson. This has plummeted to 390,000 today, 230,000 of whom live in the zone controlled by Russia, a fall in population of at least 60 per cent.

The region of Zaporizhzhia was once inhabited by 1.65 million people, compared with 1.25 million today, 460,000 of them in the zone under Russian control. That represents a fall of 25 per cent.¹⁴ These figures are confirmed indirectly by information from the Russian Interior Ministry. In March 2025 the Ministry announced that a total of 3.5 million citizens of Ukraine from the “new territories” had been issued Russian passports. If one includes the number of children one gets reaches a total population of 3.9 million for the “new territories” mentioned above.¹⁵ It must be taken into account, however, that some of the “inhabitants of the Russian regions the People’s Republic of Donetsk, the People’s Republic of Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson” were not issued passports in their form place of residence, but rather as refugees relocated to Russia.

The number of people involved can be discerned from data from the Russian Finance Ministry. Russia grants “new compatriots” one-off support of 10,000 roubles, which is basically 100 euros. This one-off cash payment was disbursed to 1.037 million people in 2022 and to another 156,000 in 2023, making a total of 1.203 million. This figure is in line with UN estimates.¹⁶

Naturally, some of these people were unable to settle permanently in their new place of residence and returned to cities such as Berdyansk and Melitopol, which were only minimally affected by the war. Some remained in Russia, however. Thus the actual number of people who left the “new territories” is at least half a million people higher than the figures given above.

The destruction of cities

Those inhabitants who did not leave their cities in good time were in danger of being killed or seriously injured. Denis Pushilin, head of the People’s Republic of Donetsk, has stated that estimates of 5,000 dead civilians in Mariupol were “too conservative”.¹⁷ However, this exceeds the number of casualties cited by the UN for the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk together.¹⁸

A large proportion of towns and villages have simply been razed to the ground. For example, Bakhmut has been

¹⁰ Головне управління статистики у Запорізькій області / Main Office of Statistics in Zaporozhia, <https://www.zp.ukrstat.gov.ua/index.php/statystychna-informatsiia>.

¹¹ Головне управління статистики у Херсонській області / Main Office of Statistics in Kherson, <https://www.ks.ukrstat.gov.ua/demografichna-ta-sotsialnaya-politika/naselennya-ta-migratsiya/2498-dani-za-period-z-pochatku-roku.html>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ К вопросу о последних данных рождаемости/ смертности и оценке населения территорий / On the matter of the latest data on birth and death rates and population estimates for the regions, https://t.me/art_insides0/2741.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Паспортизация жителей Донбасса и Новороссии полностью завершена в прошлом году – Путин, Город 24, 5.03.2025 / The issuance of passports to residents of Donbass and New Russia was fully completed last year – Putin, Gorod 24, 5.03.2025.

¹⁶ «Вернёмся домой только с российской армией». Как живут приехавшие в Россию беженцы из Украины | Украина.ру | Дзен, 28.12.2023 / “We’ll only go home with the Russian army.” How people who have fled Ukraine to Russia are living | Ukraina.ru | Zen, 28.12.2023.

¹⁷ Пушилин назвал скромными оценки о 5 тысячах погибших в Мариуполе – РБК, 11.04.2022 / Pushilin described the estimates of 5,000 deaths in Mariupol as conservative – RBK, 11.04.2022.

¹⁸ Подтвержденные данные ООН: за год полномасштабного вторжения РФ в Украину погибли более 8000 мирных жителей, RFI, 22.02.2023 / Confirmed UN data: over 8,000 civilians have been killed in the year since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, RFI, 22 February 2023, RFI, 22.02.2023.

80 per cent destroyed, while the town of Marinka has been annihilated – not a single building remains.

This also affects many places close to the frontline. In Lyman, for example, which lies only 10 km from Russian positions, all 236 residential buildings have been damaged.¹⁹

“The town of Krasnohorivka is a ghost town – every business is closed, the mine is flooded, there’s nobody there. The sole remaining resident was permitted to pass the checkpoint to retrieve his things. Would it even make sense to rebuild such towns?” Pushilin’s rhetorical question inadvertently gives a good idea of what Russia has given the Russian-speaking residents of the Donbass.²⁰

Russia has little intention of reconstructing such towns. It would make no economic sense.

Within the context of widespread devastation those few towns that saw relatively little fighting at the start of the war form an exception. But even there the situation is far from the one Lavrov and Nebenzya have tried to portray at the UN.

For example, although the population of Melitopol has even increased slightly – from 150,000 to 156,000²¹ – Russian media reports that up to 50,000 locals have left the city. Their dwellings have been occupied by Russian soldiers and administrators.²²

According to the estimate of the Russia appointed mayor of Berdyansk at least 10 per cent of the inhabitants have left because they are against the occupation.²³

In the region of Zaporizhzhia a decree remained in force for over a year that provided for the expulsion of pro-Ukraine inhabitants and the confiscation of their property. The decree was later repealed, on the grounds that in future such persons should be apprehended and imprisoned, to be used as part of an “exchange pool” for the purpose of prisoner exchanges.²⁴ Ukraine estimates the number of ci-

vilians being held in prison at around 14,000, which is about 1.5 per cent of the population of the occupied territories.²⁵ After the front stabilised in autumn 2022 combat operations consisted mainly of systematic efforts to break through lines of defence and the depopulation of the relevant territories continued. While a large part of the population remains in the towns and villages held by Ukrainian forces, the towns and villages that have come under Russian control amount to little more than abandoned ruins.

To take only a few illustrative examples:

Vuhledar – 107 inhabitants, a mere 0.8 per cent of the 2021 population (14,144), the town is now under the control of Russian forces.

Bakhmut – 500 inhabitants, 0.7 per cent of the 2021 population (71,094), town now under the control of Russian forces.

Toretsk – 48 inhabitants, 0.15 per cent of the population in 2021 (30,914), town now under the control of Russian forces.

Vovchansk – 35 inhabitants, 0.2 per cent of the population in 2021 (17,459), town now under siege.

Soledar – 1 inhabitant, in 2021 10,490 people lived here, the town is now under the control of Russian forces.

Marinka – 0 inhabitants, in 2021 the town had 9,089 inhabitants, the town is now under the control of Russian forces.²⁶

The areas that the Kremlin refers to as “historical Russian territory” were in reality never that. Although native Ukrainians habitually spoke Russian they clearly identified as Ukrainians.

Because of the “Russian Spring” and Kremlin propaganda about the “defence of Russians” 4.1 million people have lost their homes, around 40 per cent of the population. No more than 1.2 million of them decided to resettle in Russia, while the other 2.9 million were forced to flee to Europe and other parts of Ukraine before the onset of the “Russkii Mir”.

There has even been a massive exodus even in towns not directly involved in the fighting. According to Russian figures, for example, around a third of its inhabitants have left Melitopol, even though the proportion of the Russian speaking population there was 80 per cent before the war.

¹⁹ Три гілочки зелені, буде мамі свято. Прифронтовий Лиман зустріне новий рік без водопостачання та опалення: репортаж, Суспільне Донбас, <https://susplne.media/donbas/910977-tri-gilocki-zeleni-bude-mami-svato-prifrontovij-liman-zustrine-novij-rik-bez-vodopostacanna-ta-opalenna-reportaz/> / “Three green branches – it will be a celebration for Mom.” The town of Lyman, located near the front line, will ring in the New Year without water or heat: Report, Susplne Donbass.

²⁰ «Восстанавливать Донбасс нецелесообразно. Землю там раздадим военным РФ» Пушилин раскрыл планы РФ / “Rebuilding the Donbas doesn’t make sense. We will distribute the land there among Russian soldiers” – Pushilin reveals Russia’s plans.

²¹ Население Мелитополя, численность в 2025 и 2024 | BDEX / Population of Melitopol, number of inhabitants 2025 and 2024 | BDEX.

²² Город ждунов. Почему Мелитополь стал небезопасен – Минская правда, 23.07.2024 / The city of those who wait. Why Melitopol has become unsafe – Minskaya Pravda, 23.07.2024.

²³ Мэр Бердянска Александр Сауленко о возрождении города и о том, куда россиянам ехать на отдых – 29.03.2023 Украина.ру / Mayor of Berdyansk, Alexander Saulenko, on the revival of the town and where Russians can go on holiday – 29.03.2023, Ukraina.ru.

²⁴ В Запорожской области отменили выдворение за «антироссийские действия» – РБК, 08.05.2023 / In the region of Zaporizhzhia, deportation for “anti-Russian actions” has been lifted – RBK, 08.05.2023.

²⁵ Россия держит в плену более 14 тысяч гражданских украинцев – омбудсмен Лубинец, Крым Реалии / Russia is holding over 14,000 Ukrainian civilians captive – Ombudsman Lubinets, Krym Realii.

²⁶ Население городов, где идут/шли боевые действия (бои в городе или возле него) 2023-2025 гг по заявлениям местных властей. / Population of cities where combat operations took place or are taking place (urban combat or combat in the vicinity) between 2023 and 2025, according to the local authorities, 5.01.2025, Telegram: View @art_insidest0.

Since the so-called “Russian Spring” the birth rate has fallen to a fifth of its previous level and now stands, depending on the region, at only between a fifth and one ninth of the mortality rate.

Overall, the situation in Ukraine after the war, as it must end sooner or later, appears likely to be catastrophic. However, the “Russian Donbass” in its previous form has been destroyed forever by the onset of the “Russian World”. Given general demographic change population figures in these areas will never recover. The devastated towns and villages will remain for generations a memorial to the price the “Russian World” has exacted.

A New Russia that is not Russian

Russian propaganda has tried to offer as justification for the war the protection of an alleged »Russian population« in the occupied areas of Ukraine. Historical and contemporary data provide a different picture, however. In almost all the so-called »new territories« – also labelled »Novorossiya« by the Kremlin – ethnic Ukrainians have always made up the majority. Even in regions in which the Russian language was dominant the population identified overwhelmingly as Ukrainian. In fact, there has never been an ethnic Russian and Russian speaking »Novorossiya«. The war has inflicted widespread destruction on these areas, as well as massive depopulation and a dramatic fall in birth rates. Whole cities have been depopulated or devastated. Demographic developments indicate that these regions are not undergoing reconstruction, but rather are in an accelerated state of decline as a result of the occupation policy.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

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