

To be or not to be: Territory in Ukraine

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Ukrainian tank

[Referendums](#) have begun in four Russian-held or partially held territories of Ukraine. Similar to the annexation of Crimea, critics and experts believe this use of staged votes is to provide a credible reason to annex parts of Ukraine. To better understand these developments, we can use the concept of territory.

[Territory](#) can be defined as a bounded space or area where an entity has sovereignty. Territorialization, or the creation of a territory, involves the formation of boundaries, in which a governing body controls everything inside. In this case, Russia seeks to deterritorialize, or break up, Ukrainian territory. Deterritorialization is closely tied to annexation, the process in which an entity declares sovereignty over territory outside its own, often through force. In an effort to look credible, a referendum is taking place in each of these four Russian-controlled regions on whether citizens of Ukraine want to be annexed by their invading neighbor. Russia has avoided using the word annexation due to its negative connotation, which historically has involved military occupation, condemned in the charter of the United Nations. Instead, Russia is asking if citizens of Ukraine want to secede and enter the Russian Federation. The referenda are essentially illegitimate because, according to officials in Ukraine, over half the pre-war population has fled the territories where the votes are taking place. Additionally, it is unlikely that the final verdict holds much meaning. Russia's history of voter fraud and intimidation stains an already dubious vote. However, when the vote likely comes out in support of joining Russia, Putin will have more justification to intensify the conflict with more advanced weapons and

men. Indeed, Putin's announcement of a [partial draft](#), consisting of 300,000 reservists, points to an escalation, not de-escalation, of the war.

The concept of territory identifies the multi-faceted nature of this conflict through the idea that territory is continuously being contested. A territories creation in no way makes it immune to future offensives or intimidation. In its short time as a state, Ukraine has a history of being contested and reveals the delicate balance a country must maintain with its neighbors and the international community.