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Russia and Europe in memory wars

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Summary

The West European consensus on a “cosmopolitan” approach to memory politics, dominant until the beginning of the 21st century, has gradually been replaced by a more antagonistic approach to memory, typical of the countries of Eastern Europe. Also Russian memory politics have been primarily reactive and opportunistic, with Russia picking up on and adopting many regrettable elements of history politics found in Eastern Europe. By early 2009 several key elements of “historical politics” were evident in Russian practices: (1) the attempt to introduce a standardized history textbook sanctioned by the state; (2) specialized politically engaged institutions that combined organizing historical research with control over archives and publications; and (3) the attempt to regulate interpretations of history through legislation. The year 2012 saw the creation of two huge NGOs directly controlled by the Kremlin—the Russian Historical Society, and the Russian Military-Historical Society. In 2014, the State Duma passed the “Yarovaya Law” (*Federal Law N 128-FZ 2014*; Sherlock 2016) featuring all the negative aspects of Eastern European memory laws. Also Russia, following East European countries, has “securitized” memory politics, viewing discussions on history and collective identity through the lens of national security threats. How did all this come about? Is there a way out of this situation? In order to answer these questions, this NUPI Report enquires into the dynamics of memory politics in Europe, and then takes a closer look at Russian memory politics.

Russia and Europe in memory wars

Memory politics in Europe

In the immediate post-war period, memory politics in non-Communist Western and Communist Eastern Europe were kept isolated from each other. Then, from the 1960s and until the 1990s, Western European countries gradually established a kind of consensus on the past, based on recognition of the Holocaust as the central event of the 20th century, unprecedented in history. This consensus sought to emphasize the common responsibility of *all* Europeans for the dark chapters of the past century, vital to the attempt at keeping the Western part of Europe almost clear of any historical narrative that singled out any given nation. This also made it impossible to demand preferential treatment with reference to past sufferings. The focus was on the responsibility of all Europe, and on measures necessary to avoid new crimes and atrocities like the Holocaust. The approach was normative; it can be described as a *cosmopolitan and unified memory regime* (Kubik and Bernhard 2014; Cento Bull and Hansen 2016). Discussion of the past was meant to bring consensus through dialog. In international relations, this approach called for the development of a common narrative of the past. In a certain sense, collective memory was seen as a space where the *political*, with its inherent conflicts, could be overcome.

In part, the “old” EU countries were able to reach this consensus because of their political and economic successes in the closing decades of the 20th century. With their future looking bright, and the global leadership of the EU, at least in “soft” power and in the economic sphere, Europeans could now more readily admit the need to repent for their past sins.

After the collapse of socialism, the Eastern European countries were free to build their narratives as they saw fit. (The exception was the GDR, which was absorbed by the German Federal Republic and had to adapt its narratives.) Over the past 25 years, the previously isolated memory cultures of Western and Eastern Europe have begun to interact. Eastern Europe’s history politics, which focused on the suffering of its own peoples, came to reproach the West for betraying small nations that had been “kidnapped” by the Communist regime in Moscow.

Russia as a source of threat became a key element of the new narratives. This had roots in the Cold War period—but, even more importantly, it is deeply rooted in the European cultural tradition. The perception of Russia as a “barbarian at the gate” has dominated European thinking for the past three centuries, occasionally interspersed with the view of Russia as “an eternal apprentice” (but the two perceptions were generally blended). Even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, key elements of this discourse changed very little. “There is no use talking about the end of an East/West divide in European history after the end of the Cold War. The question is not whether the East will be used in the forging of new European identities, but how this is being done,” as Iver Neumann rightly noted (1999).

In the 21st century, the interaction of the Western and Eastern European memory cultures has led to a radical transformation of the European memory regime as a whole. The Eastern European model, with its focus on the sufferings of its nations and the existential threat, has prevailed over the Western European one dominated by critical patriotism and feelings of one’s own responsibility. In part, this has come about because Western European elites, for various reasons, did not consider it necessary to confront the new EU members over issues of historical policy. Another reason is that the prevailing self-confidence and faith in the success of the EU as an integration project have been shaken in the “old Europe” over the past ten years. As a result, the collective memory and identity-building mechanisms characteristic of Eastern Europe have prevailed in Western European understandings of the growing tensions between Russia and its neighbors. As put by Ferenc Laczó, a Hungarian scholar based in the Netherlands:

Through the canonization of the theory of twin – Nazi and Soviet – totalitarianisms in particular, CEE representatives and their allies have managed to dethrone the anti-fascist consensus that was so characteristic of the Western European mainstream until the early 21st century and reshape the European Union’s understanding of the recent past. As a consequence of European enlargement and the “CEE factor,” there is currently ambiguity and much oscillation at the heart of the European Union’s historical policy. Official declarations assert the uniqueness of fascist crimes and more particularly, the Holocaust, while they simultaneously equate the totalitarian evils of Nazism and Soviet communism (Laczó 2019).

It was not only the narrative that underwent change: the very understanding of the nature of collective memory was also challenged

and altered. The German perspective which took shape in the late 1980s and has since become normative in many other countries (including Russia in the 1990s) put the focus on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the struggle to overcome the past) and *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (reappraising the past). The term *Geschichtspolitik*, coined during the West German *Historikerstreit* of the late 1980s, had negative connotations and stressed that the domain of collective memory should be free from intervention on the part of politicians. Upon joining the EU in 2004, most of the new members openly proclaimed a new approach to memory politics. They reconceptualized the term *historical politics* as a positive concept, reflecting the political nature of the domain of collective memory (Cichocka 2004; Cichocki 2005; Kosiewski 2006).

Ivan Krastev and Steven Holmes (2018) argue that, while waiting to be allowed into the EU fold, the East European countries merely pretended to accept the “cosmopolitan” consensus of Western Europe. However, since 2004, the impact of East European countries has become an important factor within the EU. The “cosmopolitan” approach to memory was gradually replaced by an “antagonistic” approach, typical of Poland, the Baltic states and recently also Ukraine and Moldova. From being the space where the *political* had to be overcome, memory became a space for *memory politics* or *political use of memory* (Feindt et al. 2014). Memory was securitized with a focus on the Constitutive, Dangerous Other—that is, totalitarianism, and its current embodiment in the Russian Federation. As is clear from the Resolution adopted by the European Parliament on September 19, 2019, this external threat has been now directly linked to the internal threat of “all kinds of populism” alleged to exist, due largely to support from Moscow (*European Parliament* 2019).

Memory politics in Russia

The initial trend in Russian politics of memory in late 1980s and in early 1990s was towards recognition of Soviet crimes against Soviet subjects and neighbors. Gorbachev made public the original text of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, including the secret protocols, and declared them a criminal act. In 1989 the Supreme Soviet of the USSR recognized the annexation of the Baltic states in 1940 as occupation and condemned it. The Katyn extermination of Polish officers was also recognized as a Soviet crime. Russians saw themselves as the victims of the Communist

rule, together with people of other nationalities. Thus, the recognition and condemnation of Soviet-era crimes was not seen in Russia as the beginning of a long story of one-sided penitence “German style,” but as the way to mutual rapprochement and common sorrow with other peoples who had also suffered from the crimes of the Communist regime. Moreover, Russians wanted to see the collapse of the Communist rule as their victory, not as their defeat in the Cold War. The assessment of 20th century history forged in this period was reflected—with some distinct but not major differences—in school textbooks. These described the Soviet regime as totalitarian and mentioned many of its crimes—without belittling in any way the achievements of the Soviet era or “the heroism of the Soviet people at work or on the frontlines.”

Russians soon discovered that their neighbors tended to conflate Communist rule with Russian rule, seeing the Soviet Union as the re-embodiment of the Russian Empire, and with post-Soviet Russia as the main threat to their security. The pro-Western sector of the Russian public argued that those unfortunate misperceptions would fade away as soon as the new states began to feel secure, having joined NATO and the EU. Russian nationalists reactivated their attempts to present Communism as the work of anti-Russian forces and Russians as its main victims. But this approach failed to gain much support in the 1990s. After Yeltsin’s attempt to put the CPSU on trial in 1992/93 was met with public indifference (Materialy 1996-1998) the first President of Russia practically left history to the historians. Russian officials very rarely referred to historical issues in their public speeches (Malinova 2011).

Until the early 2000s Russia had no state or non-government institutions that dealt with memory politics, except Memorial, which enjoyed modest support from the state in commemorations of the victims of political repressions. Memorial managed to install the Solovki Stone to commemorate victims of Stalinist terror in front of the KGB building in Lubyanka Square in Moscow, and approximately 800 memorials and memorial signs were created around the country to mark places of Soviet-era executions and mass burials, many with the help of local Memorial organizations. Probably the biggest player in the field of memory politics in the 1990s was the Russian office of the Open Society Institute, which funded the preparation of textbooks, translations of Western books, and local research in history.

From the very beginning, the presidency of Vladimir Putin was marked by state activism in the politics of memory. First, Putin solved the central issue of state symbols, which had remained a bone of contention since 1991. He began by establishing the tricolor as the official flag of Russia, with support of the liberal wing of the State Duma and against vigorous opposition of Communists. Thereafter, he switched sides in order to reinstate the old Soviet anthem (with new lyrics) as the state anthem of Russia (Miller 2012).

In 2003 Putin met with a group of historians to discuss the need to put end to the period of hyper-critical representation of the Soviet past (Kremlin.ru 2003). However, no practical steps were taken regarding memory politics before 2004. The Kremlin became much more active after the first Maidan in Kiev in 2004, and after the Moscow-hostile Law and Justice Party of the Kaczynski brothers won the parliamentary and then the presidential elections in Poland in 2005. There were proposals to establish an Institute of National Remembrance, similar to that in Poland (Shwed 2008). Instead, the authorities opted for an alternative organizational solution: they created a range of NGOs that came to play a leading role in developing memory wars, focusing on the issues problematic for the neighbors—mainly participation in the Holocaust, but also other instances of collaboration with Nazi Germany. The most visible among those NGOs is the foundation “Historical Memory,” fully operational since 2008. It has now published over 60 books, and in 2017 it launched its own *Journal of Russian and East-European Historical Studies* (Istoricheskaya pamyat’ n.d.).

In 2004/05 the Presidential Administration initiated the preparation of a new school textbook, intended as a “response” to the memory politics of Russia’s neighbors. This new textbook discarded the official position of the late 1980s–early 1990s, and re-interpreted Soviet–German relations in 1939, Katyn and the famine of 1932–33 in a way which was a clear reaction to the challenge posed by memory politics in Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. The textbook repudiated the scientific value of the concept of totalitarianism and rejected Ukrainian claims that the famine of 1932–33 was genocide, as well as attempts to interpret as genocide the Katyn shootings of the Polish officers and Soviet deportations from the Baltic states.

Interestingly, the same Presidential Administration also funded the preparation of a strongly anti-Communist textbook. Initially the project was to be developed under the patronage of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. But, having seen the draft and being appalled at its low quality, Solzhenitsyn withdrew. Plans for a textbook were dropped; the resulting book was issued as a collective monograph (Zubov 2009). The logical conclusion here is that the Kremlin was totally opportunistic in its views on memory politics—it was prepared to use a strategy of negation or a narrative condemning Communist crimes, depending on political expediency.

The escalation of anti-Russian motives in the memory politics of the Baltic states, the Law and Justice party in Poland, and the administration of Victor Yushchenko in Ukraine became particularly apparent in connection with celebrations of the anniversary of the end of World War II in 2005, when some former Communist countries refused to send delegations to the May 9 commemoration in Moscow. All the countries of Eastern Europe undertook a simple and rather fraudulent operation of “excluding” Communism from their national history as being “totally alien” to national tradition. That entailed the total export of responsibility to Russia and the rejection of any achievements of the Communist period. In Russia such a move was impossible, because of the central place in the national historical mythology accorded to “Victory” in World War II—which lacks analogies in any neighboring countries, except Belarus and south-eastern Ukraine. Russian reactions to the boycott of the May 9 celebrations in Moscow became very aggressive. The press was full of angry articles about Poland and the Baltic states, and demonstrations were organized in front of their embassies in Moscow. With Putin’s Munich speech in 2007, and the Russian–Georgian military conflict in 2008, it was obvious that memory politics in Russia were set to intensify.

Indeed, in May 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev signed a decree establishing a presidential commission on fighting historical falsification (Kremlin.ru 2009). This decision was accompanied by a press campaign which described discussions about the Soviet role in WWII as a clash between patriots and traitors, in which the “traitors” would have to be silenced and punished. Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu, one of the leaders of the ruling United Russia Party, was

the first to speak out about the need to pass a law threatening criminal prosecution for “incorrect” remarks about World War II and the Soviet Union’s role in that war. Two bills pursuant to this idea were soon submitted to the Russian parliament (News.ru 2009). Thus, by early 2009 several key elements of “historical politics” were evident in Russian practices. First, there was the attempt to introduce a standardized history textbook sanctioned by the state. Second, there were specialized politically engaged institutions that combined the tasks of organizing historical research with control over archives and publications. And third, an attempt was made to regulate interpretations of history through legislation.

However, later in 2009, the international context changed. After the Civic Platform won the parliamentary elections in Poland, Russian Prime Minister Putin became, *ex officio*, the main partner for Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in developing political dialog. The Russian political leadership reacted immediately to the new circumstances by re-tailoring its memory politics. Putin visited Westerplatte, the symbol of the Polish Army’s resistance to Nazi invasion, together with European leaders on September 1, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the beginning of World War II. This was a significant event for bilateral relations, as September links in with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact (signed in late August 1939) and the Soviet invasion of Poland on September 17 that year. Putin offered an unexpectedly constructive approach in an article titled “Pages of History: A Pretext for Reciprocal Claims or a Basis for Reconciliation and Partnership?”, published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland’s leading newspaper, on the eve of his visit to Poland (Putin 2009). Further, he gave a reconciliatory speech at Westerplatte, unequivocally denouncing the Soviet–German treaty of 1939 but insisting that it was only a small part of a larger picture in which responsibility for appeasement lay also with the leading Western powers. Also constructive was the speech held by Tusk, who stated that in 1945 the Soviet soldiers had saved Europe from Nazism, but could not bring freedom as they were not free themselves.

In October 2009, speaking on his official video-blog, President Medvedev condemned the logic according to which “numerous victims could be justified with some superior state goals.” He said that

repressions can't be justified [...] We pay much attention to the fight against falsification of our history. But for some strange reason we think that it concerns only the attempts to revise the results of the Great Patriotic War. But no less important is to prevent acquittal of those who killed their own people (Medvedev 2009).

These words clearly signaled the wish of Medvedev to change the line of history politics which sought to normalize Stalinism. On April 7, 2010, Tusk and Putin met in Katyn to commemorate the Polish officers who had been shot there in 1940. Putin called this event a “crime of a totalitarian regime,” and fell on his knees at the monument to the Polish officers (Miller 2012).

Russian–Ukrainian relations also changed considerably in 2010. The new Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich and his team sought to remove the elements of history politics that Russia found especially irritating. Also Moscow was ready to ease tensions. On May 17–18, 2010, soon after the inauguration of Yanukovich as President of Ukraine, Medvedev paid an official visit to Kiev. Both presidents visited the memorial to the victims of the 1932–1933 famine. This was the same memorial whose opening, during the presidency of Victor Yushenko, Medvedev had refused to visit, responding to the invitation with angry comments (Regnum 2008).

Although there was no political rapprochement with the Baltic countries, the principle of “avoiding extra tensions” was extrapolated to apply there as well. The Russian media simply tended to ignore provocative acts on the part of Russia’s neighbors. This was also the case in relations with Moldova, although the historical politics intensified sharply in that country in 2010, along with a surge in internal political strife. The “reset” in Russia–USA relations, proclaimed in 2009, did not set in motion the politics of reconciliation between Russia and its Western neighbors, but it created a favorable climate for consolidation of this trend.

However, the famed “reset” was not to last long. Tensions, mounting since 2012, in 2014 brought Russia into sharp confrontation with the West in general. It is not difficult to trace the relevant changes in Russian memory politics. When the Russian government initiated a program of patriotic education in 2005, the funding for this program went to two

ministries—the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Mass Communications. The new edition of this program in 2011 funneled the money to several special government agencies which had been created since 2005. However, there were still practically no government-linked NGOs which could participate in such activities (Bürger 2016). Then things changed dramatically. In 2012, two huge NGOs were created, directly controlled by the Kremlin – the Russian Historical Society headed by then-Chair of the State Duma Sergey Naryshkin, and the Russian Military-Historical Society under the guidance of Vladimir Medinski, then Minister of Culture. With the crisis in relations with the West escalating in 2014, the Kremlin halted the program of commemoration of victims of Communist repressions, which had been approved in 2013. In 2014, the State Duma passed the “Yarovaya Law” (Federal Law N 128-FZ 2014; Sherlock 2016) with all the negative aspects of Eastern European memory laws. Russia has now “securitized” its memory politics: it views discussions on history and collective identity through the lens of national security threats. The authorities openly interfere in the teaching of history, giving it an ideological slant.

Russia’s recent memory politics have been primarily reactive, and in these reactions Russia has demonstrated its ability to pick up and adopt many regrettable elements of history politics in Eastern Europe. Still, it is important to stress two important features which make Russian memory politics very different from those of the neighbors. First of all, Russia is not “Europe”: very few Russians today believe that their country can become integrated into European structures in the foreseeable future or can pursue a policy based on such hopes. This is a fundamental difference from all the countries that lie between Russia and the EU: they have either made their way into the EU and are now trying to shape EU politics of memory, or are tailoring their own politics of memory in context of their claims to become part of the EU. Another important difference is that Russia has never constructed an identity of itself as a victimized nation. Rather, Russian historical conscience and memory policy are underlain by a “besieged fortress” mentality, rooted, inter alia, in various Soviet intellectual practices of the Cold War era.

Russia has returned to its role of the Constitutive Other in European identity formation—and we find this reflected also in European memory politics. There is no reason to believe this will change in near future.

Any reasons for hope?

The new era of antagonistic memory politics will often descend into memory wars, and that will determine the atmosphere for years to come. In some intellectual quarters in Europe there is growing concern with this state of affairs. Acknowledging that there is no return to the “cosmopolitan” approach to memory politics, Bull and Hansen (2016) argue that there must be an alternative to the “antagonistic” approach. They see this alternative in an “agonistic” understanding of memory politics, located in the middle of a scale ranging from transnationalizing cosmopolitan memory on the one hand, to antagonistic memory on the other, the latter being favored by national populists who always put their own nation first. This agonistic approach tries to overcome the deadlock between the antagonistic and cosmopolitan models of memory. While accepting the political nature of this public sphere, it aims at promoting the idea of mutually respectful dialog between various actors and their perceptions of the past (Bull and Hansen 2016; UNREST n.d.)

If this new approach can gain momentum in Europe, a window of opportunity will open also for Europe–Russia relations. Of course, that would take time. But the hope is there...

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