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"The EU and the Post-Soviet Space"

The Role of Historical Narratives in
Russia's Patronal Politics and Its
Estrangement from the EU

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“The audience that views the world through the eyeglasses of the populist narrative will structure, interpret, and even supplement reality accordingly, with the help of real as well as non-real ‘facts’—which, as they fit into their worldview, will be considered just as real as the true facts. The narrative creates its own reality: the news and facts, real or otherwise, are not the backbone of the narrative but it is the other way around, they are optionally changeable illustrations to pre-ordered judgments.”

Magyar, Fisun and Madlovics (2022: 161) “on the socio-ideological world of populism”

Introduction

History is not just a record of past events; it is a powerful tool that shapes our present and future. The interpretation and narration of history often carry more weight than the events themselves. This is evident as historical narratives frequently dictate policy decisions, influence election outcomes, and justify the actions of political leaders. Recognizing this, political actors leverage the power of history and storytelling to their advantage, understanding that the way history is told can be just as important as the history itself.

Reflecting on the power of historical narratives, in September 2019, the European Parliament adopted a resolution emphasizing the significance of European remembrance for the continent's future. This resolution was a continuation of various Commission reports and Council Conclusions, particularly concerning the remembrance of crimes committed by totalitarian regimes in Europe. The resolution's second paragraph highlights that the outbreak of the Second World War, which led to immense human suffering for many decades, began with the “Treaty of Non-Aggression,’ known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its secret protocols” between the communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany (European Parliament, 2019). Vladimir Putin was outraged by this portrayal, steadfast in his position that the Soviet Union bore no responsibility for the outbreak of the war (Bíró 2023: 52; 75). He expressed his views in a detailed essay in 2020, titled '75 Years of Great Victory' which was a strategic move and a continuation of the Soviet Union's practice of whitewashing history, abandoning self-criticism, and falsifying historical

events to support current political efforts in Russia (idem: 56). These processes were crucial even in the political processes of justification of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

In order to understand the dynamics and intertwining of political power and historical narrative in Russia and the EU, it is essential to introduce the concept of patronal control. Patronal control, a tool of patronal autocracies, refers to a process of hierarchical dominance in which a central figure, a patron, and his court assert authority over the population, often referred to as clients (Magyar and Madlovics 2020: 49). Russia is characterized as a patronal autocracy, where patronal dominance is an integral part of political processes, so much so that it defines the system itself. This control is characterized by personalized exchanges and personal relations, rather than by institutionalized and legal-rational authority (ibid.). The patronal framework, as mastered by Magyar and Madlovics in their 2020 conceptual framework, states that patronal autocracies typically use ideology as a façade (Magyar and Madlovics 2020: 14). In the case of Russia, the ideology of mnemonical positionalism — the strategic use of historical memory and narratives to reinforce the patron's power and legitimacy — played a crucial role not only in the consolidation of control and the building of a single-pyramid patronal system but also in ensuring the support of decisions – or at least repressing dissent such as the invasion of Ukraine by the population (Mälksoo 2020: 489; Fedorenko 2023: 94).

In this paper, I will do a qualitative analysis of Vladimir Putin's essay: "75th Anniversary of The Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and Our Future" and showcase how this is the direct rebuttal of the claims against the Soviet Union in the 2019 European Parliament resolution. In addition, I will try to identify how some ideological patterns used to whitewash the Soviet Union and the descriptive elements used for that and how does that further the patronalization process and why.

The Interplay of Collective Memory, National Identity, and Political Legitimacy in International Relations

The study of International Relations and history has always been intertwined. Although many agree on the importance of a divisional divide, suggesting that politics and international relations are primarily based on various forms of ‘realism’, these boundaries often differ by region (Roberts 2006: 706).

History, as experienced by citizens in the form of memories – whether real or constructed – thus forms collective memories that relate to how individuals feel about their national identity and how they view certain political actors, influencing political legitimacy. As famously proposed by Anderson (1983), print capitalism and the manner in which history is documented in media and history books laid the groundwork for national consciousness. Today, collective memory is rarely primordial, passed down from generation to generation; rather, it is either constructed or instrumentalized, reconstructed to meet the needs of the present or used as an instrument to achieve specific political goals and interests (Wang 2017: 14). Consequently, as collective memory shapes national identity, it also determines policy and state action (idem: 12).

The instrumentalization of history varies across political systems, not only in democracies or autocracies but also in the reasons and goals for which history is utilized. In Russia's case, over the past decade, history has been consistently used as a tool for state capture – serving as a primary resource for Putin to establish a singular patronal pyramid structure and to exert further patronal control. However, as of 2024, analyzing Russia requires considering the context of its brutal war against Ukraine and the political shifts this conflict has induced, affecting not only its patronal structure but the regime as a whole. Magyar and Madlovics, in their special volume on Russia, note that in 2022 – at the onset of the war – regime changes transformed the country from a patronal autocracy into a market-exploiting dictatorship (Magyar and Madlovics 2023: 9). This does not imply that Russia ceased to be a patronal regime, but rather that the strategic formation of political action has drastically changed amidst wartime.

Patronal autocracies typically do not build on ideologies but rather use them as a façade, in a populist manner, for personal wealth accumulation and power monopolization (Magyar and Madlovics 2020:14). This is not to suggest that patronal autocracies avoid ideologies altogether; instead, they employ various ideological fragments – parts of specific arguments rather than a cohesive ideology (idem: 574). As the authors emphasize, this tactic is crucial in distinguishing between the projection of a particular ideology by a political actor and the actual objectives underlying this ideology (ibid.).

However, with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Putin himself became more ideologically driven and surrounded himself with like-minded individuals. As Fedorenko (2023: 94) suggests, Putin may have been caught in a propaganda loop, with “journalists tracing this shift to his isolation during COVID and his ambition to become a historical figure for Russia”. This change has had significant domestic and international consequences, such as Putin being severely misinformed in the early stages of the invasion of Ukraine. Yet, Russia's employment of ideology is highly strategic (ibid.). The use of ideology not only reinforces power monopolization but also provides justification for wartime decisions, which is crucial even in autocracies like Russia, where sustaining manpower for war efforts is essential.

Case Study and EU-Russia Relations

Most of these documents, where the instrumentalization of historical narratives can be followed are especially tailored to its population and are in Russian. Therefore, the choosing of case study, Vladimir Putin’s essay: “*75th Anniversary of The Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and Our Future*” – was chosen not only by the strategic fact that it’s written in English but that I believe that it was specifically translated to English to show that it is a reaction to the 2019 European Parliament resolution emphasizing the significance of European remembrance for the continent's future. This essay represented a continued break between the EU and Russia – and how for Putin, the differing historical narratives, putting Soviet Union for any blame presents a huge crisis for his own political apparatus.

Marzęda-Młynarska (2023) highlights the significant role of historical narratives and policies in EU-Russia relations. Her paper, employing discourse analysis, concludes that Russian historical policy, heavily centered on World War II narratives, has evolved in tandem with the country's shift towards authoritarianism. This evolution has resulted in a more rigid and unquestionable historical stance (Marzęda-Młynarska 2023: 24). Such policies have profoundly influenced the EU, especially in terms of their impact on the collective historical narratives of Central and Eastern European member states, where Russia has actively utilized historical arguments in diplomatic interactions (ibid.) These narratives became a central tenet in the wake of Russia's war in Ukraine, and the EU has realized that these instrumentalized historical narratives, propagated and fueled by Russia, have created a new geopolitical reality.

Methodology

In order to analyze Putin's essay: "*75th Anniversary of The Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and Our Future*" – I used a rudimentary discourse analysis with the use of Atlas.ti (version 23.4). Here, I have just tried to use Atlas.ti to check for certain quotations and segments in the essay that fall in to these categories.

- ***Historical Portrayal:*** This category included quotes related to how historical events and actors were depicted, with some elements including 'Betrayal of Poland's Leaders', 'Bias Against Historical Revisionism', and 'Emphasizing Poland's Pursuit of Interests'.
- ***Misrepresentation:*** Codes under this category includes instances of bias, distortion, or minimization in the narrative, with subpoints like 'Downplaying Other Countries' Role', 'Emphasizing Self-Interest', and 'Selective Quoting'.
- ***Omission:*** This category focused on the lack of mention or deliberate exclusion of certain events or actors, with subpoints including 'Omission of Soviet Union's Actions' and 'No Mention of Other Countries'.

- ***Soviet Union's Role:*** *Quotations here were specific to the portrayal and interpretation of the Soviet Union's actions and intentions, with subpoints such as 'Highlighting Soviet Union's Contribution' and 'Whitewashing Soviet Union's Role'.*
- ***World War II Perspectives:*** *This category encompassed quotations or segments related to various viewpoints and interpretations of World War II, with subpoints like 'Acknowledgment of Russian Army's Contribution', 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact', and 'Western Countries' Agreement and Recognition'.*

This was a selective coding process aimed at identifying patterns not only in how Russia instrumentalizes historical narratives concerning the Second World War but also in determining the extent to which this essay can be viewed as a response to the claims made in the 2019 European Parliament resolution. This resolution stated that the "Treaty of Non-Aggression," known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and its secret protocols between the communist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were precursors to WW2. Consequently, it suggested that the Soviet Union bore some responsibility for the human suffering during that period, without explicitly comparing the extents of involvement of the two countries.

Coding process

As the essay was quite lengthy, I have used certain functions of Atlas.ti such as its sentiment analysis and word frequency – where I could directly go to quotes when I saw that they appear in the file. After ensuring that all subcategories could be matched to a certain main category – despite significant overlap among these categories – it was important to establish some distinctions for the sake of analysis. This coding process resulted in a total of 225 points that could be allocated to a quotation across all subcategories, with notable overlap between different categories, each linked to specific segments of the essay. However only a few will be used to showcase these parts in Putin’s essay and how these are used to alter historical narratives. All the subpoints by the quotes is available here; [‘PCC and EU – Quotations by Code’](#).

The Code-Occurrence Analysis in Atlas.ti revealed that the code 'misrepresentation' and 'omission' had 32 co-occurrences with other codes, 'Soviet Union's role' had 35, 'historical portrayal' 22, and 'World War II perspectives' 13.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of the coding processes was the abundance of overlap between the different categories – as there was only one coding round and not two, which would have limited the subpoints and would have produced a more refined coding. This overlap might result in the same text segment being coded under multiple categories, which complicates the analysis and interpretation of results. In addition, during the reviewing process it showed some of the limitations Atlas has in terms of its ability to fully comprehend and interpret the nuances of human language and the subtleties of discourse – which were omitted to a certain extent by the reviewing process.

Of course, this was complicated by my personal bias, and the fact that I am not a historian. Therefore, all the codings regarding the omission of facts and historical portrayals were to the best of my ability. In addition, as other documents showcasing Russia's and Putin's instrumentalization of historical narratives are mostly in Russian, and this coding system is quite rudimental and does not contain a second-round coding, it may not be generalizable and replicable for other studies.

Analysis

Delving into the analysis, which will be divided into two major parts: the first part demonstrates that Vladimir Putin's 2020 essay, '75th Anniversary of The Great Victory: Shared Responsibility to History and Our Future,' attempts to rebut the proposition of the European Parliament resolutions. These resolutions reflect a broader discussion in the Western world about perceptions of World War II – specifically, the notion that the Soviet Union is partially responsible for the outbreak of the war through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols. This highlights the differing historical narratives on the issue between Russia and the EU, signifying a significant estrangement of Russia from the West. Secondly, the analysis will portray that Putin's essay and its discursive elements can be analyzed through the lens of patronal control – and, in hindsight, as

a tool for the use of collective memory and the whitewashing of the country's past ahead of a military invasion of Ukraine.

Putin's 2020 Essay vs the 2019 European Parliament Resolution

Throughout the essay, there are numerous instances that directly address the differences in the historical narratives of the EU, sometimes simply referred to as the 'West', and Russia regarding the Second World War, such as:

“Nowadays, we hear lots of speculations and accusations against modern Russia in connection with the Non- Aggression Pact signed back then.”

(Putin 2020:14).

“Historical revisionism, the manifestations of which we now observe in the West”

(Putin 2020: 39).

At last, the essay also mentions the resolution directly;

“Many of our partners ... pursuing their goals, they increase the number and the scope of information attacks against our country, trying to make us provide excuses and feel guilty. They adopt thoroughly hypocritical and politically motivated declarations.”

(Putin 2020: 26).

In regard to the secret protocols of the pact, we observe more downplaying or omission rather than outright rejection of claims, as seen in other instances. This is coupled with shifting the blame onto other countries – suggesting that it is unknown whether they had any secret agreements with Nazi Germany, as many of these files, such as those from the Anglo-German talks, remain classified (Putin 2020:15).

Putin recalls that in 1989, the Soviet Supreme Court denounced the secret protocols:

“as “an act of personal power” which in no way reflected “the will of the Soviet people who bear no responsibility for this collusion.”

(Putin 2020: 15).

As Bíró (2023) points out, many of these statements contradict the opinions propagated by the patrons in Russian society and what they portray to the Russian people. He notes that in 2019, Sergei Ivanov, who previously served as the Minister of Defense, the head of the President's office, and a member of the Russian National Security Council, commended the Russian society for taking pride in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Bíró 2023: 57).

The essay underscores anti-Western sentiments, a complete lack of self-criticism (often manifesting as omissions or shifting blame to the possibility of other countries having similar situations), and the whitewashing of the Soviet Union's role, substituting its actions with justifications of national love: “Yes, they were defending their homes, children, loved ones, and families, but more importantly, they shared the love for their homeland, their Motherland” (Putin 2020: 4). These elements contribute to the creation of an artificial reality, where divergent historical narratives become essential, in hindsight, for justifying actions such as the invasion of Ukraine.

Fedorenko (2023) highlights in his analysis five key elements that have contributed to the formation of a perceived artificial truth, ultimately leading to the rationalization of the war in Ukraine. These elements include claims of potential aggression from NATO or Ukraine towards Donbas, Crimea, or Russia, allegations of genocide by Ukraine, and suspicions of Ukraine developing nuclear or biological weapons (idem: 93). However, I argue that the historical narratives depicted in these accounts were crucial in establishing a collective memory upon which all these factors are predicated. Without the variance in historical narratives, leveraging these claims would have been significantly more challenging. The effectiveness of these narratives is bolstered by a propaganda apparatus that diminishes societal moral boundaries (ibid.). A survey

from late 2022 revealed that 46% of Russians completely endorse attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure, with an additional 17% showing partial support for such measures (idem: 94).

Historical narratives and Patronal Control

It was previously mentioned that journalists, under COVID, have started to write about Putin's desire to become a significant historical figure in Russia. Putin in this essay dedicated an entire paragraph to his family, describing their heroic actions during the war efforts. This can be seen not only as a method of spreading misinformation through personal biases but also a reinforcement of patron-client relationships. Often, by tying the patron's lineage to historical greatness, the regime can strengthen loyalty among its supporters and justify the patron's continued hold on power. It is no coincidence that the most oppressive dictatorships are often founded on a divine personal ethos of the leader and tend to be hereditary.

Furthermore, a common tool in patronal strategy is the exploitation of historical grievances for political mobilization. As Magyar and Madlovics (2020: 257) note, 'grievances originate from interests and/or principles that are felt to be threatened.' In this instance, Putin views that the West blames the Soviet Union rather than glorifying it – suggesting that the West is excluding Russia from a 'true collective history'. In the speech he describes this as “meanness”;

“Meanness can be deliberate, hypocritical and pretty much intentional as in the situation when declarations commemorating the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II mention all participants in the Anti-Hitler coalition except for the Soviet Union.”

(Putin 2020: 27)

Furthermore, the unified narrative on the purity of Russia that Putin seeks to establish facilitates patronal control. This approach not only makes it easier to identify dissenters (particularly when enforcing punishment for dissent) but more importantly, it serves as a patronal strategy to allow controlled dissent within a confined space. This tactic helps maintain the image of the moral

superiority of patronal actors that keep the "nation" at first. Magyar and Madlovics (2020), in their examination of Hungary's patronal systems, observe that the idea of the 'nation' frequently serves as a facade for the dominant political family. In such scenarios, the term 'nation' is effectively equated with the patronal family in power and all its affiliates, from the top leadership to the subordinate ranks (Magyar and Madlovics 2020: 597). Therefore, the strategic use of historical narratives can manipulate collective memory, making it easier for patronal regimes to secure compliance from the public.

Overall, these historical narratives aid patronal control in Russia by facilitating the creation of a unified national identity, centered around pride in the motherland – a nation perceived as incapable of wrongdoing. They reinforce patron-client relationships through the construction of a personal ethos for the chief patron, emphasizing their prioritization of the country akin to their own family. Moreover, these narratives serve to suppress dissent by casting dissenters as 'evils' or, in some cases, criminals. Such individuals are easily marginalized as outsiders to the patronal family and, consequently, as enemies of the state. This dynamic is intensified by the fact that rejecting the Russian narrative of the war is punishable. As Kopusov is quoted by Mälksoo (2020: 499), this reflects a broader trend in Russia's approach to historical narratives, where there is a tendency to 'shift the blame for historical injustices entirely to others and whitewash national romances that glorify their respective nation-state.' This strategy not only reinforces the patronal control but also shapes the collective memory in a way that aligns with the state's agenda, further solidifying its grip on power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of memory and historical narratives is crucial in shaping current policy formation, national identity building, and International Relations as a whole. It is evident that differing historical narratives, especially regarding the Second World War, significantly influence the relationship between Russia and the European Union.

Russia has focused on whitewashing its history and shifting blame onto other countries to create a positive and powerful mythos about the Soviet Union's role. This is evident in Vladimir Putin's

essay, which serves as a counter-narrative to the European Parliament's 2019 Resolution that acknowledges the Soviet Union's share of blame.

This process of altering historical memory has both broad and specific consequences. It reinforces patron-client relationships by creating a figure of Putin as a custodian of the Soviet Union's legacy, furthering his personal cult. Here, the 'nation' becomes a façade for the patronal family, ensuring public compliance. Additionally, these narratives play a significant role in the current war in Ukraine, distinguishing Russia historically from the West, which is portrayed as antagonistic and “mean”. They exploit historical grievances, bolstered by a new 'us versus them' narrative, and create an echo chamber of artificial truth that justifies wartime decisions, such as increased militarization and the erosion of societal moral boundaries regarding the war.

These practices and their long-term consequences require greater attention, not only in Russia but also throughout Europe. For instance, the issue of historical grievances in Europe, such as those surrounding the Treaty of Trianon and its border disputes, has been central to elections in Hungary for almost a decade. The impact of these issues on collective memory and their potential consequences needs to be addressed and call for a systematic solution in the future.

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