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GEOPOLITICS OF MEMORY: RETHINKING WORLD WAR II AND THE FIGHT FOR HEGEMONY IN THE BALTIC-BLACK SEA REGION¹

Abstract

The article addresses dilemmas of memory politics in the Baltic-Black Sea region in the context of the EU and NATO enlargements to the East and the changing role of Russia on the European continent. Focusing on the uses of World War II memories in (inter)national and European politics, it seeks to explain how history as a resource has been mobilized and how national identities have been renegotiated in response to the new geopolitical situation. The article shows that alternative interpretations of WWII in the countries of the Baltic-Black Sea region are used as political arguments in the fight for hegemony on the European continent and reveal competing claims for a European identity. The first section briefly discusses the role of World War II in contemporary debates on European memory and identity. The second section deals with the conflicts between Russia and the Baltic States in the context of their accession to the EU and NATO, while the third one addresses the role of World War II memories in EU-Russian relations. Finally, the last section considers the role of historical memory in the Russia's relations with Ukraine, a country with a still uncertain geopolitical future.

Keywords: World War II, historical memory, memory politics, communities of suffering, coping with the past, restitution, reconciliation.

For the countries of the Baltic-Black Sea region World War II was a formative event marked by various occupation regimes, the loss of state independence and major border changes. It was also the most traumatic event of the XXth century, as the Baltic States, Poland, Ukraine and Belarus, along with western Russia, belong to what Timothy Snyder calls "Bloodlands"². In this "Molotov-Ribbentrop Eu-

rope”, the brutalities of the war itself can hardly be separated from the crimes of Hitler’s and Stalin’s regimes. Apart from huge military losses, around 14 million civilians, according to Snyder, were murdered on these territories over the course of only twelve years: during the consolidation of National Socialism and Stalinism (1933–1938), the joint German-Soviet occupation of Poland (1939–1941) and the German-Soviet war (1941–1945).³ At the same time, it was this region, which since the end of the 1980’s has experienced most radical geopolitical changes. The “Solidarity” movement and the crisis of the communist regime in Poland, the national democratic movements in the Baltic States and in Western Ukraine undermined the Soviet block and led to the dissolution of the USSR. While Poland and the Baltic states entered the EU and NATO in 2004, thus completing their “return to Europe”, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova still face an uncertain geopolitical future.

This paper addresses the role of World War II memories in European politics and in EU-Russian relations in the context of two geopolitical challenges of the new century: the EU enlargement to the East and the recovery of Russia as a powerful international player, first of all in the “near abroad”. The strained Russian-Baltic relations, Moscow’s confrontation with the Kaczynski government in Poland, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the on-going crisis of Lukashenka’s regime account for instability on the European Union’s eastern border and reveal the on-going competition between Russia and the EU in the Baltic-Black Sea region. In this context, the competing narratives of World War II, the political debates on collective guilt and historical responsibility, on resistance and collaboration reflect the fight for political hegemony on the European continent. Here, claims for a European identity, alternative definitions of “Europe” and its “other” and diverse visions of European values, principles and political boundaries oppose to and compete with each other.

The contemporary academic literature on politics of memory pays growing attention to the role of apology, restitution and reconciliation in international relations.⁴ Some authors reject the conventional wisdom of *realpolitik* and suggest a concept of a new moral international order based on the re-negotiation of historical injustices between victims and perpetrators.⁵ Theories of transitional justice assume that the success of democratic reforms depends on reckoning with a painful past including both retribution against wrongdoings and reparation to victims.⁶ Principles of transitional justice have been increasingly introduced into international relations, as some states take responsibility for the crimes committed by the antecedent regime against neighbours or populations of former colonies or occupied territories. At the same time, the military victory over an aggressor and the liberation of other nations from occupation or oppressive regimes, as well as a nation’s “victim status” serve as important instruments of foreign policy and resources for political legitimization. While the former is actively used by the Russian elites, the latter is popular among politicians from the Baltic States, from Poland, and, in the last decade, from Ukraine. Politics of memory appeals to moral values and principles of transitional justice, but at the same time it is often driven by pragmatic interests. Moreover, historical and moral arguments are sometimes combined with traditional power politics.

It is not the intention of this paper to present a systematic overview of conflicting memory politics in this region. Rather, focusing on the uses of World War II memories in (inter)national and European politics, I will try to demonstrate how history as a resource has been mobilized and how historical identities have been renegotiated in response to the new geopolitical situation. The first part of the paper briefly discusses the role of World War II in contemporary debates on common European memory and identity. The second part deals with the conflicts between Russia and the Baltic States in the context of their accession to the EU and NATO. Part three addresses the role of World War II memories in EU-Russian relations. Finally, the last section considers Russia's relations with Ukraine, a country with a still uncertain geopolitical future.

1. Memories of World War II in post-Cold War Europe

World War II was the major pan-European trauma of the XXth century, a tragic experience shared by virtually all European nations. But it is also true that nothing divides Europe more than the memory of this war, which ended almost seventy years ago. The plurality of memories is easy to explain: in interwar Europe some nations tried to preserve the status quo and avoid aggressions, while others saw the approaching war as a chance to expand their boundaries, get back lost territories or finally gain state independence. Besides, the policies of the occupation regimes, the role of collaboration and resistance, and the scale of destruction and of military and civic losses varied significantly across the countries in Europe. But even more important for shaping the national memories of World War II was the Cold War that followed it. One of the outcomes of Hitler's defeat was a new geopolitical order: a new system of European borders and the division of the European continent into two political blocs. The post-war European order and stability of national borders were ensured not only by the balance of military power and nuclear weapons, but also by commemorative politics and "selective amnesia" (Tony Judt) – both in the West and in the East. While in the East unwanted memories were repressed, or, in the words of Timothy Snyder, "cleansed"⁷, in the West it was selective forgetting, "an exclusion and a quarantine of the dead", which served to suppress traumas and "pull all energies into reconstruction".⁸ Such "selective amnesia" was helpful in building a liberal order and was instrumental for preventing the re-emergence of old hostilities within and between nations as well as securing the stability of borders. "Memories of the war were themselves instantly caught up in the political constraints and incentives imposed by the Cold War, but also by the projects of constructing socialist societies in the East and European unity in the West".⁹ Creating and celebrating myths of resistance in the West and of an antifascist Communist underground in the East, on the one hand, and being silent about expulsions, mass collaboration with the Nazis, Stalinist repressions, on the other, served to maintain the Cold War geopolitical order.¹⁰

From its very beginning, the European integration project has been closely connected with the idea of "remembering" not just as a moral duty but also as a guarantee for peace.

The origins of the European Union go back to the lessons of World War II – “Never again war!” – and to the success story of the German-French reconciliation. In the post-war decades “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” (reckoning with the past) has established itself as a norm of European politics. The uniqueness of the Holocaust as the ultimate crime has become a common denominator of World War II memories in Western Europe. In the 1970–1980’s the Holocaust became Europe’s negative founding myth.¹¹

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the post-war Soviet Union also based its legitimacy on the outcomes of World War II, namely on the victory over Nazi Germany and on the role of the Soviet Army in the liberation of Europe. Using this symbolic capital, the Soviet Union presented itself as the main guarantor of peace and stability on the European continent and in the world. The military victory over Nazism served to prove the democratic and progressive nature of the Soviet system, and the Yalta treaty, Stalin’s greatest geopolitical triumph, became his entrance ticket to the club of Western powers.

Inside the country, the official memory of the “Great Patriotic War” had several functions: 1) re-establishing the legitimacy of the Soviet regime; 2) suppressing memories of Gulag and Stalinist repressions, and 3) consolidating collective identity and shaping the supranational community of the “Soviet people”.¹² The myth of the “common victory” played a crucial role in consolidating the Slavic core of the USSR and in integrating the newly acquired western regions of Ukraine and Belarus.¹³ In the Baltic republics the history of World War II as “liberation” became an instrument of mass Sovietization and of ideological control over politically unreliable local elites.¹⁴ Finally, in Eastern Europe the official narrative of the liberation from Nazi occupation by the Soviet Army helped to legitimize Moscow’s control over the communist satellite states. Communist regimes in Eastern Europe supported by Moscow presented themselves as the true successors of antifascist resistance, at the same time admitting the decisive role of the Soviet Army in the final defeat of the Nazi regime in Europe. The Warsaw Pact thus united the former victims of the Nazi aggression liberated by the Soviet Army and remaining under Moscow’s protection.

The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and the disintegration of the Soviet Union two years later brought a “thaw of memories” in Eastern Europe. “Re-conquering the past” has become a form of emancipation from imposed communist ideology and Soviet hegemony. Understandably, the time of World War II and the post-war Stalinist decade were in the centre of these processes. This “recovery of national memory” gave voice to the suppressed individual and collective traumas thus creating new “communities of suffering”.¹⁵ The change of the dominant “memory regime” was especially radical in those countries where partisan fights and inner civil conflicts did not end with the defeat of Nazi Germany and were followed by repressions against anti-Soviet resistance and by mass deportations, as in the Baltic States. With the EU enlargement to the East, it has become more than evident that the comfortable post-war consensus on memory among Western European societies has been thrown into question: for some of the new EU members, “Yalta” is not a symbol of the Allies’ victory over Nazism, but of the partition of Europe, in which half the continent

was abandoned to four decades of repression. The end of World War II brought just another oppressive regime that some consider as “equally criminal”.¹⁶ For these countries, the crimes of GULAG and Stalinist repressions, also qualified as “genocide”, should be ranked at least as high as the Holocaust.

As for Russia, open debates about World War II started with the Perestroika and continued in the 1990’s, destroying many ideological taboos. But the collapse of the Soviet empire, which lost the Cold war, radically changed Russia’s geopolitical status and led to a legitimacy crisis of the new state. The subsequent claims of the former satellites and Soviet republics for a “victim status” left Russia practically alone with the historical responsibility for the crimes of world communism – a burden too heavy for the post-Soviet Russian elites. As Dina Khapaeva recently wrote, Russian liberals and democrats in the late 80’s in fact considered the Soviet past a “black hole” and preferred to forget about it, sacrificing “the work of memory” for the sake of modernist and pro-Western illusions.¹⁷ While Boris Yeltsyn denounced communism he actually left untouched and even strengthened the myth of the Great Patriotic War as the only unquestionable achievement and positive symbol of Russia’s XXth century history. In this way, he accomplished what Brezhnev had started before.¹⁸ Under Putin the depolitization and “normalization” of the communist past has become official policy. Soviet history has meanwhile been rewritten in order to underline the continuity with the Russian imperial past. Today’s official politics of history fits the revived ideology of statism as a traditional source of Russian identity. In the early 2000’s, this attitude to the Soviet past was built into the newly designed ideological paradigm of “sovereign democracy”, which denies the universality of the Western normative model of democracy and legitimizes Russia’s “own way”. With Russia’s recovery after the “decade of humiliation”, Putin’s regime has instrumentalized the myth of the “Great Patriotic War” for re-establishing Russia’s positions in Europe and for re-gaining control in the “near abroad”.

2. The Baltic-Russian “memory wars”

The new national narratives of the Baltic States deny the old Soviet “liberation” myth and instead focus on such aspects of World War II as Soviet occupation and annexation in 1940, Nazi occupation and Soviet re-occupation in 1944, loss of national independence, Soviet repressions against the local population and struggle of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians for the restoration of their respective states.¹⁹ From this perspective the post-war Soviet regime in the Baltic States appears as a continuation of the previous occupation ending only with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. In the centre of such interpretations of World War II is the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and the subsequent division of Europe between Hitler and Stalin. Narratives of a “voluntary association” of the Baltic republics with the USSR and their “liberation” from the Nazi occupation, which were in the core of official Soviet propaganda, contradicted the collective memory of the majority of the population. In the late 1980’s demands to reveal the truth about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact had a

tremendous mobilizing effect in the Baltic States. On August 23, 1989, a human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius formed by about two million people became a powerful manifestation of the will to national independence. Denouncing the Soviet totalitarian regime and Stalin's foreign policy was an important legitimization strategy of the national elites in the Baltic states and an instrument of regaining state independence. At the same time, according to Dovile Dudryte, since the end of the 1980's national "communities of suffering" have emerged in the Baltic States.²⁰ "Genocide" became a common term for Soviet repressions and mass deportations,²¹ and Soviet symbols were officially banned. Anti-Soviet resistance movements and military formations that fought against the Soviets on Hitler's side have been rehabilitated and their leaders honoured as national heroes. The thesis of the "equal criminality" of Communism and Nazism is promoted today by politicians on the international level. The Museums of Occupation in Riga and Tallinn, and the Museum of Genocide Victims in Vilnius present the Baltic States as collective victims of the Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1991 (interrupted only by the three years of the Nazi regime).

For the last two decades, the relations of Russia with the Baltic countries have experienced ups and downs, but issues of historical memory and irreconcilable interpretations of World War II remain the main source of conflicts. All three states have been seeking for political acknowledgment of the fact of forceful annexation, which Russia refuses to recognize. Besides, Lithuania and Latvia have been raising the issue of material compensation for Soviet occupation. In 2000, the Lithuanian parliament passed a law on seeking reparations for damages suffered during the occupation. A Lithuanian government-appointed commission estimated the damage at 23 billion Euros. A similar commission was established in 2005 in Latvia.

In 1989, at the peak of destalinization in the Soviet Union, the Congress of People's Deputies in Moscow passed a declaration denouncing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact; the contents of the secret protocols was made public. However, Moscow has never officially recognized the fact of forceful annexation and occupation. The position of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been that this "closed page" of history should not burden interstate relations. According to the Russian MFA, the Baltic States joined the Soviet Union in 1940 voluntarily; it also underlines that the Baltic coast was part of the Russian Empire prior to 1917. Consequently, Russia refuses to discuss the issues of material compensation for Soviet occupation and restitution for the victims of forced deportations. In response to the claims of Latvia and Estonia, Russia as the legal successor to the Soviet Union claimed compensation for assets that were left on the territories of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.²² Just recently, in October 2011, the chairman of the Presidential Committee for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression, Mikhail Mitiukov, ruled out the possibility of offering financial compensation to the Baltic States for the Soviet occupation. He stressed that Russia fell victim to political repression just as other USSR republics and therefore cannot be held responsible for political repression inflicted by leaders of the former Soviet Union. Moscow's only obligation is to declassify all information about this crime.²³

The accession of the Baltic States to the EU in 2004, which provided them with strong guarantees of state independence and security, raised hopes for an improvement of Baltic-Russian relations. Instead, they remained overloaded with disagreements and conflicts on a number of issues (the project of the Russian-German North Stream pipeline, Russia's withdrawal from the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, and the Russian-Georgian war).²⁴ In May 2005, the Estonian and Lithuanian presidents refused to attend the official celebration of the 60th anniversary of the victory in World War II in Moscow. The Latvian president accepted the invitation, but "skilfully used the occasion to draw international attention to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, Soviet annexation of the Baltic States and Russia's refusal to denounce its Soviet past".²⁵ In spring 2007, protests of the local Russians against the decision of the Estonian authorities to relocate the "Bronze Soldier" (the Soviet "Monument to the Liberator of Tallinn") turned into violent riots. Tensions around these events escalated into a major crisis in Estonian-Russian relations.

In the Baltic States "memory wars" with Russia have also an internal dimension because of their considerable Russian speaking minorities (first of all in Latvia and Estonia). They often disagree with the official narrative about the "Soviet occupation" and are treated by the local nationalists as a "fifth column" of Moscow. The legitimacy of their political rights in the Baltic countries depends on the historical interpretation of the World War II events. The Soviet occupation narrative and the principle of legal continuity are reflected in the issue of citizenship. In Latvia and Estonia the initial citizenship laws limited the rights of those who had moved to these republics after the war. In this way, Russians and Russian speakers of other nationalities have been excluded from the national "communities of suffering" or even associated with the oppressors. Russians as a group indeed have different memories of the World War II. Many of them, particularly in the older generation, identify with the Soviet regime and see the Soviet Army as a "liberator from German fascism". For them, the anti-Soviet resistance fighters are not national heroes but collaborators with the Nazis. The Russian-speaking youth, on their part, uses Soviet symbols to express social protest. At the same time, as the events around the Bronze Soldier demonstrated, local Russians' distinct memory of the war serves as a consolidating factor of the new minority and as a link with the "ethnic homeland" that Moscow consciously cultivates.²⁶

In the wake of the EU accession the Baltic States came under growing international pressure in the issues of coping with their problematic past, citizenship and social integration of the Russian minorities. This moral and political pressure was coming not only from EU institutions, but also from European media and public opinion, particularly concerning the responsibility for the Holocaust and the lack of critical reflection in the issue of collaboration with the Nazis. Revealing in this respect was the conflict around the Lihula monument to the Estonian freedom fighters. It was erected in 2004 in the small Western Estonian town Lihula on the initiative of Estonian nationalists and Wehrmacht veterans. A stone plaque dedicated to 'Estonian men who fought in 1940–1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence' depicted soldiers

in German uniform with Waffen-SS symbols. The monument was strongly criticised by the European Union, by the Russian government and Jewish organizations.²⁷ Under international pressure the Estonian government had to remove it against the will of the local community.

In Europe, the debates of the late 1990's led to the universalization and institutionalization of the Holocaust memory. Following a debate on the collaboration of Swedish business circles with the Nazis, the Swedish government initiated a "Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research" in 1997. The Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust in 2000 helped to promote the international consensus on the universal status of the Holocaust as the ultimate crime against humanity. This consensus has become the moral fundament of European integration. In regard to the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, critical engagement in the issue of collaboration with the Nazis and complicity in the mass murder of the Jewish population became implicit criteria for EU accession.²⁸ Facing this challenge, in 1998 all three Baltic States established an international historical commissions for investigating Nazi and Soviet crimes. Their political mission was to reconcile the national memories of the Stalinist crimes with the European memory of the Holocaust and thus "to pave the way out of possible international isolation".²⁹

At the same time, the Baltic States have been using EU institutions and their status as EU members to strengthen their position vis-à-vis Russia. Moreover, representatives of the Baltic States have been trying to change the dominant "memory regime" in Europe by bringing Stalinism and communist crimes to the focus of European politics. As it will be shown below, they have been actively lobbying in the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and in other organizations for political condemnation of Stalinism (communism) as equally criminal as Nazism. Russia, on its part, has been instrumentalizing the memory of the Holocaust in order to present Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians as willing collaborators of the Nazis and to compromise the Baltic States in the eyes of the USA and Western Europe.

In conclusion, memories of World War II have been used in the Russian-Baltic relations as an instrument of political pressure. In these "memory wars", both sides have been referring to "Europe" as a moral authority and a bearer of universal human values. But "Europe" does not mean the same thing for the Russian and the Baltic political elites. Russia's "Europe" is a Europe liberated from the Nazis by the Allies, a Europe whose heroes, victims and perpetrators were once and forever defined by the Nuremberg trial. The "Europe" of the Baltic States is a Europe re-united after 1989 and still waiting for its trial over communism. As Viatcheslav Morozov noted, the "current political situation in the Baltic Sea region is to a great extent based upon a constant struggle to define 'Europe' (...). The Baltic story is about the Baltic Europe being abducted by an outside, non-European force, embodied in the Russian empire, the Soviet Union and – potentially at least in the Russian Federation. In Russia, the same story is often interpreted in positive terms, with Russia acting as mighty Zeus saving Europe from an outside threat".³⁰

3. The memory of the Second World War in EU-Russian relations

In the middle of 2000's the accession of the East and Central European countries to the EU and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia's economic recovery and self-assertive politics under president Putin, on the other, led to a chilling of Russia's relations with the West. The main object of this first geopolitical confrontation in Europe since the end of the Cold War became the Baltic-Black Sea region. The "Colour Revolutions", particularly in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), were actively supported by the US government and welcomed by the EU as an instrument of democratization of the post-Soviet countries and their emancipation from Russian influence. Needless to say, that Moscow saw these activities as a direct threat to its geopolitical interests in the "near abroad". Particularly the Orange Revolution in Ukraine became "Russia's September 11" (Krastev), a huge shock for the Russian political elites, which since have been determined to make no further concessions to the West. The governments of the new EU members, the Baltic States and Poland in particular, solidarized with the pro-Western political forces in the post-Soviet countries and supported the Colour Revolutions. The Russian-Polish relations, burdened with the unsolved Katyn issue, further deteriorated with the political victory of the uncompromised right wing brothers Kaczynski. To Moscow's irritation, Lech Kaczynski and Lithuanian president Valdas Adamkus came to Kyiv with a mediating mission during the Orange Revolution; and both of them came to Tbilisi to demonstrate solidarity with Michail Saakashvili after the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008. However, these efforts did not lead to an anti-Russian coalition of the Baltic-Black Sea region, first of all due to the failure of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the "reset" in US-Russian relations.

The instrumentalization of historical memory, in particular of World War II, has become an important dimension of the new geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West. On May 9, 2005, the official celebration of the 60th anniversary of World War II victory took place in Moscow. By inviting the leaders of European countries and of the US president Putin used this event as an opportunity to reassert Russia's geopolitical status after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Baltic States, in Poland and Ukraine Putin's invitation provoked hot political debates about the appropriate way of celebrating this date. As a gesture of considerable symbolic weight, US president George W. Bush on his way to Moscow made a stop in Riga to repudiate the Yalta treaty as „one of the greatest wrongs of history” which traded the freedom of small nations for the goal of stability in Europe. The 60th anniversary of the end of WWII thus started a new round in a symbolic struggle for the right to re-interpret the geopolitical consequences and the historical lessons of World War II. The EU enlargement to the east strengthened the position of Moscow's opponents, who now became EU members, and also elevated the discussions about history to a new pan-European level.

On May 12, 2005, the European Parliament (EP) passed a resolution on the end of the Second World War, noting that "for some nations the end of World War II meant renewed

tyranny inflicted by the Stalinist Soviet Union” and reminding of “the magnitude of the suffering, injustice and long-term social, political and economic degradation endured by the captive nations located on the eastern side of what was to become the Iron Curtain”³¹ In June 2005 the right-centre European People’s Party (EPP), the largest political group in the European Parliament, adopted a special resolution condemning the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States. This happened on request of Vytautas Landsbergis, Lithuanian member of the European Parliament. The resolution stated that as a result of Soviet occupation Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania lost their statehood and were unlawfully incorporated into the Soviet Union. It also mentioned Russia’s violations of post-World War I peace treaties with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. The EPP invited Russia, as successor to the Soviet Union, to admit the historic truth as the best path toward a reconciliation and normalization of relations with the Baltic States.³² In June 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) adopted a similar resolution, including amendments suggested by the Baltic representatives, which demanded from Russia to pay compensations for the citizens of the Baltic republics who suffered deportation during the Soviet occupation. In January 2006, in another resolution PACE stressed that “the fall of totalitarian communist regimes in central and eastern Europe has not been followed in all cases by an international investigation of the crimes committed by them. Moreover, the authors of these crimes have not been brought to trial by the international community, as was the case with the horrible crimes committed by National Socialism (Nazism)”³³

The growing international attention to the controversial memories of World War II and communism in the middle of the 2000’s has certainly to do with EU enlargement: East European “subalterns” (Mälksoo) actively used European institutions to promote and institutionalize their counter-hegemonic narrative. Thus, “The Union for a Europe of the Nations”, a conservative political group in the EP with quite some Baltic and Polish representatives, has sponsored the production of the documentary “The Soviet Story” (2008). The film tells about the crimes of Soviet Communism and Soviet-German collaboration before 1941 and underlines the close ideological, political and organizational connections between the Nazi and the Soviet systems. On June 3, 2008, the Conference on Conscience of Europe and Communism, held in Prague in the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic in the wake of Czech EU presidency, adopted the “Prague Declaration” denouncing communist atrocities and demanding national parliaments of Europe to recognize communist crimes against humanity as equal to the Nazi ones. In continuation of this initiative “The Platform of European Memory and Conscience”, a consortium of state and non-governmental educational and research organizations dealing with the totalitarian past was established in October 2011. The Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia are its founding members.

In 2009, the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the communist regimes in East Central Europe provided European politicians with another opportunity for commemorative initiatives. On March 18, 2009, hearings on “European Conscience and Crimes of Totalitarian

Communism: 20 Years after” took place in the European Parliament. In the beginning of April, after heated debates, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism.³⁴ The resolution was inevitably a political compromise, denouncing all totalitarian ideologies and all forms of dictatorship and confirming the uniqueness of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, it was clearly meant to balance Western European historical memory with the collective memories of the Central and Eastern European countries, which had experienced both Communism and Nazism. The resolution suggested August 23 (the date of signature of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact) as a Europe wide day of remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. The thesis of “equal criminality” was also confirmed by the OSCE resolution “Divided Europe reunited” adopted in Vilnius in July 2009. However, one of the recent initiatives aimed at the institutionalization of this approach on the European level has failed. In December 2010 the European commission rejected an appeal coming from some Eastern European countries (Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and the Czech Republic) to introduce a so-called “double genocide law” that would criminalize the denial of crimes perpetrated by the communist regimes in the same way many EU countries ban the denial of the Holocaust.³⁵

These political initiatives on the level of European institutions coming from the Baltic States and other post-communist countries have several purposes. The first one is to challenge the Western European consensus on recent European history, to acknowledge the historical experience of the post-communist countries as a legitimate and equal part of European identity, and to require equal recognition for other “communities of suffering”. As Maria Mälksoo puts it, Poland and the Baltic States attempt “to enlarge the mnemonic vision of ‘the united Europe’ by placing their ‘subaltern pasts’ in contest with the conventionally Western European-bent understanding of the consequences of World War II in Europe”³⁶

By doing so, “Eastern European subalterns” seek not only symbolic recognition, but also political profit. The second aim of this policy is strengthening the historical legitimacy of the new states, counteracting the accusations of Nazi collaboration and reinforcing the European identity of the Baltic nations. Finally, the third aim is to get leverage over Russia and contain its geopolitical ambitions. One of the implications of the idea of an “equal criminality” of Nazism and Communism is that Russia as a successor state of the USSR should acknowledge its historical responsibility for the communist crimes in East Central Europe in the same way post-War Germany did for the Nazi crimes. In the European mainstream discourse the lack of democracy and of respect for human rights in contemporary Russia is related to the lack of political will to cope with the communist past. A more radical political discourse relates Putin’s authoritarianism with what many observers see as the official rehabilitation of Stalinism, or even “re-Stalinization of Russia”. Presenting contemporary Russia as a neo-Stalinist state is a strategy of “othering Russia” as a non-European actor. In any case, anti-communist commemorative initiatives have not only a moral, but also a geopolitical dimension: a Russia which still clings uncritically to the Soviet (military) glory, is dangerous for European security as it continues to act as an imperial power.

The powerful myth of the “Great Patriotic War” remains the core of Russia’s memory politics, and the narrative of the liberation of Europe from Nazism is still used for legitimizing its geopolitical status on the European continent. Therefore, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the occupation of the Baltic countries and of Eastern Poland and the Katyn massacre belong to the most controversial aspects of World War II history. Russian political leadership is not interested in “joining” Europe, but in being treated by the EU as an equal and respected partner. “Sovereign democracy” is also understood as “sovereignty over the past” – the right of a great country to judge about its own history and not be taught by the West. Little wonder that the European debates about the “equal criminality of Nazism and Communism” as well as the Baltic and Polish commemorative initiatives have been seen in Moscow as a hostile policy. The Russian Duma denounced the 2009 OSCE resolution and accused the West of imposing a false feeling of historical guilt on Russia. Some Russian politicians such as the historian and Member of Parliament Natalia Narochitskaya and the Minister of Emergency Situations Sergey Shoigu suggested to introduce criminal responsibility for denying the role of the Soviet Union in the defeat of Nazi Germany. While visiting Ukraine in summer 2009, Patriarch Cyrill also spoke against equating Nazism and Stalinism pointing to the fact that Western allies joined Stalin against Hitler and not vice versa. The same year president Medvedev created a special commission for fighting “falsifications” of history. This decision was criticized by some historians and the liberal public as an attempt to limit academic freedom and put historical research under state control. In May 2009, in the wake of the Victory Day, the pro-presidential party “United Russia” drafted a law that is supposed to protect the Soviet version of the World War II from revisionist interpretations. The authors referred to the Nuremberg Tribunal as an absolute truth ignoring its historical and political context.³⁷ The aim of fighting revisionist interpretations of Soviet history is also proclaimed by the Historical Memory Foundation³⁸ recently founded by Alexander Dyukov and evidently enjoying the full support of the Kremlin.³⁹ Books published by the foundation address collaboration of local nationalists with the Nazis and the Holocaust in the Baltic States and Western Ukraine and defend the Soviet version of the World War II.

Counteracting the revisionism of World War II history was the main aim of Prime Minister Putin’s official visit to Gdansk, where on September 1, 2009, the European leaders met to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland and the beginning of World War II. In a long and well-argued article published by *Gazeta Wyborcza* Putin admitted that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was morally unacceptable but hardly avoidable in that situation and tried to relativize it by pointing to the Munich agreement one year before. He shifted the focus from the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact to the creation of the anti-Hitler coalition which he called “the turning point of the XXth century, one of the most significant events of the last century”.⁴⁰ According to Putin, the experience of the inter-war period proved that it is not possible to create an effective system of collective security while excluding Russia.

4. Politics of memory in the Russian-Ukrainian relations

While in the Baltic States anti-communist forces were able to establish their political hegemony during the transition and to impose their interpretation of the Soviet past, in Ukraine an informal alliance between national-democrats and the “centrists” (the former Communist nomenklatura) favoured an unstable ideological compromise. At the same time, the irreconcilable ideological differences between the two main protagonists on the battleground of historical memory – the nationalists and the unreformed Communists – made a “pact of forgetting” according to the Spanish model impossible.⁴¹ Therefore, state memory politics under Leonid Kuchma was pragmatic rather than ideological as he tried to avoid controversial issues and downplay incompatible narratives of the past. Making concessions to both the nationalists and the Communists, Kuchma supported the institutionalization of the Holodomor (Famine) memory, but opposed the rehabilitation of the UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army). Transitional justice in post-Soviet Ukraine has been very limited, the most significant measure being the Law on rehabilitation of the victims of political repressions in Ukraine, adopted as early as 1991. As in Russia, the KGB archives in Ukraine were never detracted from the control of the secret services and lustration has never been seriously discussed. Official memory politics (such as the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty in 2004) favoured the narrative of a “common history” shared by Russia and Ukraine. Many elements of Soviet commemorative culture (and first of all, the “Great Patriotic War”) were incorporated in the new memory regime.

In post-Soviet Ukraine, memory of World War II has been particularly controversial and heavily politicized. As Ukrainian historian Vladyslav Hrynevych noted, Ukraine’s role in the war was ambivalent: “it was a victim of both Stalinist and Hitlerite occupation; a land of resistance to two totalitarian regimes; both a collaborationist and a victor that cofounded the UN; as well as a country which lost a second battle for independence and national statehood”.⁴² Contradictions are built into the very “founding myth” of Ukraine as it emerged in its current borders after World War II thus profiting from the geopolitical triumph of Stalin. It was the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland in 1939 that made the “reunification of Ukrainian lands” possible. Denouncing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and Soviet occupation of Western Ukraine, national democrats and nationalists never questioned the legitimacy of the “re-unification”.⁴³ Alternative narratives of World War II contribute to the notorious polarization between the East and the West of the country. While Western Ukraine shares a commemorative culture with the Baltic States based on the hero cult of anti-Soviet nationalist freedom fighters, in other regions of Ukraine their popularity is low. Soviet rituals and symbols in commemoration of the war still persist in most parts of the country. The narrative of the “Great Patriotic war” perpetuates the view that Ukrainians and Russians belong to one East Slavic or Orthodox “civilization” and thus has been supported by Moscow.

The Orange Revolution marked a watershed in Ukraine’s newest history, as the victory of the national democratic candidate re-shaped the traditional configuration of political

forces. Ukraine seemed to emancipate from Russia's dominance and presented itself as the next candidate for the EU and NATO membership. The memory politics of president Yushchenko, apart from its domestic political aims, was supposed to legitimize Ukraine's pro-Western geopolitical choice. Supported by the pro-Western part of the Ukrainian elites, he tried to introduce a "memory regime" similar to those already established in the Baltic States. Yushchenko saw Ukraine as a postcolonial nation, struggling to emancipate from Russia's political and cultural influences. He sought to rehabilitate Ukrainian nationalism, for a long time seen through the hostile Russian and Soviet lens. Establishing a Museum of Soviet Occupation, the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor and its legal qualification as a "genocide of the Ukrainian people", and the post-mortem awarding of the UPA leaders Roman Shukhevych and Stepan Bandera with the official "Hero of Ukraine" title were his most resonant and controversial initiatives in this field. Yushchenko tried to institutionalize state memory politics by creating the Institute of National Remembrance and assigning the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) additional functions such as controlling archives, conducting historical research, and popularizing the new official approach to the Soviet past. However, active transitional justice politics and engagement with the communist legacy was hardly possible due to weak democratic institutions, the absence of a rule of law and the political manipulations of historical memory by all parties. Public discontent with the "nationalization of memory", especially in Eastern Ukraine, was instrumentalized by the Party of Regions, which turned into a fierce opponent of Yushchenko's memory politics and thus assumed the role the Communists had played in the ideological battles of the 1990's. Debates on historical memory in Ukraine polarized the public opinion and deepened divisions in Ukrainian society. As it turned out, it was rather difficult to consolidate the nation as a "community of suffering", partly because, unlike in the Baltic States, ethnic boundaries between Ukrainians and Russians are blurred. Moreover, Ukraine is a multi-ethnic society, and its various groups (Jews, Poles, Crimean Tatars, and others) have their own narratives of suffering, which challenge the monopoly of the ethnic Ukrainians as a collective victim.

Re-inventing Ukraine as a collective victim of the communist regime also had implications for its foreign policy. The Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was assigned with the task of gaining international recognition of the Holodomor as genocide. More than twenty countries, among them the Baltic States, Georgia, Azerbaijan and the countries of East Central Europe officially recognized the Holodomor as genocide. However, this issue has become one of the main stumbling blocks in Ukrainian-Russian relations. Officially Kyiv asserted that it considers Stalin and the former Communist regime responsible for the "genocide" and refuses to accuse any particular nation. However, other Ukrainian politicians, intellectuals, and journalists often referred to the Russian Federation as the legal successor of the USSR in this context. They argued that the Russian government should take responsibility for the crimes of the Communist regime and officially apologize for the misdeeds of its predecessors. Speculations about a material compensation have also emerged. No wonder that Moscow, which had already faced genocide accusations and

requests for retribution from the Baltic States, saw the new Ukrainian memory politics as a threat. The Russian leadership considers the famine a “common tragedy” and rejects its definition as a genocide of a certain national group. This position is shared by most Russian historians and intellectuals (e.g. late Alexander Solzhenitsyn). When Ukraine in 2007 launched a large-scale campaign to achieve worldwide recognition of the Holodomor as genocide, the “memory wars” between Kyiv and Moscow continued in the UN, the OSCE, and other international organizations. In April 2008, when Ukraine’s membership was discussed at the Bucharest NATO Summit, the Russian parliament adopted a resolution strongly rejecting the Ukrainian interpretation of the Famine.⁴⁴ In November 2008, President Medvedev in an open letter rejected the official invitation of his Ukrainian colleague to the commemorative events devoted to the 75th anniversary of the Holodomor. Medvedev justified his decision with his principal disagreement with the genocide thesis.

Apart from the Holodomor Yushchenko’s politics of rehabilitation of the UPA became another point of conflict in Ukrainian-Russian relations. As in the case of the Baltic States, Moscow instrumentalized the issue of collaboration and the Holocaust in Ukraine to compromise Kyiv’s politics in the eyes of the West. Expressing criticism about Yushchenko’s decision to award Bandera with the “Hero of Ukraine” title, Putin said that the Orange Revolution “spitted in the face of the Western sponsors”.⁴⁵ Yushchenko’s step was also criticized by Jewish organizations and by Poland, where the UPA is held responsible for the massacre of the Poles in Volyn’ in 1943.

Conclusion

The “ceasefire” in the memory wars on the European continent during the last two years can be explained by the stabilisation of the new geopolitical order resulting from the “reset” in the US-Russian relations and the internal crisis of the European Union. As the EU is preoccupied with internal consolidation, constitutional reform and economic crisis, and Obama’s government has shifted its geopolitical priorities from Eastern Europe, Ukraine’s EU and NATO memberships seem to be out of agenda at the moment. Russia’s pressure, the political failure of the Orange leadership and the internal split of the Ukrainian elites on central issues of identity and collective memory thwarted the Ukrainian government’s efforts to gain international recognition for the Holodomor as genocide of the Ukrainian nation. In April 2010, after president Yanukovich had articulated a new official Ukrainian position on the Holodomor, which was close to the Russian one, PACE declined the amendments on the Holodomor as a genocide. The UPA issue spoiled Ukraine’s relations with Poland, its most enthusiastic advocate in the EU. Disappointed with political developments in Ukraine Europe solidarized with the Polish (and Russian) criticism of Yushchenko’s politics of glorifying the UPA. In February 2010 the European Parliament adopted a resolution denouncing his decree on Stepan Bandera.

The warming of Russian-Polish relations, which had started even before the tragic death of president Kaczynski in an air crash near Smolensk, was to a significant extent

due to the long-awaited progress in the Katyn case. In spring 2010 *Rosarchiv* declassified and published documents on the Katyn massacre, while President Medvedev voiced the official recognition of the Soviet leadership's responsibility for this crime. In April 2011 the Council for Development of Civil Society and Human Rights under the President of the Russian Federation made a proposal to establish a nationwide program "On perpetuating the memory of victims of the totalitarian regime and on national reconciliation". In addition to internal purposes, namely the "modernization of the consciousness of Russian society", the program is clearly aimed at strengthening the international position and prestige of Russia in Eastern Europe by supporting "the awareness of the shared tragic past".⁴⁶ It is emphasized that the Program "must be initiated by Russia as the country that suffered most from totalitarianism".⁴⁷ Declaring Russia the main victim of the communist regime could become a new, more successful strategy for Moscow in the Baltic-Black Sea region. It has been already used to deny claims for the moral and material compensation for the Soviet occupation and the "genocide". The memory of the "Great Patriotic War" and of Russia's role in the victory over Nazi Germany will, of course, keep its legitimizing function in the future. But the "victim narrative" can provide Russia with an additional instrument for counteracting political strategies of its western neighbours meant to stigmatize it as a neo-totalitarian state and limit its geopolitical influence.

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