

The evolution of Russia's historical policy

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Since autumn 2009, a distinct change of course can be observed in Russian historical policy. The most important signs of this are the cessation of vindications for Stalin and his policy, and of the particular interpretation of Soviet history whose nature was confrontational towards Eastern Europe and the West. An expression of this change has been seen in recent declarations made by the most important Russian politicians, the media campaign, and the commemorations of historical anniversaries (such as the Katyn massacre on 7 April and victory in the Second World War on 9 May). A specific role in this change was played by a wide-ranging policy interview given by President Dmitri Medvedev to *Izvestia* daily on 7 May, the eve of the victory commemoration. At the same time, these activities demonstrate that despite the changes, the concept of the USSR's fundamental role in ensuring security in Europe is still the basis of Russian historical policy.

This change is designed to create the image of a 'constructive' Russia, an image which would support its aspirations to play a greater role in Europe (especially in the security sphere), and would make the implementation of its political and economic goals easier. At the same time, it is intended to provide arguments to those political elites in EU countries who favour the Union's closer co-operation with the Russian Federation as a constructive partner.

Russia's historical policy: correction and continuation

The most significant change in Russian historical policy, as observed since autumn 2009, is the **de-Stalinisation of historical rhetoric**. The key representatives of the Russian government elite have repeatedly condemned Stalin-era repression, and have ceased acknowledging Stalin's contributions to victory in the Second World War. The most active promoter of this 'new' course has been President Medvedev, although the whole government elite has been unanimous in condemning Stalin, confirming that this change is not merely incidental in nature.

The most unambiguous condemnation of Stalin-era repressions was expressed by President Medvedev, initially on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Political Repression on 30 October 2009. Later, the president re-emphasised his stance on several occasions, including in Cracow during the funeral ceremonies for the late President of Poland, Lech Kaczynski, of 18 April, and in the interview given to *Izvestia* on 7 May. In addition, Medvedev stated that the Stalin-era repression of Soviet command staff had weakened the USSR's defence potential in its confrontation with Hitler. The policy of Stalin-era repression was also condemned by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during the ceremony

in Katyn on 7 April, and by many other Russian politicians and representatives of the Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. The authorities also blocked attempts to display images of Stalin during the victory anniversary ceremonies in Moscow. The Russian Communists and radical leftist circles of marginal relevance are alone in not having joined in the criticism of Stalin.

Another change observed in the historical policy is **a more nuanced evaluation of the Soviet legacy**. Currently, a separation is occurring between the role of the Soviet Union during the war (which is openly celebrated) and assessment of its political system and its participation in creating the post-war order, which are acknowledged as having been ambiguous, or are subjected to open criticism. In his *Izvestia* interview, President Medvedev admitted that after the war, the USSR's policy in Central Europe was not a glorious one. Moreover, he stated that the USSR was a totalitarian state, one not conducive to social development, and whose collapse was above all caused by its inefficiency. The president also admitted that the policy of the Soviet government towards the Katyn massacre was an example of the falsification of history.

A further important correction is the **halt to the use of historical rhetoric for confrontation** with the West and the states of Eastern Europe. Russia has limited the criticism of 'attempts to rehabilitate fascism' which is usually addressed to the Baltic states and Ukraine. Instead, the need for co-operation along the lines of the co-operation of allies during the Second World War has been emphasised. President Medvedev in his *Izvestia* interview is one of numerous figures who have stressed the joint action of the peoples of the USSR and their allies in the great victory. A symbolic complement to this idea was the participation, for the first time ever, of soldiers from the allied states in the Red Square parade on 9 May.

Apart from the corrections observed, however, one key element of Russian historical rhetoric remains unchanged; **the role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War** as the state which saved Europe from Nazism. Russia permits no debate on this question. At the same time, by emphasising the 'liberating' and 'stabilising' role of the USSR during the war, the Russian government is creating parallels between the situations in Europe then and now, emphasising the importance of Russia for European security.

The aims of the historical policy

Above all, this adjustment to Russian historical policy is being carried out with the intention of realising Russia's interests abroad more efficiently. Moscow is attempting to create **an image of itself which will be accepted by European countries** and will thus make it easier to bring about its political and economic goals in Europe. The emphasis on the USSR's positive role in the Second World War is intended to legitimise Moscow's aspirations to play a greater role in European security today, including justifying a need to reform the current security system, which would encompass a privileged place for Russia. Purifying this image of any controversial elements – those which could not be supported by Western partners, and which were confrontational in nature (such as the glorification of Stalin, or defending the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) – is intended to strengthen both Russia's credibility on the international stage as well as the strength of its arguments.

At the same time, Moscow's approach has the aim of providing arguments to the political elites in those EU countries which favour the Union's closer co-operation with Russia. The

'new' historical policy is intended to be a symbolic complement to the positive actions Russia has taken in recent months towards those countries with which relations had hitherto been tense (such as the initial agreement with Norway on the two states' marine borders, and the improvement in relations with Poland).

Historical politics invariably remains a tool which Russia uses to maintain its influence on the post-Soviet area, as much towards the countries of Eastern Europe as to those of the South Caucasus. But however much confrontational tones had previously predominated in these relations (Moscow accused Ukraine and Georgia, among others, of falsifying the history of the USSR), the current policy now emphasises a positive historical heritage. The victory in the Second World War is presented as a result of the joint effort of the Soviet peoples, which thus serves to **strengthen and maintain the post-Soviet area's community of identity**, as well as to win acceptance for Russia's leading role.