

## The myth of the Great Patriotic War as a tool of the Kremlin's great power policy

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The sacralised Soviet victory over Nazism is a central element of the politics of memory, as utilised by the Russian state today. It constitutes an important theme in the Kremlin's ideological offensive that is intended to legitimise Russia's great-power ambitions. The messianic myth of saving the world from absolute evil is supposed to cover up the darker chapters of Soviet history and to legitimise all subsequent Soviet or Russian wars and military interventions, starting with Hungary, through Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan and ending with Ukraine and Syria. According to the current neo-Soviet interpretation, all these military actions were purely defensive and justified by external circumstances. The glorification of the "Yalta order" and the justification of the use of force in foreign policy is intended to legitimise Moscow's pursuit of its current strategic aims, first and foremost of these being hegemony in the post-Soviet area and revision of the European security architecture.

The war mythology and Russia's great-power ambitions continue to resonate with the wider Russian public; thus contributing to legitimisation of the authoritarian regime in the eyes of a large swathe of society and offsetting the effect of growing socio-economic problems. The myth of a wartime 'brotherhood of arms' has a smaller impact on other post-Soviet states, which have increasingly been distancing themselves – especially since 2014 – from Moscow's neo-imperial historical narrative. The use of historical myths as a form of soft power finds even less resonance in Europe and the US. Nevertheless, low susceptibility in the West to Russian historical propaganda does not diminish the gravity of the challenge posed by Russian information-psychological warfare, resorting to historical falsehoods and specious analogies between the current international situation and political-military tensions of the 1930s.

### The nature and goals of Russia's politics of memory

Russia's politics of memory consists of ideas and practices designed to shape collective memory and historical discourse in a way that serves the

political interests of the ruling elite. It is implemented by state agencies, state-controlled media outlets, a part of academia and a network of social organisations. The funding comes from the state or from businesses with ties to the Kremlin. The politics of memory is intended to be one of



the tools for legitimising an authoritarian regime. Its significance grows whenever the impact of other legitimising factors (economic, political, social and international) wanes.

**” Russia’s official historical narrative is strongly ideologised and subordinated to the goals pursued by authoritarian propaganda.**

The current version<sup>1</sup> of the Russian politics of memory took shape during Vladimir Putin’s third presidential term (2012–2018). Its inauguration was marred by mass political protests in Moscow, which lasted several months and were viewed by the Kremlin as the result of a conspiracy by Western intelligence services. Putin’s presidency was further overshadowed by economic slowdown, which in subsequent years was followed by further challenges: the Ukrainian “Revolution of Dignity” (also known as the Euromaidan Revolution) at the turn of 2013 and 2014 (seen by the Kremlin as a threat to the stability of Putin’s regime); Western sanctions, imposed in response to Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine; the financial and economic crisis of 2014–2016; and finally, the prospect of long-term economic stagnation. In addition, the years 2018–2019 were marked by growing dissatisfaction and mounting readiness to engage in public protests on the part of Russian society, faced with declining living standards.

Due to the nature of the Russian political-economic system<sup>2</sup> the ruling elite cannot use economic development and growing living standards as the basis for its legitimisation. Moreover, the regime displays conspicuous ideological void, has failed to formulate any attractive vision of the future and prioritises political control over economic development. Hence, it is forced to seek legitimacy in the sphere of foreign, rather than domestic, policy.

The most important factor which influences the thinking of Kremlin decision-makers about foreign policy and their choice of appropriate policy measures to accompany it is the abiding inferiority complex produced by the ‘phantom pains’ arising from the collapse of the Soviet empire. The ruling elite, driven by interests specific to the authoritarian nature of the regime, and incapable of constructing a compelling vision of Russian national identity (“the national idea”<sup>3</sup>), decided to utilise a time-worn method by reviving the traditional international identity of Russia as a great power. This identity remains readily comprehensible and appealing to the Russian public. The politics of memory that largely replicates the Soviet paradigm of Russian history, with its strong anti-Western thrust, is part and parcel of this project. The revival of the traditional great power identity is calculated to have a double effect: first, justification of the Kremlin’s aggressive foreign policy in the eyes of Russian society; second, legitimisation of Russia’s great-power ambitions in the eyes of the international community. The Soviet templates have been chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, for the temporal proximity of the USSR with its superpower status. Secondly, because they offer a set of ready-made symbols, which many Russians still cherish and find meaningful. Thirdly, such a choice reflects the mentality and serves the interests of the core beneficiaries of Putinism, i.e. former officers of the Soviet security services formed by the Cold War-era confrontation with the West.

Due to the authoritarian philosophy of power and the Russian political culture shared by the ruling elite,<sup>4</sup> the official historical narrative is strongly ideologised – it has actually begun to function as a sort of substitute for state ideology that is banned under the Russian constitution. Its formulation and promulgation creates a “monopoly on truth” as the authorities consistently restrict

<sup>1</sup> For its previous versions see О. Малинова, ‘Тема прошлого в риторике президентов России’, *Pro et Contra*, Май–август 2011, [www.carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the essence of the Russian authoritarian model, see M. Domańska, *Putinizm po Putinie. O „głębokich strukturach” rosyjskiego autorytaryzmu*, OSW, Warszawa 2019, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

<sup>3</sup> In 1996, in response to President Boris Yeltsin’s appeal/request, “*Rossiyskaya Gazeta*” announced a competition for a “national idea”, i.e. a coherent narrative based on the common values that could unite all Russians. However, all attempts to come up with such an “idea” carried out to date have failed.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Russia’s political culture, see M. Domańska, *Conflict-dependent Russia. The domestic determinants of the Kremlin’s anti-Western policy*, OSW, Warszawa 2017, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

access to archival sources and limit the freedom of historical research. From their perspective, “history” is merely an eclectic collection of myths, a malleable material from which any narrative can be spun arbitrarily. The politics of memory simply constitutes an important element of state-sponsored propaganda: historical facts and their interpretations are subordinated to the political interests of decision makers.

As regards foreign policy, these are long-term interests of a strategic nature. They include: Western consent to Russian hegemony over the post-Soviet area; revision of the European security architecture in line with Moscow’s interests (which means marginalisation of NATO regarded by the Kremlin as Russia’s main enemy, threatening its very survival; creation of a security buffer zone in Central Europe; provision of the right of veto for Moscow in all questions regarding European security); limitation of the US’s presence and influence in Europe; and finally, unrestricted and unconditional opportunities for developing economic and political cooperation with the West.<sup>5</sup> The myth of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ of 1941–1945, including its key aspect – the 1945 victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, is an instrument for legitimising Russia’s great-power aspirations.

### The narrative of the Great Patriotic War in Russian foreign policy

In the mythology which has been constructed to serve the current needs of Russia’s foreign policy, the sacralisation of the victory in 1945 takes pride of place, as a turning point raising the Soviet Union to the status of a superpower. This myth carries a strong messianic message: it depicts the Soviet Union as a state that accomplished a unique mission of saving the world from absolute evil. As a high-ranking Russian official said, “Europe exists today thanks to those Soviet soldiers and officers who paid the ultimate price in order to

enable its development.<sup>6</sup> The loss of over 20 million Soviet citizens as a result of the war is exploited as a counterargument to invalidate the historical narratives of neighbouring states asserting that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century they were victims of Soviet imperial expansion. The Russian official narrative of the war is framed in religious terms – any attempts to question the “canonical” version of events are stigmatised as “blasphemous”. The current National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation describes attempts to “revise Russia’s role in history” as a threat to the “cultural security” of the state.<sup>7</sup> In 2014 the Russian parliament adopted a law criminalising the “spreading of intentionally false information about the Soviet Union’s actions during World War II”. It provides for a penalty of up to five years in prison.<sup>8</sup>

**” A distorted vision of history is intended to legitimise Moscow’s strategic goals, including the revision of the European security architecture.**

Following this logic, Russia consistently protests against and denounces critical assessments of the foreign policy conducted by the Soviet Union, both on the eve of the war (the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the USSR’s co-responsibility for the outbreak of war) as well as during its course (the attack on Poland and Finland, annexation of the Baltic states, executions of about 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia – known as the Katyń massacre – and mass terror against Soviet citizens and inhabitants of the newly annexed territories). To deflect and counter such criticism Russia distorts or blatantly falsifies historical facts. For example, by inventing and spreading a narrative relativizing the Katyń massacre (the so-called “anti-Katyń” propaganda campaign) that paints this war crime

<sup>5</sup> For more on strategic goals of Russia’s foreign policy in Europe, see M. Menkiszak, *A strategic continuation, a tactical change. Russia’s European security policy*, OSW, Warszawa 2019, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

<sup>6</sup> Вячеслав Володин: правителям, которые затеяли пересмотр истории, никто не подаст руку’, Государственная Дума, 21 November 2019, [www.duma.gov.ru](http://www.duma.gov.ru).

<sup>7</sup> Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года, published on 13 May 2009, Президент России, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

<sup>8</sup> This is the so-called ‘law against rehabilitation of Nazism’ (Article 354.1 of the penal code of the Russian Federation) of 5 May 2014.

as a “just historical revenge” for the spurious mass killings of Soviet POWs in Poland during the Polish-Soviet war of 1919–1921.<sup>9</sup>

**” The sacred myth of victory over Nazism serves to cover up the darker periods in Soviet and Russian history, and to legitimise all subsequent wars, including the aggression against Ukraine.**

The Russian narrative depicts the role of the Soviet army in the neighbouring countries in 1944–1945 as that of unequivocal liberators from German-Nazi occupation. For years Moscow has protested against the alleged “distortions of historical truth” by Russian neighbours who refuse to accept the triumphalist rhetoric of “liberation”. What particularly elicits demonstrations of displeasure by Russian officials is the removal of Soviet-era symbols from public space in the states of the former Soviet bloc, especially of monuments and memorials commemorating the “liberating” role of the Red Army. Russian decision makers officially insist that such commemorations are not only of moral, but also of political significance.<sup>10</sup> Examples of Russian disinformation activities in this field include: a hysterical media campaign which falsely claimed that the 2016 Polish law banning the propagation of Communism and other totalitarian systems allows for the vandalism of Soviet military cemeteries<sup>11</sup>; an anti-Czech media campaign triggered by the announcement by one of the boroughs of Prague, about a planned removal of the statue of a Soviet Field Marshal, Ivan Konev<sup>12</sup>, and of a memorial plaque honouring him; and finally, the Russia-inspired riots in Tallinn and a large-scale

cyber-attack on Estonia, following the removal of a monument to the “soldiers-liberators” from Tallinn’s city centre in 2007.

Resorting to its routine manipulative techniques, which include blatant distortion of historical facts, Russian historical propaganda increasingly exploits the theme of an alleged co-responsibility of the West and Poland for the outbreak of the world war in 1939. This theme is being used as a tool in the information-psychological war, which is waged by Russia against the West, designed in particular to weaken the position of those states within the Euro-Atlantic community that are advocates of determined resistance against Moscow’s aggressive foreign policy. The deliberate falsification of historical facts is part and parcel of a confrontational Cold War rhetoric, which for several years has overshadowed the memory of the common allied struggle back in 1941–1945 (the contribution of the Western allies into this fight is deliberately played down and glossed over). Among numerous official statements betraying such Cold War logic, President Putin’s speech at the Victory Day Parade in May 2015 deserves particular attention. In what was the second year of the war against Ukraine, and at a time when Russia was struggling with an economic crisis and Western sanctions, he in fact warned the West against a repetition of the scenario of the late 1930s, pointing out that at that time an “enlightened” Europe had underestimated the threat posed by Hitlerism, and appealed for “vigilance” in the face of contemporary challenges. In what was a clear jab at Washington, he also developed a theme of alleged dangers posed by efforts towards building a unipolar world order and by “bloc mentality”. By using such a transparent analogy, he was hinting that by disregarding Russia’s interests the West is fuelling the risk of a new war.

December 2019 saw further escalation of this narrative. This time, it was Poland that became the target of an unprecedented propaganda offensive led by President Putin in person. *Inter alia*, the president devoted almost his entire, hour-long speech (at an informal CIS summit) to castigate Poland for its alleged close collaboration with

<sup>9</sup> According to Polish and Russian historians, the main cause of high mortality among Soviet prisoners of war were infectious diseases that took the lives of 16,000–20,000 (while Russian propaganda most often cites the inflated number of 100,000).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the statement by Konstantin Kosachev, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Federation Council: ‘Объявить всемирным наследием’, *Российская газета*, 21 November 2019, [www.rg.ru](http://www.rg.ru).

<sup>11</sup> The law is intended to remove Communist symbols (including monuments) from public space, although it protects burial sites, graves and cemeteries; [prawo.sejm.gov.pl](http://prawo.sejm.gov.pl).

<sup>12</sup> K. Dębiec, ‘A crisis in the Czech Republic’s relations with China and Russia’, 2 October 2019, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

the German Third Reich before the Second World War. In subsequent days the allegations contained in the speech were echoed repeatedly by Russian officials and state-controlled media outlets. In one of the weekly news programs on the main Russian state TV channel, Poland was branded as a country whose responsibility for the outbreak of war was second only to that borne by the Third Reich. It was also accused of being “systemically anti-Semitic” while its government was supposedly expressing solidarity with Hitler’s plans for “the final solution of the Jewish question.” Therefore, the anchor claimed, it was not “by chance that Nazi extermination camps were located by the Nazis on Polish territory”.<sup>13</sup>

In this context, an evident change in the official Russian interpretation of the secret protocols to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact is telling – when compared not only with the interpretation prevailing in the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> but also with Soviet discourse (which, when it comes to other issues, is often replicated by the current official narrative). Until the late 1980s, Soviet authorities consistently denied the existence of the secret protocols dividing Central-Eastern Europe into German and Soviet zones of influence, while presenting the ‘non-aggression pact’ as motivated by purely ‘defensive’ intentions. In Putin’s Russia, the official perception of this pact has been increasingly positive; in May 2015, during a joint press conference with Angela Merkel, Putin firmly and unambiguously praised it, citing its vital

importance for the USSR’s national security.<sup>15</sup> The months and years that followed have seen repeated manifestations of an increasingly appreciative attitude towards the pact. It is no longer presented only as a forced step due to the anti-Soviet policy of Western Europe but also as a great achievement of Soviet diplomacy which Russians can be proud of. In June 2019, the original Soviet copy of the secret protocol was published for the first time<sup>16</sup> and displayed at an exhibition (“The beginning of the Second World War”) at the State Archive of the Russian Federation. The depiction of a patently aggressive treaty as a justified defensive measure suggests that preventive use of force against other states can be regarded as a legitimate means of pursuing national interests and strengthening one’s own security.

” **Waging its information-psychological warfare, Russia often resorts to the theme of an alleged co-responsibility of the West and Poland for the outbreak of the Second World War.**

This attitude towards the use of force in international relations is also manifested by the intentional militarisation of war memory, *inter alia* through demonstrations of Russian military power during the annual Victory Day parades in Moscow’s Red Square. While the display of military prowess has been part of these celebrations since 2008, the size of the military contingent in the parade held to celebrate the latest round anniversary in 2015 was unprecedented.<sup>17</sup> Along with Putin’s speech quoted above, it was clearly intended to draw

<sup>13</sup> See the recording of President Vladimir Putin’s speech available at the official website of the President of the Russian Federation, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru); and the recording of the TV programme aired on 29 December 2019 ‘«Вести недели» с Дмитрием Киселевым(HD) от 29.12.19’, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jSpIDeVLVs>).

<sup>14</sup> In December 1989, the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union condemned the fact of signing the secret protocol; ‘Постановление Съезда народных депутатов СССР о пакте Молотова-Риббентропа от 24.09.1989 г.’, документы XX века, [www.doc20vek.ru](http://www.doc20vek.ru).

<sup>15</sup> Similar arguments, referring to the great power’s vital interests, are used in relation to the Soviet invasion on Finland in November 1939. ‘Путин: СССР в войне с Финляндией хотел исправить ошибки 1917 года’, РИА Новости, 14 March 2013, [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

<sup>16</sup> The existence and the wording of the secret protocol were revealed in 1989, however its original Soviet copy was not published until 2019.

<sup>17</sup> For more on 2015 celebrations see M. Domańska, ‘Russia marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory over Nazism: What significance does it have in an epoch of global confrontation?’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 171, 20 May 2015, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

a parallel between the Soviet victory over Nazism and Russia's ongoing confrontation with the West.

With emphasis laid on triumphalist, military aspects, the myth of war appeals primarily to the image of the victorious state and strong state power (as personified by the army), while the human dimension of the war is often neglected. In the official narrative, the war is associated not so much with the suffering of the nation as with festive military parades. The ostentatious exploitation of military and patriotic symbols that state propaganda dazzles the Russian public with, often leads to a carnivalisation and trivialisation of the theme of war among society itself, and to the general public's conventional participation in strongly ideologised rituals; the overall aim thereof is to make the public view the use of force as a natural and justified tool of Russia's foreign policy.<sup>18</sup>

The sacred, messianic myth of victory and "liberation", the blatantly distorted narrative about historical facts and the justification of the use of force as a tool of foreign policy are all intended to uphold Moscow's efforts to revise the 21<sup>st</sup> century European order in a way that would best suit its interests. The narrative of the liberation of Europe by the Soviet empire as the only genuine opponent of Nazism serves to legitimise the "Yalta order" which marked the apogee of Russia-USSR great power status. Moscow's current geopolitical ambitions build upon two main elements of this order. Although they are implicitly present in international politics, Russia's claim to their recognition and legitimisation by the international community is fundamentally contradictory to the *acquis* of international law. The first one is the division of Europe into zones of influence and entrusting great powers with keeping these zones stable; nowadays, this idea would imply the recognition of the post-Soviet area as a sphere of exclusive influence, alongside the privileged interests of Russia. The other is the concept of "non-equal

sovereignty", where only great powers with strong military potential enjoy full sovereignty, while the independence of other states is limited by definition: they are expected to consider the interests of the powerful international actors as the main guideline for their foreign and domestic policies. By this logic, Central and East European countries are expected to embody Russian security interests rather than their own, which would be tantamount to the creation of a sort of security buffer zone in this region. The West's positive response to Russian demands would thus enable Moscow to intervene – in the name of "stabilising" the international situation – in the European security architecture that stems from NATO membership and EU integration. At the same time, any reciprocal influence of the West on Russia's activities in its exclusive zone of influence and beyond would prove to be illusory, due to the well-developed defence mechanisms of the Russian authoritarian regime, including the strive to tighten Kremlin control over the Russian information sphere.

**” Positive perception of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact serves to legitimise preventive use of force against other states, as a means of pursuing Russia's national interests.**

The biased narrative of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War found its most striking practical application in the anti-Ukrainian smear campaign that was launched in late 2013 and which preceded Russian armed attack on that country. It was intended to discredit the Ukrainian revolution and justify Russian military response to Ukraine's European aspirations. The latter were perceived by the Kremlin as a serious threat to Russia's great-power interests in the post-Soviet area. The emotional force of the war lexicon was revived at this time: while pro-European Ukrainians were most often called "fascists" or "Nazis", the accusations of an alleged revival of Ukrainian "anti-Semitism" and "pogroms" were intended to have the strongest propaganda firepower in the international arena. The European Union and the United States were in turn accused of supporting

<sup>18</sup> Participants of mass events organised on 9 May frequently dress their children up in military costumes (this type of clothing is increasingly more prevalent); children's push-chairs are quite often made up as plywood tanks or jets.

the “revival of Ukrainian Nazism” (“Banderism”) in their alleged attempt to destabilise Russia through another “colour revolution” at its borders – this time the “fascist” one. The purported NATO plans to base its ships and missiles in Crimea were presented as another reason for Russia’s preventive military attack against Ukraine.

**” Russian historical narrative is designed to legitimise the “Yalta order”: the division of Europe into spheres of influence and the concept of “non-equal sovereignty”.**

From the outset, this attack has been depicted as a mission to protect ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population living in Ukraine from the alleged “Nazi” menace, although the Kremlin *de facto* viewed it as a quasi-Cold War ‘proxy war’ waged against the West for domination in the Russian “traditional sphere of influence”. Thus, the European aspirations among Ukrainian society were not only disavowed (in accordance with the Yalta-style perception of societies being an object of international politics, rather than a subject), but were also incorporated into the leitmotif of the Russian politics of memory, which is the myth of an eternal threat coming from the West. At the same time, the very idea of Ukrainian statehood was discredited, by marshalling arguments that echoed Soviet propaganda from the turn of 1930s and 1940s, which back then served to justify the aggression against neighbouring countries. In the spring of 2014, Putin upheld Russia’s violation of security guarantees for Ukraine, enshrined in the Budapest memorandum of 1994, as a result of the “interruption of the continuity of Ukrainian statehood” brought about by the “revolution”, which – according to him – legitimately nullified all Moscow’s commitments vis-a-vis Kyiv.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See ‘Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов о ситуации на Украине’, Президент России, 4 March 2014, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru). The Budapest Memorandum is an agreement signed in December 1994, pursuant to which the United States, Russia and the United Kingdom provided security assurances against threats or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine in exchange for Ukraine’s nuclear disarmament.

In 2014 Russia *de facto* revived the Brezhnev doctrine (the doctrine of “limited sovereignty”)<sup>20</sup> that had been devised to justify military interventions in fellow socialist states as a means of self-defence against the hostile ideologies of capitalism and liberal democracy. Nowadays, as Moscow views the post-Soviet area as a sphere of its vital interests, the role of this hostile ideology is once again performed by the liberal-democratic values of “colour revolutions”. In an attempt to counterbalance the centrifugal tendencies in the post-Soviet space, Moscow is promulgating the notion of the “Russian world”: it portrays the former USSR as a single universe of Russian language and culture, cemented by common historical experience, including the brotherhood of arms during the Great Patriotic War. Ukraine and Belarus play a special role in the “Russian world” project<sup>21</sup> as parts of the “triune Russian nation”, connected by “eternal” ties with Russia (these countries are thus not viewed as fully sovereign).<sup>22</sup>

Due to its ‘sacred’, ‘messianic’ nature, the Great Patriotic War seems to serve as an archetype of all “defensive” wars fought later by the USSR and Russia (from military interventions in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, through Afghanistan in 1979, to the wars in Donbass and Syria,

<sup>20</sup> This term refers to the Soviet policy formulated in 1968 in order to justify the collective military intervention of the Warsaw Pact members in Czechoslovakia. The Brezhnev doctrine proclaimed that any threat to socialist rule in any state of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe was a threat to the socialist community as a whole.

<sup>21</sup> The “Russian world” is a concept of a civilisational community comprising both ethnic Russians and representatives of other nations of the former USSR who identify themselves with the Russian language, Russian or Soviet culture and – often – the cultural aspects of the Orthodox religion. In the 2000s, this concept has become a tool of Russian foreign policy: a component of Moscow’s soft power as well as ideological justification for Russia’s great-power ambitions in the post-Soviet area (in their political, economic and military dimension).

<sup>22</sup> In order to prove the “eternal” nature of these bonds Russia presents the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland in 1939 (later these lands have been called ‘western Belarus’ and ‘western Ukraine’) as a legitimate recovery of territories held by Russia “from time immemorial” (the same argument applies to territories annexed by the Russian Empire during the partitions of Poland in 18<sup>th</sup> century).

waged since 2014 and 2015 respectively<sup>23</sup>). Each time their goal was to fend off invented or deliberately exaggerated threats, including through operations carried out in remote areas – in line with the logic of forward defence. The need to legitimise Moscow’s great-power ambitions has led in recent years to a positive re-evaluation of those armed interventions that were long absent from the canon of Russia’s politics of memory, reflected *inter alia* by two recent initiatives from State Duma deputies. The first one proposed annulling the resolution condemning Soviet aggression against Afghanistan, passed in 1989 by the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union. The second proposed granting the status of military veterans to those who took part in the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. Although these initiatives have so far not translated into legal acts or won official support from decision-makers, their implementation cannot be ruled out in the future, should Russia step up its confrontational course in the field of history and ideology. Against this background, the narrative of state media outlets on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet intervention in Hungary (in October 2016) deserves particular attention, as it clearly demonstrated the actual goals of Russian historical discourse. In one of the TV programs, the Hungarian uprising was branded the “first colour revolution” in history, allegedly orchestrated by Western intelligence services implementing “techniques of turning peaceful protest into bloody chaos” and using Nazi militias to attain their goals, while the bloody crackdown

on the insurgents was called “restoration of the socialist rule of law”<sup>24</sup>.

### The limited impact of the Russian historical narrative

The Russian great power narrative exploiting the war mythology is targeted at three main groups and has a different appeal to each of them. The first group is the Russian public; success stories in the field of international politics – both in the past and present – serve to overshadow Russia’s deepening economic backwardness and the ossification of its political system, and to legitimise the authoritarian regime. Moreover, as the 1945 victory is actually the only historical event that resonates with large groups of the society, it helps to overcome – at least partially and on an *ad hoc* basis – the social atomisation inherited from the Soviet era, so as to make Russians feel united and rally around the government. Although Russian citizens increasingly expect the authorities to focus on socio-economic problems, the great-power narrative and – to a lesser extent – the anti-Western propaganda that complements it still find considerable support among the people<sup>25</sup>. However, the mobilising potential of militarism is much weaker – social support for Russia’s great power ambitions wanes whenever the fear of a “real”, “big” war emerges.<sup>26</sup>

**” Russian politics of memory resonates mainly with the domestic audience, whereas abroad it is much less influential and sometimes even counterproductive.**

The second target group constitutes the post-Soviet elites and societies. Russia exploits the narrative of the ‘brotherhood of arms’ in order to cement the community of the “Russian world”. In parallel, it discredits the opponents of Russian hegemony over this area by equating them with “fascists”.

<sup>23</sup> The declared goal of the Russian intervention in Syria was to organise “forward defence” against Islamic terrorism, whereas the actual goal involved waging a proxy war against the US (in order to prevent the success of another ‘colour revolution’ and facilitate Russia’s return to the Middle East geopolitical game). The symbolism of Great Patriotic War was present even there: in May 2018 an Immortal Regiment march was organised for the first time in Syria (such marches are organised annually, on 9<sup>th</sup> May, both in Russia and among Russian diaspora abroad, to commemorate those who fought in the 1941–1945 war). During this celebration not only the portraits of Great Patriotic War soldiers but also photographs of those who were killed in the “fight against terrorism” were displayed. ‘«Приводим детей, чтобы они не забывали про свои корни». Как прошел «Бессмертный полк» за рубежом’, Газета.Ru, 8 May 2018, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

<sup>24</sup> “«Вести недели» с Дмитрием Киселевым”, 23 October 2016.

<sup>25</sup> See public opinion polls available at [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).

<sup>26</sup> ‘Хотят ли русские войны. Война и террор в восприятии россиян’, Левада-Центр, 23 March 2016, [www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru).



This is intended to serve the overarching goal of coercing its neighbours into economic, political and military integration with Russia. However, this strategy has not only brought limited results so far but often proved to be counterproductive. Although in many countries of the post-Soviet area the war against Nazism is a constituent part of collective memories and the official politics of memory, the use of war mythology for the legitimisation of Russia's great power ambitions generally incites growing resistance. This is particularly so when it comes to Moscow's evident readiness to maintain its sphere of influence by military means, through another 'holy' and 'defensive' war, if necessary. The year 2014 was a watershed: the annexation of Crimea and the Russian armed attack on Donbass revealed the essence of Russian strategy, rang alarm bells among post-Soviet leaders, and prompted them to revise – at least partially – their politics of memory, enhancing the anti-imperial and anti-colonial aspects thereof. This not only applies in the obvious case of Ukraine<sup>27</sup>, but also in the far less obvious case of Belarus, Russia's most loyal ally. Just as Belarusian authorities have been seeking channels for dialogue and cooperation with the West in recent years, they have also been gradually reshaping their politics of memory with more emphasis on those periods in Belarusian history that exemplify the independent course of the state and national development. Although these changes have not yet affected the canonical Soviet narrative of the "Great Patriotic War", deeply rooted in the collective mentality of Belarusians, the war is presented primarily in terms of national tragedy, and not the triumph of the army and state power.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Following the "Revolution of Dignity", Ukraine started a process of radical de-Communistation and de-Sovietisation of its politics of memory. The term "Great Patriotic War" was supplanted by "Second World War". The narrative of a historically shaped community of Ukrainians and Russians has also been abandoned. For more see T.A. Olszański, *The great decommunisation. Ukraine's wartime historical policy*, OSW, Warszawa 2017, [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

<sup>28</sup> However, in October 2019 Alyaksandr Lukashenka went as far as to assert that the Great Patriotic War was one of the "foreign" wars that had raged through Belarusian territory over centuries, bringing the Belarusian nation huge losses and suffering. 'Эксклюзіўнае інтэрв'ю Прэзідэнта Рэспублікі Беларусь Аляксандра Лукашэнкі тэлеканалу «Хабар»', 23 October 2019, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

The third group to be targeted is the "collective West", i.e. the political establishment and societies of Europe and the United States. Beyond local groups of Russian diaspora, the sacred-messianic narrative of Soviet victory has a marginal impact there, as Western societies have developed their own coherent narratives about the Second World War. Not only are they much less biased than the Russian one, owing to the freedom of historical research and pluralistic public debates, but they are also based on themes that fundamentally differ from Russian leitmotifs. Apart from local heroic-patriotic myths, it is above all the reluctance to militarise historical memory and the recognition of civilian suffering on both sides of the front. In addition, in the West the condemnation of Nazi Germany is often just one aspect of the condemnation of all totalitarian regimes, including the Soviet one. This approach was reflected in resolutions passed by international organisations, which provoked harsh criticism from Moscow (for instance, the 2019 European Parliament's resolution which labelled the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact as an immediate cause of the outbreak of the Second World War, and the 2009 resolution of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly equating the crimes perpetrated by Nazism and Communism).

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Ahead of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, one should expect Russia to intensify its historical propaganda campaign<sup>29</sup>. In November 2019, Moscow reiterated its demand that the UN General Assembly pass a resolution in May 2020, adding the victory over Nazism and

<sup>29</sup> In November 2019, when discussing the May 2020 celebrations agenda, Putin reiterated: "We should remember what brought this tragedy that took tens of millions of human lives; we should remember who collaborated with the Nazis, who encouraged them to go to the East; we should remind everyone that it was the Soviet Union that played a crucial role in defeating the aggressor and liberating Europe and the world". 'Заседание Совета по международным отношениям', Президент России, 29 November 2019, [www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru).

memorials to soldiers fighting against Nazism to the World Heritage List (the official purpose of the initiative is to “prevent the rebirth of Nazism”<sup>30</sup>). Granting special protection to the victory obtained in 1945 would enable Russia to exert moral and legal pressure on other states (or even to interfere in their internal affairs) on issues that are politically sensitive for the Kremlin, such as the legal status of monuments commemorating Soviet soldiers or claims made against Moscow in connection with the annexation of a number of

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<sup>30</sup> In 2019, this initiative was lent official support from the members of the Council of the Interparliamentary Assembly of the Commonwealth of Independent States and by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

territories back in 1939–1945. Russia could also demand restrictions on the freedom of historical research in other countries, thus trying to draw a veil over dark chapters in Soviet history. While adoption of the postulated resolution remains highly uncertain, the very debate over it would furnish Russia with another tool and platform for its “memory war” as a component of a broader anti-Western, great-power ideological offensive. The less that Russia has to offer in the future, both to its own citizens and the international community, the more importance the myth of Great Patriotic War will acquire, remaining a peculiar allegory of eternal return to the golden age of bygone superpower status.