



# **FORWARD, INTO THE PAST!** RUSSIA'S POLITICS OF MEMORY IN THE SERVICE OF 'ETERNAL' AUTHORITARIANISM

**Maria Domańska, Jadwiga Rogoża**

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AUTHORITARIANISM

Maria Domańska, Jadwiga Rogoża

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## MAIN POINTS

- The specific nature of the Russia's politics of memory stems from two types of determinants. These are systemic factors originating from a particular socio-cultural substrate, formed mainly in the course of the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century history, as well as the present-day interests of the authoritarian regime. The latter results in an extreme politicisation of the issues relating to the past and leads to alternative viewpoints being excluded from the debate. The narrative of memory is meant to legitimise the authoritarian system of government as being optimal for Russia, and thus to perpetuate the model of state-society relationship that serves the Kremlin's interests.
- The politics of memory is supposed to legitimise the international image of Russia, the roles it aspires to in the global arena, its great power interests and its aggressive foreign policy. The aim is to justify Moscow's demand for special influence on the geopolitical shape of today's Europe, and also on the European security architecture. The authorities follow the Soviet matrix of perceiving the country's history, with its distinctly anti-Western features. This stems from the fundamental importance of the Soviet era as the peak of Russia's international status and is meant to help realise the Kremlin's desired vision for the contemporary international order.
- The authorities of the Russian Federation perceive discussions about the past as an element of national security. This leads to strong ideologisation and even mythologisation of the country's history. The repressive state apparatus seeks to safeguard an 'appropriate' direction of historical studies, via an instrumentalised approach to criminal and administrative law, and to curb the freedom of historical research by restricting access to historical archives. The education system is designed to indoctrinate young generations in the spirit of neo-Sovietism and to militarise thinking about the past and the present.
- Russia's politics of memory rests upon the sanctification of its victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) as the key event in the country's history, which constitutes a kind of founding myth of the Putin era. The cult of this triumph is accompanied by a return to the Soviet interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, which had been deprecated in the 1990s. This cult is based on propagating the idea of Russian messianism, covering up dark chapters in Soviet history, and justifying the Stalinist terror and the territorial annexations of the 1930s and 1940s. These efforts serve an important function

in the country's contemporary foreign policy, as the Great Patriotic War is something of an archetype of military operations conducted by Moscow in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

- The image of war, which has become a pillar of the triumphalist official narrative, is becoming increasingly mythologised within Russian society: with the passing of generations of first-hand witnesses to these events, their image as a humanitarian tragedy, a drama for the nation and individuals, a continent in ruins, is fading away. Instead, we are seeing the creation of a war myth as an exclusively heroic act, a path to victory, a desirable way of solving international conflicts, a triumph for the state and the rise of its prestige.
- The ease with which militarised historical memory has been instilled in the public consciousness stems from the specific Russian political culture. Its traditional features include a cult of strength and a 'culture of violence', a widespread use and acceptance of violence as a method of managing political and social relations on many levels – the authority against the citizen, the stronger against the weaker, domestic violence, and violence as a means of education. The militarisation of historical memory and making the state its sole 'custodian' are also facilitated by public acceptance of the primacy of the state over the individual, alongside the conviction that Russia is predestined to act as a great power. Indoctrination in a great-power and militaristic fashion begins as early as preschool and then continues during state education through the contents of textbooks and history lessons, as well as patriotic education programmes.
- One of the most effective tools for shaping the above mentioned public consciousness is popular culture. In a simplified, entertaining form, it instils beliefs about the power of the state, the continuity of the 'thousand-year-old Russia', and the 'eternal order' for which there is no alternative, while pointing to the unpatriotic nature of critical attitudes towards the authorities. Films and TV series depict historical events from different eras (the period of the Baptism of Rus, the Russian Empire, the October Revolution, right up to the Soviet era), but with new interpretations supportive of the Kremlin's present-day policy. They include those that prop up the cult of the repressive apparatus and the military as the eternal pillars of Russia.
- The politics of memory pursued by those in power is supported and implemented by a host of organisations formally independent of the government.

An important tool of the Kremlin in this area is the Russian Orthodox Church. It carries on with its traditional mission of legitimising the secular power, emphasising the continuity of the 'thousand-year-old Russian state' and its great power aspirations, the constancy of its conservative values and its perennial distinctness from Western civilisation. The so-called GONGOs (organisations which are formally non-governmental, but in fact controlled and financed by the authorities) are involved in the implementation of this strategy. They operate in the sphere of patriotic and historical education, but are also used to launch attacks (including physical ones) on opponents of the Kremlin's historical memory. Further contributions are made by Cossack organisations which, through references to the Cossack past and imperial traditions, strengthen the image of the state as the heir to the Russian Empire.

- Russian society easily absorbs the ideological and historical content propagated by the authorities as it falls upon the fertile ground of Russian political culture, traditionally centered around state power and the imperial status of the state. One manifestation of this is a steady rise in public support for Joseph Stalin as a historical figure and statesman. The dictator's popularity is partly a result of his indirect rehabilitation by the Kremlin, primarily in the context of victory in World War II. However, this trend also has a socio-economic background with a hint of protest – being a manifestation of social frustration caused by livelihood problems and corrupt elites. For most of his apologists, Stalin embodies not only the power of the empire-state, but also social justice, the welfare state and modesty or even asceticism on the part of the rulers.
- Although the majority of citizens are susceptible to the Kremlin's narrative of memory, the opposite trend can be seen in certain segments of society – an interest in uncovering the dark and tragic chapters of the nation's past, delving into the history of one's own region, city or family (rather than that of the empire), highlighting the costs of building a great power with its glorious victories, especially in relation to the Stalinist period. In Russia these activities have been dubbed the 'second memory' (or alternative memory), in opposition to the heroic and state-centric 'first memory'. The 'second memory' is a collective (yet uncoordinated) effort of the younger generation, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of both victims and executioners, who, unlike their parents' generation, are ready and eager to examine their difficult history and do it in an innovative and appealing way. The initiative is facilitated by widespread Internet access, which makes it possible



to conduct research, carry out educational and cultural activities, run projects, and seek supporters and funding virtually independent of the state. This process may gain strength as Russians become more and more disillusioned with the authorities and the overall condition of the state, which increasingly fails to meet the needs and aspirations of its citizens.

## INTRODUCTION

Representations of the past, assessments of its significance and consequences, as well as historical myths, are an inseparable part of individual and collective identity. Indeed, history is a building block for identities of various groups, which transforms the sphere of public discussions about past events into a field of eternal symbolic conflicts.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, representations of the past are shaped according to the interests of the ruling elite and serve as a political instrument for the preservation and succession of power. Attempts to politicise these issues are commonplace: history is ‘too important to be left to the historians’, because it provides models for the organisation of the state and builds a positive image of the national community, thus helping to strengthen society’s loyalty to the authorities and mobilise it around the goals they set. This applies, to a varying extent, both at the internal political level and to the international image of a state and the roles it plays in the regional or global arena. In democratic systems, however, the activities of the ruling elite in the field of history and the pursuit of its interests are limited by the primacy of freedom in scientific research and are subject to public scrutiny. In authoritarian systems the authorities usurp the monopoly on shaping the desired version of the past and harness the entire institutional system of the state, including the coercive apparatus, to protect it.

Ideas and activities aimed at shaping collective memory and historical discourse in a manner corresponding to the interests of those in power constitute the politics of memory. It involves the creative use of symbolic resources present in the public sphere and internalised by recipients, as well as the construction of new threads of the historical narrative. The politics of memory takes on special significance in nations with an unestablished collective identity, which are internally divided on the issue of choosing and interpreting past events intended to unite the community.

In the 1990s, the authorities of the Russian Federation refrained from actively formulating its politics of memory, since it was too closely associated with the Soviet-era state ideology imposed from above. Top-down activities in this area intensified after 2000. It was both a consequence of Vladimir Putin’s declared efforts to strengthen the state and a response to narratives of memory in neighbouring countries and resolutions of international organisations critical of Soviet totalitarianism, which were at odds with the interests of the Russian

<sup>1</sup> О. Малинова, ‘Коммеморация исторических событий как инструмент символической политики: возможности сравнительного анализа’, *Полития* 2017, № 4 (87), p. 7.

regime. A progressive re-Sovietisation of Russia's politics of memory – both in terms of its content and the instruments for protecting the 'ideological righteousness' – means that it bears all the hallmarks of propaganda.

Massive propaganda campaigns under Putin's rule were usually carried out before the milestone anniversaries of the victory over Nazism.<sup>2</sup> Since 2014, however, there has been an unprecedented intensification of these activities and a brutalisation of the accompanying narratives. On the one hand, it is directly related to attempts to justify Russia's geopolitical ambitions,<sup>3</sup> including its aggression against Ukraine. On the other – it is designed to legitimise the Russian authoritarian regime that is increasingly dysfunctional across the economic, social and political dimensions. The scale of lies and manipulations about the past is particularly remarkable in the case of the 20<sup>th</sup> century history. They are peddled in the spirit of 'post-truth' and increasingly rehabilitate Stalinism, which has led to permanent 'memory wars' between Moscow and the neighbouring countries. The latter, as victims of Soviet totalitarianism, challenge the core messages of the official Russian historiography.

The first signs that Russia's politics of memory was taking shape came in 2002–2003, when president Putin, at meetings with historians, suggested a 'patriotic' approach to the content of school textbooks covering Russian history.<sup>4</sup> This effort took on a more comprehensive form in response to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine and in the context of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, which was marked in 2005. The anniversary was seen by the Russian establishment as an ideal opportunity to use the symbolic resource associated with this victory for the purpose of building Russian national identity. Since then, the cult of the Great Patriotic War (Russian: *Великая Отечественная война*) has become the pillar of the Kremlin's politics of memory. It has involved an elevation of the Soviet period for the purposes of Putin's political regime as it strives to reinforce the public's conviction that Russia has 'got up from its knees' and restored its great power status.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For more on the dynamics and organisation of Russian propaganda campaigns see B. Cichoński, L. Pietrzak, *Propaganda historyczna Rosji w latach 2004–2009*, Biuro Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego, Warszawa 2009, bbn.gov.pl.

<sup>3</sup> The terms 'geopolitical' and 'geopolitics' refer in this text to the perception of international politics by the Russian authorities. It is reflected in their appreciation of the territorial potential of the state, the political role of natural resources, or the ability to maintain geographical spheres of influence as the criteria of international power.

<sup>4</sup> M. Ostrowska, 'Znaczenie rosyjskiej polityki historycznej dla odbudowy statusu mocarstwowego państwa', *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* 2010, nr 1–2 (t. 41), p. 130.

<sup>5</sup> 'Историческая политика в современной России. Путь в «сужающемся тоннеле»?', Гефтер, 22 June 2016, gefter.ru.

Securitisation of the politics of memory (namely its perception as an element of national security – see Chapter I.3) began in 2006–2007. At a meeting with teachers in 2007, Putin expressed criticism of the authors of textbooks who allegedly portrayed the past in line with the interests of Western grant-givers.<sup>6</sup> This gained an additional context in light of his anti-US speech delivered in Munich the same year. In 2009, the then president, Dmitry Medvedev, set up a special commission to counter the falsification of history. The same year, the *National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020* stated that any attempts to revise Russia's historic role would be perceived as having a negative impact on state security. With little to show from its work, the commission was dissolved in 2012, but active efforts to shape the official historical canon gained momentum.

While during the first decade of Putin's rule – as president (from 2000–2008) and then prime minister – the state administration was not particularly involved in historical issues, this changed around 2011. For example, top officials began to head organisations that promoted a desired vision of the past and speak frequently on the issues of history and the politics of memory. As a result, during Putin's third presidential term (2012–2018), this policy acquired its current shape. A powerful impulse for the authorities in this area was provided by the circumstances of Putin's return to presidency. The backdrop to this event was formed by several months of political protests in Moscow in late 2011 and early 2012 (construed by the Kremlin as the result of a plot by Western intelligence services) and declining economic growth. These were followed by further challenges, which included: Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity at the turn of 2013–2014, perceived by the Kremlin as a threat to Putin's regime (both in terms of domestic stability and Russia's position abroad); EU and US sanctions imposed in response to the armed aggression against Ukraine; the financial and economic crisis of 2014–2016; and finally, forecasts of long-term economic stagnation and a mood of discontent and protest among the impoverished population building up from 2018.

After some fifteen years of actively constructing an 'ideologically correct' version of Russian history, the official canon of historical propaganda should be considered as fully elucidated. Its importance for the domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Federation and its consequences for Russian – Western relations are unquestionable. This results in a pressing need for a comprehensive

<sup>6</sup> 'Стенографический отчет о встрече с делегатами Всероссийской конференции преподавателей гуманитарных и общественных наук', Президент России, 21 June 2007, kremlin.ru.

analysis of the background, objectives and instruments of Putin's 'war over history', as well as its reception by Russian citizens and impact on public attitudes. The following paper is a response to this demand.

Chapter I outlines the systemic determinants of Russia's politics of memory. These primarily include the interests of the authoritarian regime and the imperial identity permanently embedded in the collective psychology of Russians. They result in the extreme politicisation and securitisation of historical issues by the authorities; they are presented almost exclusively in the context of national security and existential threats. This leads to historical matters being transformed into ideology and state mythology.

Chapter II presents various aspects of the cult of victory over Nazism, which constitutes the warp of Putin's historical narrative. It performs the three most important functions from the authoritarian regime's point of view: legitimisation of an aggressive foreign policy, militarisation of the public perception of the past and present, and rehabilitation of state terror.

Chapter III presents the most important instruments of the politics of memory and the channels of its influence, designed to shape the desired social identity and political culture. These include: administrative and criminal laws, restricted access to state archives, the moulding of a 'Homo neo-Sovieticus' by the education system, and the use of popular culture as a potent carrier of desired ideological content. The chapter also describes the institutions and organisations that serve the Kremlin in supporting and implementing its propaganda version of history, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, Cossack associations, or various GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations).

Chapter IV outlines the public reception of the past and the Kremlin's politics of memory. It identifies the sources of Russians' susceptibility to manipulative propaganda by the ruling elite, including a political and social culture centered around the state and power, as well as Russia's imperial status. It also describes the phenomenon of the cult of power and violence entrenched in this culture. At the same time, it draws attention to the gradual transformation of Russian society and takes a closer look at the phenomenon of the "alternative memory", i.e. the interest, especially among the younger generations, in uncovering the dark and tragic pages of domestic history and studying the fate of local communities and individuals who fell victim to history, instead of focusing exclusively on the great history of the empire.

# I. THE SYSTEMIC DETERMINANTS OF RUSSIA'S POLITICS OF MEMORY

## 1. The authoritarian context of the narrative about the past

**The specific nature of Russia's politics of memory stems from two types of determinants which define its most important functions – compensatory and defensive. The first of these are systemic factors** originating from a particular socio-cultural substrate, formed mainly over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's turbulent history. These factors include: the discontinuity of the state system; the legacy of totalitarian repression; the repeated destruction of the elites and the social fabric in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the absence of intergenerational bonds and discontinuity of memory; and the balancing of entire social groups on the verge of physical survival. Totalitarian oppression produced a growing social atomisation, a result of deliberate social engineering by the authorities which exploited the myth of the enemy and widespread public fear of denunciation. The generations formed under these conditions developed a defence mechanism – the habit of doublethink. Their most common characteristics include fear of open cultivation of individual and family memory, pragmatic subordination to the official imperial narrative, and seeking respite therein for an acute lack of rootedness. The 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a close with new fundamental challenges to the collective identity: the collapse of the USSR, a deep socio-economic and political crisis, and also the need to build a nation-state upon the ruins of the empire. Over the first decade of the Russian Federation's existence, the search for the 'national idea' was chaotic due to the lack of a well-established, 'canonical' narrative covering the key events from the past that could provide a reference point for the new Russian identity.<sup>7</sup> Two decades later, that 'national idea' has still not developed into a coherent identity project. It has now been replaced by a vague slogan of 'patriotism'<sup>8</sup>, understood as state patriotism – closely associated with loyalty to those in power.

**Russia's politics of memory is also determined by the current interests of the authoritarian regime.** The ousting of politics in its classical sense from

<sup>7</sup> In 1996, in response to an appeal by president Boris Yeltsin, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* announced a contest for a 'national idea' – a coherent narrative based on common values that could unite all Russians. Both bottom-up and top-down attempts to develop such an idea have failed so far.

<sup>8</sup> Putin called patriotism a national idea in February 2016. He had previously used the term 'national idea' to describe issues such as the competitiveness of the state, economy and citizens (2004), and 'preservation of the nation' (2011). See Г. Перемитин, 'Путин назвал единственно возможную для России национальную идею', РБК, 3 February 2016, rbc.ru.

public life has resulted in an extreme politicisation of the issues of the past. The eradication of pluralism of opinion from discussions about history is a logical consequence of the systemic struggle against freedom of speech and the suppression of political competition, free media and independent civil society structures. History becomes another sphere of the state's activity – as the guardian of political orthodoxy. The historical narrative is meant to legitimise the authoritarian model of government as being optimal for Russia, and thus to perpetuate the type of state-society relationship that serves the Kremlin's interests. The breakup of the USSR left the elite with the belief that the key threat to both the security of the ruling class and the country's position in the international arena (meaning above all the ability to block external democratisation impulses) is the weakness of the executive power and its inability to fully control domestic socio-political processes. Such a conviction is common in authoritarian systems, but in the Russian Federation it is reinforced by the recent experience of state collapse. A view has taken hold that a dismantling of the authoritarian model (deemed traditional for Russia) in the vein of Gorbachev or Yeltsin poses a mortal threat to the vital interests of a narrow elite. This conviction is compounded by the specific nature of the Putin regime, which – being much more personalised and less institutionalised than the Soviet one – is inherently more vulnerable to shocks. Thus, the desire to fully control the domestic situation in order to prevent another 'smuta' (a period of turmoil and state weakness) has become the *idée fixe* of the generation in power.

**Russia's politics of memory thus reflects an approach to the past that is typical of undemocratic states attempting to build an artificial community of interests between the government and society.** This attitude is based on two main elements: highlighting only those aspects of collective memory which invoke the evil that 'others' have done to 'us', and denying or suppressing the guilt of the authorities for the wrongs inflicted on citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Several fundamental assumptions can be seen here, which automatically lead to a biased selection of the stories about the past of the country and the nation. The first of these holds that the only driving force in the creation of national history is the state, while the nation, society and citizens are the objects of action rather than the subjects of history and politics. According to this

<sup>9</sup> E. Langenbacher, 'Collective Memory as a Factor in Political Culture and International Relations' [in:] E. Langenbacher, Y. Shain (eds.), *Power and the Past. Collective Memory and International Relations*, Georgetown University Press, 2010, p. 37.

narrative, there is no past and society without the state and state power, and the latter in turn cannot exist without an empire (great power status). The culture of dialogue and consensus in the ruler–citizen relationship is rejected in favour of the culture of obedience and state violence as the main regulators of socio-political relations. In this view, political repression – a special manifestation of the state’s monopoly on institutionalised violence – is regarded not as a violation of the social contract, but an act of restoring order.

The second assumption is the dogma of a fundamental compatibility of the interests of the government and the people. It stems from the Slavophile belief in an organic symbiosis between the rulers and the ruled, which results from voluntary subordination. According to this inherently patriarchal, paternalistic vision, the authority of the government is based on trust and faith rather than legal guarantees. Liberal constitutionalism is thus rejected. Every conflict between the state and the citizen is perceived as a dissonance disturbing this natural harmony and interpreted as a consequence of external instigation or fake news – the latter serving as a tool in international information warfare.

The third assumption holds that in order to maintain the semblance of convergence between the national interest and the narrowly perceived interest of the elite, the politics of memory needs to shape the views of Russian society regarding international realities. The Kremlin treats foreign policy (both successes in this field and external threats) as the most important means of legitimising the regime. Its significance has grown as the impact of other legitimising factors – economic, political and social – has diminished. Indeed, the specific nature of the Russian political and economic model makes it impossible to find sustainable foundations for economic development and raising the living standards of the impoverished population. An ideological void, a lack of vision for the future, and the primacy of control over development are all clear to see. The authorities are also struggling with a lack of adequate language to describe contemporary Russia. Their rhetoric on state modernisation rings false and creates a dissonance with the rigid, centralised institutional model and an economy consumed by systemic corruption. The Kremlin is trying to fill this ideological void and attain legitimacy, not so much in domestic policy and a forward-looking approach, but in foreign policy and resuscitation of the glorious past.



## 2. The imperial identity

**Apart from domestic political goals, “Project Past” is designed to legitimise the image and the international roles the Russian Federation aspires to, its great power interests and aggressive foreign policy** – not only in the eyes of Russians, but also the rest of the world. In this dimension, the adopted narrative often clashes with counter-narratives created by other actors in international relations.

The most important factor that informs the thinking of Kremlin decision makers about foreign policy and the choice of its instruments is the insurmountable inferiority complex, an effect of the ‘phantom pains’ following the collapse of the Soviet empire. A long and difficult farewell to an empire is not an exclusively Russian experience, but it involves a special trauma in this case. It stems from the continental character of the Russian empire, which makes the search for a new identity even more difficult, and from serious barriers to economic development that further aggravate the complex of being a ‘second-rate power’.

Due to these interests of the authoritarian regime, the ruling elite in the Putin era has decided to return to the traditional – understandable and socially resonant – identity of Russia as a great power aspiring to play a global role. To this end, a politics of memory is employed that follows straight from the Soviet matrix of perceiving the country’s past, with its distinctly anti-Western features.

**The Soviet templates have been chosen for several reasons.** The first is the temporal proximity to the USSR and its superpower status. The second is the interests and mentality of the key beneficiaries of Putinism, who are mainly former officers of the Soviet secret services, but also military personnel. These people were formed by the Cold War confrontation with the West and perceive history and contemporary international relations as a zero-sum game – a field of confrontation and warfare between armies and intelligence services. The choice of Soviet templates for the politics of memory also makes it possible to tap into a readily available symbolic resource, which many Russians still hold dear. It is an easy answer to the problems of building a national identity: it seeks to invalidate discussions on ethnic, political or civic nation-building, and offer a ready-made model of an ‘imperial nation’ instead. The imperial narrative thus provides a sense of continuity in a volatile environment. Putin cited this need for identity security to justify the reinstatement of the Soviet melody of the national anthem in 2000 (“people should have the feeling that they haven’t lost everything”). The fundamentally unequal government-society

relations and the exclusion of the public from the political process are offset by an ostensible sense of personal or collective empowerment by the might of the state. **The map of Russia as evidence of this might** (in its geographical, geopolitical, military and strategic dimensions) **is supposed to replace the ballot as the material expression of the citizens' political agency.** Being part of a bigger entity and sharing its glory means realising one's desire for uniqueness and status.

**The imperial-great power narrative of history is designed to advance Russia's desired vision of a contemporary international order.** Moscow is trying to transplant the model of hierarchical power, where states have different rights depending on the degree of their self-sufficiency and where full sovereignty is the exclusive attribute of great powers, into the (inherently anarchic) international environment. Under this vision, the Kremlin seeks to pursue its **permanent strategic interests.** They include: obtaining Western acceptance of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet area, remodelling the European security architecture to suit Moscow's interests, reducing US presence and influence in Europe, and maximising benefits for Russia from economic and political cooperation with the West without concessions on its part.

**The imperial optic is reflected in Russia's politics of memory on several levels. Firstly, irrespective of the fact that its main reference point is the Soviet period, it is clearly building the image of an 'eternal empire'** – a thousand-year-old (“historical”) Russia<sup>10</sup> which is heir to all the state structures ever created on its vast territory. As early as 2000, an attempt was made to implement an eclectic imperial quasi-ideology, whose symbols included the tsarist double-headed eagle in the state emblem, the national flag originating from the tsarist era, and the Soviet melody of the national anthem, reinstated after several years. In 2003, Putin clearly articulated the idea of a strong state – “preserving statehood across the vast area” – as the basis for Russia's past and future greatness. In 2005, the great power discourse finally crystallised (symbolised by the thesis of the USSR breakup as “the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”), marking a final break with the Yeltsin discourse.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Putin uses the term ‘historical Russia’ in reference to the borders of the Russian Empire formed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see his 2012 policy statement: В. Путин, ‘Россия: национальный вопрос’, Независимая газета, 23 January 2012, ng.ru). It is worth noting his remarks from 2020 (made in the TV programme “Moscow. Kremlin. Putin”), where he called the creation of the USSR “the reconstruction of historical Russia within its previous borders”, and linked the collapse of the Soviet state with Russia's loss of its “traditional historical territories”.

<sup>11</sup> О. Малинова, ‘Проблема политически «пригодного» прошлого и эволюция официальной символической политики в постсоветской России’, *Политическая концептология* 2013, № 1, pp. 122–123.

According to the experts of the Izborsky Club (a Kremlin-linked conservative think tank), “the first empire was Kievan and Novgorod Rus. The second was the Grand Duchy of Moscow. The third was built by the Romanov dynasty. The fourth was the Soviet Union. The Russian state of today, even though it has lost large territories, still bears the hallmarks of an empire. The geopolitics of the Eurasian continent is once again giving great momentum to the collection of lost lands”.<sup>12</sup> This account is clearly aimed at legitimising Putin’s (failed) Eurasian integration project.

**Secondly, the basis of identity is a strong state, both in its domestic and external dimensions.** The slogan of building a strong state in opposition to its weakness in the 1990s has been a symbolic feature of Putin’s image-building. The benchmarks of this power have been defined in a traditional way – military power (above all the nuclear arsenal), in addition to geopolitical influence and geostrategic potential, along with the status of a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council. Associating positive moments in history almost exclusively with military victories and conquests precludes a cooperative model of international relations. Even Peter I, at the very top of the pantheon of historical figures, is remembered not so much as the architect of modernisation and westernisation of the country, but as the creator of an empire and the author of military conquests. Making the destructive potential of nuclear weapons the prime criterion for Russia’s international status implies a willingness to raise the stakes in negotiations with other countries to the level of intimidation and blackmail. This approach sidelines those indicators of power that refer to international cooperation, such as the scale of foreign investment, political or ideological attractiveness, or the ability to win allies.

**Thirdly, the imperial optic – founded on the idea of territorial expansion, strategic depth and competition for spheres of influence – invokes the category of the enemy as a reference point for state identity and international politics.** It is based on the logic of a zero-sum game, akin to the Chekist mentality.<sup>13</sup> The choice of adversary, however, is not based on real threats, but on the vested interests of the authoritarian ruling elite, which are equated with state security. The authorities fuel the syndrome of a ‘besieged fortress’ – in the neo-Soviet spirit – and cultivate the image of Russia as perpetually

<sup>12</sup> ‘Манифест отцов-основателей, принятый 8 сентября 2012 года’, Изборский Клуб, 1 December 2009, [izborsk-club.ru](http://izborsk-club.ru).

<sup>13</sup> More on the political culture of Russia’s ruling elite: M. Domańska, *Conflict-dependent Russia. The domestic determinants of the Kremlin’s anti-Western policy*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

surrounded by enemies, being aware that the country's archaic, uncompetitive political and economic system would not survive in an open competition with Western democracies or Asian models of authoritarian modernisation. Hence, official propaganda portrays the Russian Federation as a self-contained entity, a separate civilisation pursuing its own path of development, which by definition rules out the import of foreign civilisational models.

Naturally, the West has been identified as the chief enemy. The wave of 'colour revolutions' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century reignited the fear of a possible loss of power, exposed the insecurity of the Russian elite over its public legitimacy and filled it with a seemingly genuine dread of the regime's overthrow as a result of a 'conspiracy' orchestrated by Washington. The anti-Western narrative has many features of a persistent myth of the enemy, where the latter is defined in a vague way and in isolation from immediate threats, thus confrontation can occur in virtually any field and involve various actors.<sup>14</sup> Semantically, 'Western conspiracies' have become a catch-all category in Putin's Russia. The main role of such a myth is to perpetuate the fear that society is under constant threat.

In this context, it is crucial that the Putin regime blames the West, particularly the US, for the decline of the state in the late Soviet period (especially in the years of Gorbachev's perestroika) and then Yeltsin's 'smuta'. The top-down acquiescence at the time to a cautious adoption of elements of Western political models in order to reform the state has been recognised as the cause of its collapse and the subsequent political, social and economic chaos. "In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it proved easier to blame the West than to take stock of Russian choices".<sup>15</sup> Placing all the responsibility for external and internal conflicts on foreign powers makes it possible to build the narrative of a thousand-year-old 'besieged fortress'. It ranges from the externally supported Novgorod conspiracy in 1570, the Polish intervention in 1612, the Napoleonic campaign of 1812, the Nazi aggression in 1941 and the Cold War confrontation, through to the 'Western inspiration' for the mass anti-Putin protests of 2011-2012 and the alleged plans for NATO expansion into Ukraine in 2014. Russian historical memory has largely been formed by the leitmotif of "expelling the foreign enemy".<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> P. Timofiejuk, 'Mity nacjonalistów rosyjskich' [in:] P. Timofiejuk, A. Wierzbicki, E. Zieliński (eds.), *Narody i nacjonalizm w Federacji Rosyjskiej*, Warszawa 2004, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup> T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom. Russia, Europe, America*, New York 2018, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> А. Колесников, 'История под ружьем: несекретная война Кремля', Московский Центр Карнеги, 9 April 2020, [carnegie.ru](https://carnegie.ru).

**Fourthly, the dominant category of the enemy as the key reference point coexists with another leitmotif of the politics of memory, which aims to discredit those ‘enemies’ even more: the story of a ‘good empire’, which fights only defensive wars and pursues peaceful expansion.**<sup>17</sup> “An imperial power does not recognise the political entities that it encounters in what it regards as colonial territories, and so it destroys or subverts them while claiming that they never existed”.<sup>18</sup> In this view, armed aggression is also portrayed as ‘defence’<sup>19</sup> or ‘preventive attack’, often compared by Russian propaganda to the Western concept of humanitarian intervention. The ‘good empire’ prospers when state power can be exercised ‘harmoniously’ and smoothly, meaning when it is fully “sovereign” (autocratic). The empire is further legitimised as a stronghold of Christianity in its ethical and civilisational dimensions – it performs a messianic mission in the eschatological struggle between good and evil. The image of Moscow as the Third Rome, well-established in Russian historiography, has found its continuation in a pseudo-conservative ideological project pushed since 2011–2012, where the Russian Federation has become the defender of ‘traditional’ values in the face of degenerating Western liberalism.<sup>20</sup> This initiative tends to have a religious setting, though it is not a prerequisite.<sup>21</sup>

**The main objective of the narrative about a good, peaceful empire is to justify Russian aspirations for exclusive influence in the post-Soviet area. For this purpose, the Russian authorities have been nurturing the idea of the ‘Russian world’ (Russian: *Русский мир*).**<sup>22</sup> At present, it is mostly

<sup>17</sup> This text deliberately refrains from discussing the broad subject of ‘memory wars’ between the federal centre and Russian regions over imperial conquests in the 16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> centuries (e.g. Moscow’s expansion into what is now the Volga region, Siberia, or the North Caucasus). They are not among the most important causes of tensions between the centre and the regions, though their importance may grow as the economic, social and political problems in the country continue to deepen.

<sup>18</sup> T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 64. An interesting illustration of this statement is the dominant narrative about the Russian expansion in the Far East as the conquest of a ‘no man’s land’. The earlier presence of both indigenous and Manchurian settlements in those areas is ignored. See A. Островский, ‘Владивосток: история до нашей эры’, Новая Газета во Владивостоке, 20 October 2016, novayagazeta-vlad.ru.

<sup>19</sup> The desire to remove threats to national security is used, for example, as a justification for the armed aggression against Finland in 1939. See ‘Путин: СССР в войне с Финляндией хотел исправить ошибки 1917 года’, РИА Новости, 14 March 2013, ria.ru.

<sup>20</sup> See for example L. Barber, H. Foy, A. Barker, ‘Vladimir Putin says liberalism has ‘become obsolete’’, Financial Times, 28 June 2019, ft.com.

<sup>21</sup> А. Колесников, ‘История под ружьем...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> The idea of the ‘Russian world’ means the concept of a civilisational community bringing together both ethnic Russians and representatives of other nations of the former Soviet Union, who identify themselves with the Russian language, Russian or Soviet culture, and often also the Orthodox religion in its cultural dimension. After 2000, this idea was operationalised in Russia’s foreign policy. It is meant to build Russian soft power abroad and justify Moscow’s great-power ambition to restore its political, economic and military domination in the post-Soviet area.

narrowed down to the Russian ‘triune nation’ – an organic community of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, with the former as the natural ‘elder brother’. In doing so, the Kremlin appropriates the legacy of Kievan Rus, which differs in many ways from that of Muscovite Rus. “The existence of a Ukrainian state was thus conceived as a form of aggression against Russia”.<sup>23</sup> The religious aspect served as an additional, historical justification for the annexation of Crimea as the cradle of Russian Christianity.

Both the ruling elite and the ‘licensed’ opposition (de facto allies of the government) are the guardians of this imperial legacy. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) invokes the legacy of the communist empire, whereas Vladimir Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) refers to the empire as such. According to Zhirinovsky, the empire is the best form of state organisation.<sup>24</sup> One of the LDPR’s recent initiatives was the announcement of a draft law to establish a new holiday in 2021 – Day of Empire.<sup>25</sup> The topic was clearly considered as socially appealing in the context of the parliamentary elections scheduled for September 2021.

### **3. The securitisation of history in Russian political thinking**

It is common for nations to primarily seek reasons for pride in their past and to gloss over its inconvenient sections. These efforts usually translate into attempts to shape the discourse in a biased manner. In Russia, however, this phenomenon is qualitatively different, as history is subject to securitisation: its desired interpretations have been subjectively recognised by the authorities as a vital yet endangered state interest, an element of the state’s existential security, one of the guarantees of its survival. This approach implies the need to take decisive action to defend the ‘righteous’ historical narrative – and to devote a disproportionate amount of attention and resources to this end, including emergency measures.

In liberal democracies, the securitisation of an issue means excluding it from the standard practices of state operation, shifting it from the pluralistic public sphere of politics into the area of emergency measures, where decision-making processes are not subject to public scrutiny. In authoritarian states

<sup>23</sup> T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom...*, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> ‘«Самая удачная форма государственного устройства». ЛДПР предложит отмечать День Империи’, *Знак*, 21 February 2020, znak.com.

<sup>25</sup> ‘ЛДПР предложила праздновать в России «день империи»’, *РИА Новости*, 21 February 2020, ria.ru.

such as Russia, where politics by definition is outside the public sphere, securitisation further strengthens and justifies a model where these decision-making processes are hermetic and public discussion is replaced by top-down propaganda. Risk creation is used to legitimise not only the authoritarian system of government, but also the style of governance characteristic for the Putin era, namely a permanent ‘special operation’. What is striking is the extent to which laws are used instrumentally to defend the desired narrative, as well as the involvement of the military and security agencies in the aggressive implementation of the politics of memory.<sup>26</sup>

The securitisation of memory about the past, which leads to ‘memory wars’, falls within the classic security dilemma in international relations.<sup>27</sup> The national narratives under its purview compete with each other – there is no middle ground as the logic of a zero-sum game prevails. The sense of threat to one’s own identity leads to even greater mobilisation in the struggle for memory. In this respect, the “securitisation of historical memory tends to reproduce insecurities and reinstate historical animosities instead of alleviating them”.<sup>28</sup> Kremlin ideologists, fighting against the alleged ‘distortion’ or ‘falsification’ of the past by neighbouring countries, depict narratives inconsistent with the official line as a ‘cognitive weapon’. Its alleged purpose is to shape the perception of the world, as well as the identity of Russians, in a manner that serves the interests of the enemy, with the aim of breaking the country apart.<sup>29</sup>

**In Russia, the securitisation of history is partly based on the securitisation of so-called spiritual and moral values.** In Putin’s own words at the beginning of his third presidential term (a turning point in the consolidation of Russian authoritarianism), “cultural self-awareness, spiritual and moral values (...) are a sphere of brutal competition and sometimes the object of open information warfare and carefully orchestrated propaganda attacks”. Their supposed aim is to influence the worldview of entire nations, to subordinate them to someone else’s will. Putin placed the “war over values” in an intermediate sphere between “hard” (military) and “soft” (socio-ideological)

<sup>26</sup> For more on the securitisation of history in Putin’s Russia see. H. Bækken, J.D. Enstad, ‘Identity under Siege: Selective Securitization of History in Putin’s Russia’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 98, no. 2 (April 2020).

<sup>27</sup> This term describes a situation in which actions taken by one state to increase its security may be perceived by other states as threats to their own security, which may lead to an escalation of tensions.

<sup>28</sup> H. Bækken, J.D. Enstad, ‘Identity under Siege...’, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

<sup>29</sup> For an extensive case on this topic see В.Э. Багдасарян, ‘«Когнитивное оружие» как инструмент десоверенизации’, Центр Сулакшина, 26 April 2016, rusrand.ru.

security and explicitly compared its significance to the struggle for raw materials. He stressed that distortions of national, historical and moral consciousness have repeatedly led to the weakening or even loss of sovereignty and collapse of state organisations.<sup>30</sup>

Similar discussions are taking place in the Scientific Council under the Security Council of the Russian Federation – an advisory body to the president that acts as an informal centre of strategic decision-making in the field of national security and foreign policy. This body treats the politics of memory as an object of “intentional destructive actions taken by foreign states and international organisations in order to pursue their geopolitical interests in the spirit of anti-Russian policy”, which requires Moscow to diligently prevent and swiftly respond to any attempts to falsify the past. These issues also attract the interest of the Ministry of Defence, which is calling for the development of a state strategy to counteract the falsification of history. Alongside this, in Kremlin-linked academic circles at the service of the security agencies there are voices which see the falsification of the past as one of the components of hybrid warfare. In their view, Moscow’s adequate response should be to conduct strategic information operations designed to change the consciousness of Western audiences, instil in them Russian assessments of history.<sup>31</sup>

**The issue of countering the distortion of the past** (especially the topics of the Great Patriotic War and World War II) **has been raised in the context of national security in a number of Russian strategic documents.** *The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation* adopted in 2015 stated that attempts to “falsify Russian and world history” have a negative impact on national security in the cultural sphere. Among the key threats, it mentioned the destruction of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and the propagation of fascist and extremist ideologies (understood extremely broadly in local legal practice). It also stipulated the need to strengthen the role of schools in the “prevention of radical ideology” (the term was not explained, so anything that contradicts the official line could be considered as radical ideology) and to protect society from external ideological expansion.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> ‘Путин: РФ сталкивается с попытками влияния извне на самосознание нации’, РИА Новости, 12 September 2012, ria.ru.

<sup>31</sup> И. Нагорных, В. Хамраев, ‘О роли точности в истории’, Коммерсантъ, 31 October 2016, kommersant.ru.

<sup>32</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 31 декабря 2015 года N 683 «О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации», Президент Российской Федерации, 31 December 2015, see Российская Газета, rg.ru.



The updated version of this Strategy, signed by Vladimir Putin in July 2021, lists “the defence of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values, culture and historical memory” among the strategic priorities of national security.<sup>33</sup> The use of information technologies to protect the cultural, historical and spiritual-moral values of the multi-ethnic nation of the Russian Federation is identified as a national interest in the 2016 *Doctrine of Information Security*. The document refers to the “discrimination” that Russian media allegedly face in the West and the “growing information and psychological pressure” towards the Russian population, which aims to “erode the traditional spiritual and moral values” and “undermine historical foundations and patriotic traditions related to defending the homeland”.<sup>34</sup> The revised *Military Doctrine*, adopted in 2014, identifies “subversive information activities against the population (...) aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defense of the motherland” as one of the “main internal military risks”.<sup>35</sup> The 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* stipulates the need to decisively counter attempts to “rewrite history and use it to stir up confrontation and revanchism in global politics” and to “revise the outcomes of World War II”.<sup>36</sup> The obligation to defend the “historical truth” was also included in the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation adopted in July 2020.<sup>37</sup>

In 2016, advisors with the Security Council identified six major issues and events that are subject to “falsification” and need to be “defended”. They are: the ethnic policy of the Russian empire (“falsification” allegedly involves attempts to discuss its colonial character), the 1917 revolution, the ethnic policy of the USSR, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the role of the USSR in the victory over fascism (Nazism) in World War II, and the attitude of the USSR towards political crises in the GDR, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and other formerly socialist countries.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 2 июля 2021 года N 400 «О Стратегии национальной безопасности Российской Федерации», Президент Российской Федерации, 2 July 2021, static.kremlin.ru.

<sup>34</sup> Доктрина информационной безопасности Российской Федерации, Президент Российской Федерации, 5 December 2016, see Российская Газета, rg.ru.

<sup>35</sup> Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, Президент Российской Федерации, 30 December 2014, see Российская Газета, rg.ru.

<sup>36</sup> Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В. Путиным 30 ноября 2016 г.), Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации, mid.ru.

<sup>37</sup> Конституция Российской Федерации, the text available on the official website publication.pravo.gov.ru.

<sup>38</sup> И. Нагорных, В. Хамраев, ‘О роли точности в истории’, *op. cit.*

**The securitisation of history is accompanied by militarised narratives with a strong ‘Chekist’ spirit.** As mentioned above, the militarisation of historical memory is a consequence of the imperial identity and the authoritarian vision of government-citizen relations. The official canon is dominated by triumphalist, military aspects of the past and focused around state authority, which is embodied by the army. If the civilian population (the nation or society) appears in this narrative, it is usually in the form of cardboard heroes – bearers of the official patriotic ideology. This is designed to familiarise the audience with the widespread violence employed by the authoritarian system, including in its foreign policy. Force and violence are presented as a path to the state’s power – both in its domestic and external dimension.

This approach leads to **an increasingly explicit affirmation and even glorification of the state security bodies.** They openly proclaim themselves to be heirs to the Soviet security apparatus. The positive image of the KGB, NKVD and Cheka is promoted by pop culture (see Chapter III) and top state officials. The advocates of this peculiar “Chekist mythology”<sup>39</sup> primarily include the head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, and the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin. In a much-publicised interview in December 2017,<sup>40</sup> Bortnikov offered an idealised history of the security agencies since 1917 to mark a century of patriotic struggle against foreign agents, terrorists, bandits and enemies of the state. He also warned against forces that aim to destroy Russia today. He made a direct link between the history of the FSB and that of the NKVD and Cheka. By attributing only intelligence and counterintelligence tasks to the Soviet security services, he whitewashed their role in Stalin’s mass terror. The interview was interpreted by academics and human rights defenders as the first attempt to justify the mass repressions of the 1930s and 1940s by a senior public official since the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> On the historical legitimacy of Russia’s secret services see J. Darczewska, *Defenders of the besieged fortress. On the historical legitimisation of Russia’s special service*, OSW, Warsaw 2018, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>40</sup> ‘ФСБ расставляет акценты’, *Российская Газета*, 19 December 2017, [rg.ru](http://rg.ru). The interview was published on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the creation of the Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage), which was responsible for the red terror during the 1917 revolution and civil war. Russian secret services now identify with this dark tradition even on the symbolic level. In the 1990s president Yeltsin proposed to establish a new ‘founding’ date (and holiday) for the Federal Security Service on 24 January (to mark the creation of the Ministry of Security in January 1992). However, his idea was rejected; as early as 1995, the FSB reverted to the Soviet Cheka date – 20 December.

<sup>41</sup> Е. Рачева, ‘«Попытка создать красивую историю госбезопасности провалилась»’, *Новая Газета*, 30 December 2017, [novayagazeta.ru](http://novayagazeta.ru).

#### 4. The ideologisation and mythologisation of history

Centuries of repression and censorship in Russia served to protect the interests of those in power. This has prevented **the development of a strong tradition of reliable, independent scholarly reflection on the past that could offer a real alternative to official propaganda**. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, historians performed subservient functions on the Cold War frontline. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Kremlin has assigned them an equally important role in the consolidation of the authoritarian regime and Russia's struggle to regain its position as a key player in the international arena. This has led to the questioning of those facts (and their interpretations) that made it into mainstream historiography during the brief period of freedom of research and publication in the 1990s. The servile function of national history studies was best described by Vladimir Medinsky, former minister of culture, currently assistant to the president and head of the state-sponsored Russian Military-Historical Society: "national interests set an absolute standard of the truth and reliability of historical research".<sup>42</sup>

A logical consequence of this state of affairs is **an exceptionally strong ideologisation and mythologisation of the past**. This is underpinned by a political culture that rejects dialogue and compromise.<sup>43</sup> The official narrative about history has effectively become a substitute for state ideology, forbidden by the Russian constitution. It strives for a 'monopoly on truth': the authorities are systematically eliminating information and the pluralism of research from the public sphere, thus blurring the boundary between the politics of memory and state propaganda. The 'ideology of memory', however, is highly eclectic, and does not correspond to the coherent, comprehensive Soviet ideology. History in the hands of the Kremlin has turned into post-truth – an eclectic set of myths, a malleable material from which any narrative can be spun arbitrarily. The past is an object of "situational usage" rather than intentional design.<sup>44</sup>

**Historical material takes its desired shape owing to classic methods of distorting facts.** They include: a selective omission of disagreeable facts, fabrication (denying something that did happen and affirming something that did not), exaggeration, and embellishment. These narratives employ a manipulation of the cause-effect relationship and seek to blame the 'objective

<sup>42</sup> 'Доклад Вольного исторического общества «Какое прошлое нужно будущему России», Комитет гражданских инициатив, 23 January 2017, komitetgi.ru, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> М. Домаńska, *Conflict-dependent Russia...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> О. Малинова, 'Проблема политически «пригодного» прошлого...', *op. cit.*, p. 126.

circumstances' or enemies. The latter, in its ultimate form, leads to the attribution of Russia's own misdeeds to its enemies.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the past becomes problematic and "fundamentally unpredictable".<sup>46</sup> This unpredictability is a direct result of the desire to 'sovereignise' the narrative of memory by the 'sovereign' authoritarian power. The latter imposes successive versions of the state's history, according to its own opportunistic interests.

**The politics of memory is being constructed in the spirit of the "politics of eternity".** It is based on a cyclical concept of history, on the myth of ever-returning moments of glory and existential threats. Selective, biased presentation of facts from the past aims to build a myth of innocence in danger and immerse the nation in the cyclically recurring history of martyrdom.<sup>47</sup> The rulers usurp the status of the only heirs and custodians of the great achievements of the bygone era – the legacy of the 'thousand-year-old Russia'.<sup>48</sup> Such a vision, which can ironically be described as 'forward, into the past', means both a rejection of reformist ideas and an escape from the ambitious challenge of building a new Russian identity. The politics of memory and the associated collective identification are thus increasingly out of step with the demands of postmodernity and innovative development.

**Emotionally charged language describing Russian history has been reduced to a tool for mobilising the people.** This explains the growing aggressiveness and intransigence of the politics of memory. The official narrative is based on reinforcing the divisions between the 'patriotic majority' and the marginalised 'traitors' or 'foreign agents'. Independent, defiant historians are repressed, as are those who dare to disseminate narratives that run counter to the canonical official version. Alternative messages do not reach the information mainstream, including the education system. The 'disloyal' individual and family memory, as well as anti-colonial narratives found in some of the country's regions, are suppressed. The works of foreign historians are also censored, as long as their theses contradict the Kremlin's canon.

<sup>45</sup> See J. Kłaś, 'Muzea historyczne – pomiędzy pamięcią zbiorową a polityką pamięci historycznej', *Zarządzanie w Kulturze* 2013, t. 14, z. 3, p. 202.

<sup>46</sup> 'Доклад Вольного исторического общества...', *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> More broadly on the 'politics of eternity': T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

## II. THE RELIGION OF VICTORY AS THE FOUNDATION OF PUTIN'S POLITICS OF MEMORY

### 1. The victory of 1945 - the founding myth of Putinism

**At the heart of Russian ideology and state mythology is the martyrdom of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) and the sacred, messianic myth of Victory (capitalised) over Nazism in 1945.** It is the only national myth that truly unites Russians. Victory entered the canon of the Soviet state symbolic politics quite late – it was not until 1965 that 9 May acquired the status of a state holiday. It was a result of the generation of war veterans coming to power and a means of legitimising the late-Soviet ‘thriving stagnation’ of the Brezhnev era, when faith in the future-oriented ideological project of the October Revolution was definitively abandoned. The myth of war temporarily lost its importance in the period of perestroika and transformation of the 1990s, when the main source of legitimacy for the new elites was the forward-looking concept of building a market democracy. Solemn commemorations of the 1945 events were only reinstated in 1995.<sup>49</sup>

**In the domestic political dimension, the victory over Nazism is a kind of founding myth of Putin's Russia.** As the 1990s did not bring forth any coherent concept of national and historical identity, it has become the only uncontroversial, universal reference point for the collective identification of Russians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the external dimension, in turn, 1945 is the ‘founding moment’ of the USSR's/Russia's status as a superpower. Its double, crucial role for the Kremlin's interests determines the manner in which all the earlier and later events are interpreted. This applies in particular to the actions of the Soviet authorities at home and abroad in the 1930s and to Moscow's post-war policies in the Soviet bloc.

**As the ruling elite draw extensively on the legacy of the Soviet politics of memory, it is noteworthy that they have consciously abandoned its cornerstone – the story of the 1917 revolution,** which refers to a linear, progressive dimension of history. The gradual dismantling of this myth began in the 1990s as part of overcoming the totalitarian ideology, but the reasons for its marginalisation after 2000 should be sought primarily in the sphere of the Kremlin's domestic political interests. Putinism, seeking legitimacy in

<sup>49</sup> More: Н. Копосов, ‘Пакт Молотова-Риббентропа и Россия’, Новая Польша, 22 August 2019, [novayapolsha.pl](http://novayapolsha.pl).

Russia's eclectic imperial heritage and its centuries-old statehood, focuses on continuity rather than rupture. It invokes moments of consolidation of state power as opposed to disintegration of old structures, chaos and 'smuta'. The Kremlin's pseudo-conservative ideology treats social and political stability as a supreme value. The condemnation of the idea of a revolutionary change of power is mainly the result of fears triggered by the 'Arab Spring', the protests in Russia in 2011–2012, and finally the Ukrainian 'Revolution of Dignity' in 2013–2014. Today, the thousand-year-old imperial Russia protects authoritarian regimes around the world against 'colour revolutions', in the name of defending the 'legalism' of power, its 'eternal continuity'.<sup>50</sup> It is symptomatic that the Soviet narrative about the USSR's armed interventions in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been revived, which is accompanied by (as yet unimplemented) initiatives to cast them in a positive light in legislation. This applies primarily to the interventions in Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979–1989),<sup>51</sup> and to a lesser extent to the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956.<sup>52</sup>

### **A troublesome revolution**

The last parade in Red Square on the anniversary of the 1917 October Revolution took place in 1990. Currently, only the Communist party celebrates its anniversaries and openly defends its legacy. Since 1996 the most significant Soviet holiday (7 November) was honoured as the Day of National Concordance and Reconciliation. In 2004 it lost its status as a public holiday and was replaced by a new one – the Day of National Unity on 4 November, which never became popular. Its meaning remains unclear to the broader public but it was quickly appropriated by nationalists who organise the so-called Russian (*russkiye*) marches on this day.

<sup>50</sup> For more details see M. Domańska, 'The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution: a troublesome anniversary', OSW, 8 November 2017, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>51</sup> In November 2018, a draft resolution was submitted to the Duma revising the position of the 1989 Congress of People's Deputies (which condemned the deployment of Soviet troops to Afghanistan) as inconsistent with the 'principles of historical justice' and 'historical truth'. A proposal was also put forward to elevate the status of Afghanistan war veterans to that of soldiers who fought in the Great Patriotic War. A similar demand was made with regard to the participants in the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia.

<sup>52</sup> What draws attention, however, is the exceptionally aggressive narrative about the Hungarian uprising presented in the Russian state media on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The uprising was called the 'first colour revolution' that allegedly involved Nazi militias and was orchestrated by Western intelligence services. More: M. Domańska, 'The myth of the Great Patriotic War as a tool of the Kremlin's great power policy', OSW Commentary, no. 316, 31 December 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

2017 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the October Revolution. The official discourse accompanying its celebrations revealed the ambivalent attitude of the Russian ruling elite towards these events and became a testimony to a partial reinterpretation of the communist heritage. The “year of the revolution in Russia” celebrations were dominated by discussions related to the Bolshevik coup (the authorities’ official narrative carefully avoids references to democratic episodes in the state’s history, such as the February 1917 revolution). Still, the coup itself is viewed negatively by the rulers. It points to both the illegal nature of the Bolshevik seizure of power and the massive number of victims of revolutionary terror. Official propaganda reinforces the negative image of the event by equating revolutionists and foreign intelligence agents. In Russian movies about 1917 released on that occasion, the thesis about foreign inspiration and financing of the Bolshevik activities, led by Lenin, was repeated. Some establishment representatives directly compared the coup of a hundred years ago to the modern ‘maidans’.

Due to the difficulties in including the revolution in official state propaganda, the authorities sought to depoliticise this topic. They mostly shaped the narrative around the theme of national ‘reconciliation’. To this end, they also pointed to the positive socio-economic effects of the events of 1917 (industrialisation, modernisation, social justice slogans), favoured the cult of Tsar Nicholas II, canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church, and used the subject of revolutionary terror as a warning against ‘mistakes of the past’.

This ambivalence was reflected in the attitude of the authorities towards the anniversary celebrations. On the one hand, a year-long program of celebrations of the “century of the 1917 revolution in Russia” was adopted. It was coordinated by the Russian Historical Society, headed by Sergei Naryshkin, the director of the Foreign Intelligence Service. The program included dozens of conferences, exhibitions, and publications; state television channels featured numerous information and documentaries about the revolution. On the other hand, no jubilee ceremonies were held in the Kremlin. The President’s spokesman even questioned the legitimacy of celebrating this date, and Putin himself has criticised several times both the way the Bolsheviks took over and exercised power and the Soviet system established by Lenin. According to the president, this system contained the seeds of the state’s future disintegration.

However, the symbolism associated with the revolution is still strongly present in the public space, as evidenced by, among other things, toponyms, monuments, and maintenance of Lenin's mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow. It also remains an essential element of Russians' identification with the Soviet legacy, which is beneficial for the Kremlin.

**The narrative that employs the mythology of the Great Patriotic War is addressed to three distinct audiences, with a slightly different appeal for each of them.**<sup>53</sup> **The first are Russian citizens**, and the main purpose of the message is to legitimise in their eyes both Putin's regime and the very idea of authoritarian power as the only guarantee of survival for the state and nation. We see the creation of a cult of strong leaders who navigate the country through moments of crisis and guide it to success in the international arena. The latter is supposed to perform a compensatory function in the face of a deepening economic decline and increasing ossification of the political system. The myth is meant to instil in the citizens a readiness to make sacrifices in the name of the strong state and thus override socio-economic or democratic demands that are dangerous to the authorities. The cult of victory is also designed to neutralise the potential dissonance between pride in the nation's achievements and awareness of the painful, dark pages of totalitarian history.

**The second audience are the elites and societies of the post-Soviet states** – an area considered as a zone of Russia's vital interests. The victory is presented by Moscow as an achievement of the multi-ethnic Soviet nation. The Kremlin instrumentally utilises the myth of brotherhood in arms to keep the community of the 'Russian world' together<sup>54</sup> while seeking to discredit supporters of integration with the Euro-Atlantic community by equating them with fascists. Belarus and Ukraine are supposed to play a special role in this 'Russian world' project – their ties with the Russian Federation are described by Moscow as 'eternal' (which excludes consent to their full sovereignty). The 1939 annexation of Poland's eastern territories by the USSR, like Russia's territorial conquests during the partition of the First Polish Republic, is thus depicted as a legitimate recovery of territories that are 'eternally Russian'. The aim of this narrative is to coerce neighbours into economic, political and military

<sup>53</sup> For more details see M. Domańska, 'The myth of the Great Patriotic War...', *op. cit.*

<sup>54</sup> See footnote 22.



integration with Moscow. However, this strategy has yielded limited results and often been counterproductive.

**The third audience is the ‘collective West’ – the political circles and societies of Europe and the United States.** The message addressed to them is intended to justify Russian ambitions to shape the continental and global security system in a way that marginalises the role of Western integration structures. The sacral, messianic narrative of the Soviet victory and historical disinformation have a marginal reach there, practically limited to the Russian diaspora, but the accompanying discourse on contemporary international relations finds more fertile ground.

Although ‘memory wars’ over the history of World War II are waged by many countries, only in Russia are they so fierce, with a strongly ideological and propagandistic form that excludes any criticism of official claims. The language of the stories about this period refers to the religious domain: any discussions undermining the ‘canonical’ version of events are deemed blasphemous.

### **The myth overriding the truth: Vladimir Medinsky’s cult of the ‘Panfilovtsy’**

One illustration of the Kremlin’s ambiguous approach to facts and the deliberate, open mythologisation of history is the ideological campaign by the former minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, who has perpetuated the legend of ‘Panfilov’s 28 Men’ (‘Panfilovtsy’, Russian: *Панфиловцы*). These were soldiers of the 1075<sup>th</sup> rifle regiment, killed in the battles near Moscow in November 1941; their story was told twice in the Soviet press in 1941–1942 by Alexander Krivitsky. The Panfilovtsy became a symbol of heroic resistance against the overwhelming enemy forces. However, the credibility of the story had already been undermined in Soviet times: among other things, it turned out that several ‘fallen’ Panfilov’s Men had in fact survived the war. In 1948, an investigation by the USSR military prosecutor’s office proved that Krivitsky had invented the whole story. In 2015, the director of the Russian State Archives, Sergei Mironenko, concluded – based on archival documents – that it was a myth and a fabrication of Soviet wartime propaganda.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> ‘Мединский рассказал о новых доказательствах подвига 28 панфиловцев’, Meduza, 3 December 2018, meduza.io; Г. Тадтаев, ‘Мединский рассказал о найденном подтверждении боя 28 панфиловцев’, Телеканал РБК, 2 December 2018, rbc.ru; П. Аптекарь, ‘Зачем Мединскому «миллионы панфиловцев»’, Ведомости, 3 December 2018, vedomosti.ru.

Initially, Medinsky did not insist on the story's veracity; he instead practised a kind of hagiography. He used to call it "a holy legend that must not be tampered with", he viewed the fallen Panfilovtsy as "saints", and in 2016, he labelled the critics of this narrative as "downright bastards" who will "burn in hell".<sup>56</sup> In December 2018, however, he tried to make the story more believable. In an article published by the state-owned *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*,<sup>57</sup> he argued extensively that some newly declassified archival documents allegedly delivered irrefutable proof. He also repeated accusations against his opponents of acting to the detriment of the Russian state. Professional historians criticised his article.

Medinsky has written several books popularising historical knowledge in which he interprets Russia's history quite freely. He calls these stories "historical mythology". They create a simplistic dichotomy between the true patriots, defenders of the motherland, and its enemies. In 2017, he was almost stripped of his postdoctoral degree in historical sciences: professional historians rebuked his habilitation thesis for defying standards of academic research.

Given the Kremlin's political goals, the following three issues are of the greatest importance in war mythology: advancing the desired vision of the international order on the European continent, resuscitating the 'Homo Sovieticus' through the militarisation of the historical discourse, and justifying Stalinist repressions – the most glaring example of violent state-society relations.

## 2. History in the service of geopolitics

**Russian demands for special influence on the geopolitical shape of today's Europe and the Euro-Atlantic security architecture are justified by the messianic role of the Soviet empire in the fight against Nazism.** This war messianism combines two intertwined components. The active one represents strength and invokes the image of the USSR as a chosen nation, a victor-saviour. The passive component, embedded in the war martyrdom, refers to its image as an innocent victim of aggression. In this narrative, Russia inherited from the USSR the 'moral mandate' of the only true opponent of Nazism

<sup>56</sup> 'Мединский о 28 панфиловцах: Те, кто ставит под сомнение подвиг наших предков, будут гореть в аду', Meduza, 26 November 2016, meduza.io.

<sup>57</sup> В. Мединский, 'Будут жить 28', Российская Газета, 2 December 2018, rg.ru.

who saved the world from annihilation in an eschatological struggle between good and absolute evil. This special ‘mission of salvation’ is supposed to justify today’s calls for an actual return to the Yalta order – the peak of Russian-Soviet power – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the name of ‘stabilising’ the international situation. It is reflected in demands for the formation of a ‘multipolar order’, a de facto concert of powers, leading to a division of spheres of influence between the strongest players. In the Kremlin’s opinion, the Euro-Atlantic partners, in order to avoid a new global conflict, should accept Russia’s repeated proposals to create a new, “non-bloc” system of indivisible international security. This would effectively mean agreeing to give Moscow the right of veto in decision-making processes concerning Euro-Atlantic security. Putin’s call for a summit of permanent UN Security Council members made in Jerusalem in January 2020 should be interpreted in this spirit.<sup>58</sup>

**The pursuit of these objectives requires the elimination of all the facts and interpretations that might weaken or discredit the Russian narrative.** It is no coincidence that World War II has been almost entirely replaced in this narrative by the Great Patriotic War. The first years of the global conflict, when the USSR acted as an invader of neighbouring countries, are absent from this mythology. It only begins in 1941 – this ‘moment of innocence’ amply serves the story of a ‘victim of aggression’ and the subsequent ‘liberation’ of adjacent territories. In this context, the USSR’s loss of 27 million citizens during the war is meant to debunk the claims of neighbouring countries that they fell victim to Soviet imperial ambitions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the war mythology constructed for the purposes of contemporary foreign policy, Soviet troops brought nothing but liberation to Europe in 1944–1945. For the message to be coherent, it is necessary to misrepresent or openly falsify history and explain aggression by the need for ‘defence’ or ‘prevention’.

The primary means of manipulation include holding Western Europe responsible for the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of war, whitewashing the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, justifying the invasions of neighbouring countries and the mass repressions against their populations. As a result of a persistent reversal of concepts and roles in the Russian discourse, it is not the alliance of 23 August 1939, but the Munich Pact from over a year earlier, that is recognised as the war’s immediate cause. Such history-making is used as a tool of information and psychological warfare against the West and is part of Russian

<sup>58</sup> ‘Форум «Сохраняем память о Холокосте, боремся с антисемитизмом»’, Президент России, 23 January 2020, kremlin.ru.

efforts to weaken those milieux in the Euro-Atlantic community that call for staunch opposition to Moscow's aggressive foreign policy. In this propaganda, Poland is made out to be a "systemically anti-Semitic" country that collaborated with Hitler<sup>59</sup> (such as in the partition of Czechoslovakia<sup>60</sup>). The victory is increasingly presented – contrary to historical truth – as an individual achievement of the USSR, which reflects the logic of Cold War confrontation rather than the spirit of the anti-Hitler alliance.

An interesting illustration of the official rhetoric is a remark made in September 2019 by Sergei Ivanov, former head of the Presidential Administration and chairman of the supervisory board of the Russian Military-Historical Society. According to him, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states or Poland's eastern territories cannot be called an occupation as their inhabitants were granted Soviet citizenship "with all the associated rights and duties", and some even entered the Soviet elite. Nor did those areas stand out from the rest of the country in terms of the scale of repression.<sup>61</sup> In its fullest form, the Kremlin's propaganda theses were repeated in Putin's ideological manifesto, published in the conservative magazine *The National Interest* in June 2020.<sup>62</sup>

### **Russian narrative on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact during Putin's presidency**

**Putin's narrative about the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact should be viewed in relation to the resolution adopted by the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR on 24 December 1989. It was a breakthrough document, which disavowed the earlier Soviet position on the pact and**

<sup>59</sup> Anti-Polish propaganda intensified between December 2019 and May 2020. It went so far as to claim that the Nazi death camps were 'not accidentally' placed on Polish territory and that Polish authorities supported Hitler in his plans for the 'final solution of the Jewish question'. The theme of an alleged secret Piłsudski–Hitler pact with an aggressive anti-Soviet edge is also heavily played up.

<sup>60</sup> The border region of Cieszyn Silesia was divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1920 at the Spa Conference, after a protracted and heated dispute. After years of Polish–Czechoslovak interstate tensions over this issue, in October 1938 the Polish army annexed the Czech part of Cieszyn Silesia, which raised accusations of complicity with Nazi Germany. After World War II, these territories were restored to Czechoslovakia. In 2009 the then Polish president Lech Kaczyński remarked: "Poland's participation in the annexation of Czechoslovakia in 1938 was not only an error, but above all a sin". 'Czechs praise Kaczynski's apology for 1938 annexation', Polskie Radio, 3 September 2009, [polskieradio.pl](http://polskieradio.pl).

<sup>61</sup> 'Иванов прокомментировал заявления о советской «оккупации» Польши', РИА Новости, 16 September 2019, [ria.ru](http://ria.ru).

<sup>62</sup> 'Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of World War II', *The National Interest*, 18 June 2020, [nationalinterest.org](http://nationalinterest.org). A comment on the text: M. Domańska, 'Putin's article: historical revisionism at the service of great-power politics', OSW, 19 June 2020, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

**stressed adherence to historical truth as one of the essential elements of political transformation. The point of view expressed in this resolution persisted in the official narrative throughout the 1990s.**

The resolution stated that the Soviet Union “was facing tough choices” in 1939, and one of the agreement’s goals, albeit unachieved, was to shelter the country from the danger of a looming war in the face of a “critical” international situation. The deputies also acknowledged that although the text of the treaty did not deviate notably from the standards of international law applied to similar agreements, the secret protocols attached to it deserved condemnation. The Congress stated that both the procedure of concluding the pact and its content was in conflict with the sovereignty and independence of several third countries and violated the existing bilateral agreements with them. It emphasised that Stalin and Molotov were negotiating in secret from the nation and the Communist party, and the signing of secret protocols was an act of personal power and did not reflect the will of the Soviet people who bear no responsibility for this “treacherous collusion”. Congress declared the secret protocols as invalid from the moment of signing.

**The prevailing narrative during Putin’s era has been gradually drifting away from the position of the Congress:**

**February 2005** – Putin referred to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact in an interview with the Slovak media. He described it as a response to the ‘Munich conspiracy’ of 1938 and a countermeasure to Western attempts to turn the German army towards the East.<sup>63</sup>

**May 2005** – State Duma resolution “On Attempts to Falsify History” condemned the attempts to accuse the USSR of collusion in the outbreak of WW II. It stated that the Munich conspiracy was the decisive factor that contributed to the unleashing of the global conflict. The document also disavowed appeals to Russia to apologise for the occupation of the Baltic states as “duplicitous” and “cynical”; the occupation itself allegedly “allowed the Baltic nations to survive within the borders of another state” instead of being “totally wiped out”.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Интервью «Радио Словенско» и словацкой телекомпани СТВ’, Президент России, 22 February 2005, kremlin.ru.

**August 2009** – Putin published an article in the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*<sup>64</sup> on the eve of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. The text contained ritual wording about “all premises” to condemn the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and a reference to the 1989 resolution of Congress. At the same time, Putin reiterated accusations against the Western powers: the USSR could not reject the German proposal to conclude the pact when its potential allies in the West had already agreed to “analogous” agreements with the Third Reich and did not want to cooperate with the Soviet government. To illustrate the thesis that “the borders in Europe were violated much earlier than 1 September 1939”, he recalled the Anschluss of Austria and the Polish annexation of Cieszyn Silesia in 1938.

**November 2014** – Putin met young historians.<sup>65</sup> The president spoke about ongoing “disputes” about evaluation of the pact and relativised the partition of Poland between Germans and Soviets in 1939 by comparing it to the Polish incorporation of Cieszyn Silesia. He also returned to interpreting the treaty as “a non-aggression agreement”, which expressed the USSR’s desire to avoid war.

**May 2015** – Putin’s press conference with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. The president unequivocally justified the pact, referring to its vital importance for the USSR’s national security threatened by the irresponsible policy of the West. This was the first such firm statement by Putin and one pronounced during a high-level meeting.

**In the months and years that followed, the advocates of the pact became increasingly vocal; they defined it as the greatest achievement of Soviet diplomacy and a source of pride. On the one hand, it stemmed from the continuing conflict with the US and the EU over the Russian aggression in Ukraine. On the other – it accompanied the upcoming 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. Concerning the latter context, the following events and statements deserve particular attention.**

<sup>64</sup> ‘List Putina do Polaków – pełna wersja’, *Wyborcza.pl*, 31 August 2009, wyborcza.pl.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Встреча с молодыми учёными и преподавателями истории’, Президент России, 5 November 2014, kremlin.ru.

**23 August 2019** – an article by the then minister of culture, Vladimir Medinsky, was published on the government portal RIA Novosti.<sup>66</sup> Medinsky called the pact “a diplomatic triumph of the USSR” and disavowed its condemnation by the USSR Congress of Deputies as “hysterical defamation”. He also decried the anti-Stalinist politics of memory of the perestroika period. Medinsky stated that the US–USSR Yalta agreement was “the same [as the Molotov–Ribbentrop] pact of non-aggression, only brokered on a global scale”, serving to “establish rules of mutual competition to avoid war”.

**15 September 2019** – Sergey Ivanov, former head of the Presidential Administration and chairman of the supervisory board of the Russian Military and Historical Society, called the pact “an achievement of Soviet diplomacy, which is something to be proud of”.<sup>67</sup>

**22 September 2019** – the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued an official statement on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. It pointed out that this agreement helped to postpone the outbreak of the German-Soviet war and start it on more advantageous terms for the USSR. Due to that, the population of the Western territories of the USSR (annexed from Poland in 1939) experienced Nazi terror only two years later, which saved hundreds of thousands of people.<sup>68</sup>

**December 2019** – Putin publicly criticised, on six occasions, the European Parliament’s resolution of 19 September 2019. This document indicated that the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols paved the way for World War II. At the informal summit of the CIS leaders on 20 December Putin spoke for about an hour about ‘real’ causes of the war and held Poland and the Western allies accountable for its outbreak. He based his narrative on the relativisation of the pact (as only the last of many agreements concluded by European states with the Third Reich) and aimed to discredit the pre-war policy of Poland, England, and France towards Germany. In particular, he devoted much time to accusing Poland of cooperation with the Nazis (concerning the annexation of Cieszyn Silesia and the “anti-Semitic” policy of the Polish authorities).

<sup>66</sup> В. Мединский, ‘Дипломатический триумф СССР’, РИА Новости, 23 August 2019, ria.ru.

<sup>67</sup> ‘Сergeй Иванов: переписывание истории Второй мировой войны на Западе будет продолжаться’, ТАСС, 16 September 2019, tass.ru.

<sup>68</sup> See the post published on the official account of the Russian Foreign Ministry on the social network VKontakte, 22 September 2019, vk.com.

**18 June 2020** – Putin’s article published by *The National Interest* repeated his theses about the causes of the outbreak of World War II. Additionally, the president alleged that agreements between the Western powers and the Third Reich might have contained secret protocols analogous to the Soviet-German ones. He also stated that by occupying the eastern Polish borderlands in September 1939, the USSR saved the local population, including Jews, from the Nazis and their local allies – anti-Semites and ultranationalists. He described the annexation of the Baltic states as a defensive action in line with the standards of international law of that time.

**So far, the Russian parliament has rejected attempts to rehabilitate the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact officially.** Postulating the cancellation of the 1989 resolution of the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR, the last bill was submitted in May 2020 by the chairman of the nationalist party Rodina, Alexei Zhuravlov.

Of particular note is the warning repeated by the authorities that disregard for Russia’s geostrategic demands, justified by its unique role in 20<sup>th</sup> century history, could lead to another war tragedy. The warning rings out against the background of thinly veiled suggestions and threats, ritually echoed by a part of the public, that the Russian Federation ‘may repeat’ its military actions if forced to do so. The Great Patriotic War and the Cold War, combined with the ongoing geopolitical confrontation with the West, have thus merged into a single narrative about a cyclically recurring ‘eternal threat from the West’ that seeks to destroy Russia. In this manner, the Kremlin has finally overcome the legacy of Gorbachev and Yeltsin that was based on Russian – Western cooperation.

**The Myth of Victory thus organises representations of history as a circular, repetitive motion rather than a linear one.** It is thereby the fullest illustration of the authoritarian ‘politics of eternity’ – a pattern of the same threats, the same enemies and the same ‘patriotic’ responses endlessly echoed in state propaganda. **Due to its sacred, messianic nature, the Great Patriotic War is somewhat of an archetype of all the subsequent ‘defensive’ wars fought by the USSR and Russia** (interventions in the Soviet bloc and Afghanistan as well as contemporary conflicts such as the seizure of Donbas or the military campaign in Syria). Their objective has always been to push arbitrarily defined or artificially created threats away from the country,



through operations on distant territories also, under the logic of forward defence.<sup>69</sup>

**The biased message about World War II and the Great Patriotic War was recently used mainly in the anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaign launched at the turn of 2013–2014, which served the purpose of preparing and justifying the subsequent military attack on this country.** The emotional force of the wartime lexicon was revived at that time. Pro-European Ukrainians were most often called fascists and Nazis, and allegations of a resurgent 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 accused of supporting the ‘resurgent Ukrainian Nazism’ (‘Banderism’) and trying to destabilise Russia through another ‘colour revolution’ on its borders, this time a ‘fascist’ one. Together with the purported NATO plans to base its ships and missiles in Crimea, this was presented as justification for Russia’s preventive military attack against Ukraine. This aggression was depicted from the outset as one aiming to defend universal humanitarian values and to liberate the Russian and Russian-speaking population from the alleged ‘Nazi’ threat. The accompanying schizophrenic discourse was meant to confirm the myth of Russian innocence – according to contradictory messages, “No war was taking place, and it was thoroughly justified”.<sup>70</sup>

Ukraine’s European aspirations were treated by the Kremlin as a serious threat to Russia’s great power interests in the post-Soviet area. By launching its attack, Moscow effectively reactivated the Brezhnev doctrine of ‘limited sovereignty’, once intended to justify military interventions in the Soviet sphere of influence by the need to keep a hostile ideology at bay. It was clear from the start that the Kremlin was de facto treating its military operations in Ukraine as a quasi-Cold War ‘proxy war’ with the West for domination in Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. The aspirations of Ukrainian society were therefore not only ignored (in line with the Yalta-style perception of international politics, where societies are the objects rather than subjects of political processes), but also framed in the myth of an eternal threat from the West. This was accompanied by a disavowal of the very idea of Ukrainian statehood, with echoes of Soviet propaganda from the late 1930s and early 1940s that justified the annexations of neighbouring territories. In the spring of 2014,

<sup>69</sup> For more details see M. Domańska, ‘The myth of the Great Patriotic War...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup> T. Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom...*, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

Putin suggested that the violation of Russian security guarantees for Ukraine enshrined in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum resulted from an “interruption of the continuity of Ukrainian statehood” brought about by the “revolution”, which – according to him – legitimately nullified all of Moscow’s commitments vis-à-vis Kyiv.<sup>71</sup>

### 3. Militarisation of hearts and minds

**The affirmation of the use of force in international relations is reinforced by the militarisation of war memories and demonstrations of military might.** A traditional occasion for this is the annual Victory Day parade held on 9 May in the Red Square in Moscow.<sup>72</sup> In light of the Kremlin’s domestic and foreign policy objectives, what draws attention is a government-inspired trivialisation of the war myth, often with a tawdry tinge. 9 May is no longer just a day of remembrance of the biggest ever armed conflict and its social toll, but an opportunity to manifest pride in the power of the state, often in a crude way. The message no longer says “war should never happen again”, but “since that war ended with victory, the next one would end with victory as well”.<sup>73</sup> Ostentatious displays of military and patriotic symbols in state propaganda lead to public trivialisation of the war issues and unreflective participation in ideologised rituals. Increasingly frequent practices during 9 May parades and festivities include making up prams as plywood tanks or aircraft and dressing up little children as soldiers (which coincides with the militarisation of education of children and youth – see further).<sup>74</sup> There are also rallies of cars painted in military colours.<sup>75</sup> In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reenactors started to gradually replace veterans during commemorative celebrations.<sup>76</sup> In 2015, there were reenactments in the form of show trials against the enemies and traitors, including ‘corridors of shame’ where ‘German prisoners of war’ were ostentatiously humiliated.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>71</sup> ‘Владимир Путин ответил на вопросы журналистов о ситуации на Украине’, Президент России, 4 March 2014, kremlin.ru.

<sup>72</sup> The full-scale military component (march, flypast, military equipment parade) was added to these ceremonies in 2008.

<sup>73</sup> А. Архипова and others, ‘Война как праздник, праздник как война: перформативная меморация Дня Победы’, *Антропологический форум* 2017, № 33, p. 103.

<sup>74</sup> Prams imitating military equipment first appeared in 2010 in Volgograd.

<sup>75</sup> А. Архипова and others, ‘Война как праздник...’, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91.

<sup>76</sup> И. Курилла, ‘«Бессмертный полк»: «праздник со слезами на глазах», парад мертвецов или массовый протест? Споры о смысле и перспективах нового праздничного ритуала’, *Контрапункт* № 12 (June 2018), pp. 2–3.

<sup>77</sup> There are also scandalous and humorous incidents, such as the replacement of portraits of Soviet commanders with photographs of members of one of the regional parliaments. See П. Аптекарь, ‘Память против пропаганды’, *Ведомости*, 8 May 2020, vedomosti.ru.

Such theatrical rituals express symbolic aggression<sup>78</sup> and attest to a far-reaching reformulation of the sentiments associated with the Victory. The first post-war years were dominated by the 'shameful memory' of its enormous price and the tragic mistakes of the Soviet leadership. From the 1960s, it was replaced by the formula of a 'holiday with tears upon the eyes', with the veterans at its centre. It balanced pride in the achievements of the USSR and mourning for the fallen. This way the state-oriented, top-down component, symbolised by the parade, interwove with the human dimension of the war experience, represented by the memories of soldiers. In the 1990s, as part of a confrontation with the totalitarian legacy, the victory was primarily portrayed as one achieved by the nation in spite of mistakes made by the government. **Under Putin, however, it has been embedded in the continuous tradition of the thousand-year-old empire and separated from the negative perceptions of the Stalinist regime.**<sup>79</sup>

**The 'living memory' of war participants and their families is increasingly appropriated by the authorities as time passes and its bearers pass away.** Particularly noteworthy is the censorship imposed on discussions about the siege of Leningrad – a sacralised symbol of the martyrdom and sacrifice of 27 million USSR citizens.<sup>80</sup> It is one of very few testimonies of the tragedy of the civilian population found in official propaganda, but it is subject to top-down stylisation and regulation. Just as the Soviet authorities censored any non-canonical statements about the siege, the Kremlin today does not permit narratives that undermine the monolithic myth of a steadfast and heroic nation organically united with the totalitarian government. It portrays monumental heroes instead of living people while dismissing difficult issues (such as the problem of cannibalism in the besieged city). Any suggestions that a different scenario was possible (e.g. surrendering Leningrad to save its inhabitants) or that the Soviet leadership was responsible for the scale of this tragedy are not only considered as blasphemy, but in fact a crime.<sup>81</sup> At the same time, the ordeal of the city is implicitly compared to the Holocaust – a manipulation

<sup>78</sup> А. Архипова and others 'Война как праздник...', *op. cit.*, pp. 102–103.

<sup>79</sup> О. Малинова, 'Великая отечественная война как символический ресурс: эволюция отображения в официальной риторике 2000–2010 гг.', *Россия и современный мир* 2015, № 2 (87), pp. 25–26.

<sup>80</sup> In the USSR, the number of civilian victims of the siege of Leningrad was kept secret; according to documents disclosed later, it was 1–1.2 million.

<sup>81</sup> Е. Чиждова, 'Моя блокадная память', *Новая Газета*, 11 May 2019, [novayagazeta.ru](http://novayagazeta.ru).; А. Колесников, 'История под ружьем...', *op. cit.*; J. Rogoża, 'Attack on TV Rain, a warning for the Internet', OSW, 5 February 2014, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

exploited by the Kremlin to press ahead with the aforementioned initiatives to redefine the global order.<sup>82</sup>

Other examples of the appropriation of ‘living memory’ by the state administration include: the takeover of the organisation of the popular Immortal Regiment march (Russian: *Бессмертный полк*); the instrumentalisation of another grassroots initiative – the use of the ribbon of Saint George as a symbol of the ‘community of memory’; or active suppression of the Immortal Barrack project (Russian: *Бессмертный барак*) that commemorates the victims of Soviet repression.

#### **4. The long shadow of state terror: defence of executioners, anonymisation of victims**

**The glorification of Victory as the greatest achievement of Stalinism, as well as the logic of the authoritarian regime, lead to a conscious, systemic evasion of comprehensive confrontation with the Soviet terror.** The memory of repression is presented as undermining the nation’s heroism during the Great Patriotic War. The ambivalent attitude of the Russian authorities towards the persecutions does not result from the inherent complexity of the problem – although overcoming the totalitarian legacy would undoubtedly be extremely painful due to the often blurred lines between executioners and victims. The Kremlin seems to be pursuing two specific goals. **The first is to build an ‘organic’ society centered around state power as the main reference point, and the other is to bring about a ‘reconciliation’ across divides and eras in the name of great power interests.** The truth about the repression would undermine not only the domestic political legitimacy of the authoritarian power which draws on the legacy of totalitarianism, but also the validity of geopolitical ambitions based on the thousand-year history of ‘peaceful expansion’. Russia’s real succession from the USSR is becoming apparent here – not only in legal terms, but above all in terms of identity, axiology and ideology.

There is also a clear desire to anonymise the victims of mass crimes. Its primary aim is to devalue the role of individuals relative to the state and authority, to demonstrate their powerlessness in the face of history: an anonymous

<sup>82</sup> ‘Открытие монумента в честь жителей и защитников блокадного Ленинграда «Свеча памяти», Президент России, 23 January 2020, kremlin.ru. For example, the symbolism of 27 January is used for this purpose: the day the siege was lifted is also the International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

citizen has neither identity, nor rights. Anonymity of victims also leads to namelessness of executioners and, above all, to the institutional system of the state being absolved of crimes. In this context, declaratory condemnation of the repression carried out goes in parallel with getting the society accustomed to violence as the main regulator of government-citizen relations. In turn, criticism of totalitarianism is often equated with defiance against the contemporary Russian state and a lack of patriotism.

The ambivalent attitude of the Kremlin's rulers to Soviet repression is well illustrated by concrete examples of their actions and omissions. On the one hand, between 1991 and 2014, 3,510,818 people were rehabilitated, and another 264,085 (children of the repressed) were recognised as victims of political repression.<sup>83</sup> Also, the *State Policy Concept for Perpetuating the Memory of the Victims of Political Repression* was adopted in 2015, and the president personally unveiled a monument in their honour in Moscow in 2017. On the other hand, the authorities do nothing to prevent unofficial or semi-official initiatives to commemorate Stalin. Putin himself is far from unequivocally condemning him,<sup>84</sup> and shortly after the monument to the repressed was unveiled, the FSB director whitewashed the Stalinist security organs in an extensive interview.<sup>85</sup>

So far, no detailed information has been collected on how many people were imprisoned and murdered during the period of terror under formally non-political laws or as a result of mass deportations.<sup>86</sup> Nor has the necessary work to find the burial sites of the victims been carried out. The restoration of memory by publishing lists of those executed depends on whether a relevant initiative emerges at the regional level. Law enforcement and security agencies in some regions actively persecute independent researchers and activists under various pretexts (the case of Yuri Dmitriyev, a researcher of mass graves of NKVD victims in Karelia's Sandarmokh, is particularly striking in this context)<sup>87</sup>. Gagging those who try to perpetuate the memory of the

<sup>83</sup> 'День памяти жертв политических репрессий', РИА Новости, 30 October 2018, ria.ru.

<sup>84</sup> In the president's words, Stalin is a complex figure and a product of his era, and his excessive demonisation is one of the ways to attack the USSR and Russia. See 'Путин считает, что излишняя демонизация Сталина – один из путей атаки на Россию', ТАСС, 16 June 2017, tass.ru.

<sup>85</sup> 'ФСБ расставляет акценты', *op. cit.*

<sup>86</sup> П. Аптекарь, 'Вечная реабилитация', Ведомости, 29 October 2015, vedomosti.ru.

<sup>87</sup> In September 2020, after several years of investigations and trials, Dmitriyev, head of the Karelian branch of the human rights centre Memorial, was sentenced to 13 years in prison for alleged morality crimes. For detailed description of his case see Н. Гири́н, 'Дело Дмитриева. Раскопки', Новая Газета, 13 July 2020, novaygazeta.ru.

repressed stands in contrast to commemorating fallen soldiers. All kinds of grassroots activities to search for and identify mass graves of soldiers obtain the unequivocal support of the authorities.

The 2015 *Concept...* does not say a word about the need to identify and punish (or even symbolically condemn) individual perpetrators. In fact, its adoption has led neither to an increased availability of terror-related archives, as called for in the document, nor to a credible programme of teaching about the Stalinist terror in schools. Moreover, even though the *Concept...* calls for the popularisation of knowledge concerning repression and commemoration of victims among the youth, the Memorial Association – which has spent years organising competitions for students' works on these issues – is constantly harassed.<sup>88</sup> The country's only museum of political repression on the site of a former gulag, Perm-36, has been de facto transformed into a museum of prison service. It seems that the erection of a monument to the victims of mass terror in Moscow was primarily intended as a pretext to put an end to an inconvenient topic in the public sphere. It is a grim paradox that Putin issued a decree in April 2014 on measures to rehabilitate and support the nations repressed in the Crimea during the Soviet era, including Crimean Tatars,<sup>89</sup> while at the same time the latter, as well as other residents of the peninsula who protested against its annexation by Russia, have been persecuted since spring 2014. The actual siding with the executioners rather than the victims is dictated by the logic of the present model of rule. According to data from the Memorial Association, a human rights watchdog, there were 420 political prisoners in the country as of November 2021 (a figure which the organisation itself says is an undercount). 340 of them were imprisoned in connection with the exercise of the right to freedom of religion.<sup>90</sup>

Manipulation of the theme of repression takes place at both the official and 'grassroots' levels (the media, social organisations supported by the authorities, sections of academia). The following methods are mainly employed for this purpose:

<sup>88</sup> In 2013, the status of 'foreign agent' was imposed on this organisation in order to discredit it and hinder its activities. For years, regional administrative bodies have put pressure on the participants of the contest of historical works titled *People and History. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia* and their teachers. There have been physical assaults on Memorial representatives, offices of the organisation's branches have been vandalised. The above mentioned Dmitriyev case has become the most drastic example of persecution in recent years.

<sup>89</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 21.04.2014 г. № 268, Президент России, kremlin.ru.

<sup>90</sup> See 'Список политзаключённых (без преследуемых за религию)', Правозащитный центр Мемориал, memohrc.org.

**a) Silence** (the theme of mass terror is absent from public discussions at the federal and regional levels).

One of many examples thereof is the discovery of mass graves of those executed during the years of Stalinist terror near Vladivostok. In 2009, their remains were found by accident during road construction. Previously, the local authorities had refused to allow a search despite repeated requests from local researchers. Back in 1991, on the initiative of Memorial, a commemorative stone was erected at the presumed execution site (the exact location of the spot is known to only a few interested persons). During the exhumation works carried out in connection with road construction, the remains of 495 people were excavated and then moved to a local cemetery. These activities were discontinued in spite of reliable estimates by historians that up to several thousand murdered people may be buried in the entire area. Worth noting is the number inscribed on the monument to honour the “nameless” victims, unveiled at the cemetery in 2013 – “over 5,000” (this has not been conclusively confirmed in any way). The exact figures will most likely remain unknown for a long time to come and the available information suggests that no archival work has been carried out to identify the excavated remains. In this context, the monument erected by the local authorities largely follows the logic behind the unveiling of the monument to the victims of repression in Moscow in 2017 – a symbolic gesture intended to put an end to an inconvenient topic.<sup>91</sup>

**b) Relativisation.** It is carried out through the following measures:

- admitting that repression did take place, but searching for a ‘legal basis’ in the form of purported misdeeds of the persecuted (this argument was used, for example, by Bortnikov in the 2017 above-mentioned interview; there are claims in Russian propaganda that those buried in Mednoye were not Polish prisoners of war from 1939 murdered by the NKVD, but “Poles shot for criminal offences”<sup>92</sup>);
- admitting that repressive measures did take place, but treating them as ‘just retaliation’ for someone else’s (alleged) guilt; in the spirit of this logic, the Katyn massacre is justified by a spurious extermination of Soviet prisoners of war in Polish POW camps in 1919–1921;

<sup>91</sup> Details: ‘Захоронение расстрелянных в районе Седанкинского перевала (г. Владивосток)’, Музей Гулага, gulagmuseum.org.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Историк разоблачил ложь “Мемориала” о захоронении в Медном’, РЕН ТВ, 18 September 2019, ren.tv.

- substitution – as in the case of the mass graves in Sandarmokh (promoting the thesis that those buried there are not victims of Stalinist terror, but Soviet prisoners of war murdered by the Finns during the 1939–1940 war) or Mednoye (admitting that victims of repression rest there, while at the same time highlighting the issue of Red Army soldiers who died in nearby field hospitals<sup>93</sup>);
- playing numbers games – agreeing on the scale of repression but emphasising that there were many more innocent victims of the Great Patriotic War. This way the crimes of the authorities are covered up by glorified heroism of the nation. Relativisation based on juggling with numbers is also conspicuous in the narrative about Soviet prisoners of war who died in Poland in 1919–1921. The number of the deceased is sometimes inflated several fold: from 16,000–20,000 (according to Polish and Russian historians) to over 100,000. This is intended to play down the gravity of the ‘retaliatory’ Katyn crime (almost 22,000 murdered).

**c) Denial** – e.g. the lie about the German perpetration of the Katyn crime.

### **From lie to lie. The meanderings of the Russian narrative about the Katyn massacre<sup>94</sup>**

**13 April 1990** – the Soviet news agency TASS published a statement admitting that the NKVD was responsible for the Katyn massacre. Polish authorities received the first portion of archival documents on these killings from the Soviet side.

**September 1990** – The Chief Military Prosecutor’s Office of the USSR initiated an investigation into the Katyn case, which was actually conducted until 1994, then the investigators’ actions were shammed.

**Since the beginning of the nineties** the authorities of the Russian Federation have been trying to relativise the crime through the so-called anti-Katyn narrative. It boils down to accusing Poland of the spurious extermination of Soviet POWs in “concentration camps” during the Polish-

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> The Katyn Massacre – a series of mass executions carried out by the NKVD on about 22,000 Polish officers and intelligentsia (the prisoners of POW camps in Kozelsk, Ostashkov and Starobelsk as well as prisons in western Belarus and western Ukraine) in the spring of 1940. Among them, 10,710 are buried in Russia: 4,415 – in Katyn Forest near Smolensk, 6,295 – in Mednoye near Tver.



-Bolshevik war (1919–1921). The number of victims is deliberately inflated (up to as many as 100,000), while **Polish historians estimate it to be between 16,000–18,000, and their Russian counterparts – approximately 18,000–20,000.**

**February 1994** – the Polish-Russian *Agreement on graves and memorial sites of the victims of wars and repressions* was signed, together with a joint statement that enabled the construction of the Polish war cemetery in Katyn (it began in 1995).

**28 July 2000** – ceremonial opening of the Polish and Russian parts of the memorial complex in Katyn (the Russian part remained essentially undeveloped until 2018).

**21 September 2004** – Russian Chief Military Prosecutor’s Office discontinues the Katyn investigation “due to the death of the perpetrators”.

**7 April 2010** – Vladimir Putin, the then prime minister, paid an official visit to the Polish cemetery in Katyn, where he condemned the massacre as a Stalinist crime that cannot be justified in any way. After the Smolensk air disaster on 10 April<sup>95</sup> Russian state television broadcast the film ‘Katyn’ by Andrzej Wajda. The Polish side was provided with subsequent volumes of archival documents referring to the Katyn massacre (in total 148 out of the 183 volumes were transferred, while the rest were classified and Russian authorities refused to release them to Poland). The Russian State Archives published documents relating to the murder on their official website.

**26 November 2010** – The Russian State Duma adopted a declaration stating that the Katyn massacre was carried out on Stalin’s direct orders. It asserted that German responsibility for the crime was “a lie of Soviet propaganda”. President Dmitri Medvedev spoke in a similar vein in December 2010. The version about the Nazi perpetration of the crime, however, still appears in the public discourse, and it also happens that state media disseminate opinions questioning Soviet responsibility for the massacre.

<sup>95</sup> A crash of a Polish military plane at the Severny airport near Smolensk, which killed 96 people, including Polish president Lech Kaczyński and his wife. The delegation was on its way to ceremonies related to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyn massacre.

**2017** – the exhibition “Gulag on wheels” in the Russian part of the Katyn cemetery, presenting the fate of the victims of Stalinist repression, was replaced by plaques devoted to the Polish-Bolshevik war. They describe the harsh conditions in which Soviet POWs were held in Polish POW camps; they also indicate an overestimated number of deaths among them – 25,000–28,000.

**20 April 2018** – the ceremonial opening of the reconstructed and enlarged cemetery in the Russian part of the memorial complex in Katyn (the cemetery had been undeveloped since 2000).<sup>96</sup> Over 8,100 Soviet citizens murdered in the years 1918–1953 are buried there (of which approximately 7,000 were killed in 1937–1938). In stark contrast to the Polish cemetery, information about each of them is extremely scarce (only surnames and patronyms are presented). An important part of the complex is the museum, which shows Polish-Russian relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in a distorted way. It presents Poland as an aggressive state and whitewashes the policy of the USSR. It includes accusations against Poland of spurious extermination of Soviet POWs in 1919–1921; information about the Polish annexation of Cieszyn Silesia in 1938; outright lies about the Soviet aggression against Poland on 17 September 1939; no information about communist repression; glorification of the Red Army as “liberators” of Poland in 1944–1945).

**5 March 2020**<sup>97</sup> – the Russian state agency RIA Novosti published an interview with the “publicist and political scientist” Vladislav Shved, who blamed Nazi Germany of the Katyn massacre, thus repeating the long-refuted lies of Soviet propaganda. He labelled the true version of the NKVD responsibility for the crime as a provocation concocted by Goebbels in close cooperation with the then Polish government in exile. He also accused Poland of running “anti-Russian campaigns”.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>96</sup> A decree of the Russian government to create a memorial complex to commemorate the victims of the totalitarian regime was issued in 1996. For more on the cemetery and museum in Katyn see J. Rogoża, M. Wyrwa, *Katyn. In the Footsteps of the Crime*, Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding, Warszawa 2020, cprdip.pl.

<sup>97</sup> 5 March 2020 – the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the order to execute Polish prisoners of war, issued by the Politburo of the CC AUCP(b).

<sup>98</sup> ‘Раскрутку Катыни одобрил Гитлер: кто на самом деле убивал поляков?’, РИА Новости, 5 March 2020, ria.ru. Shved is the author of several books on Katyn (e.g. *Katyn. A Contemporary History of the Problem*), in which he promotes the thesis that the crime is a product of ‘Russophobic Goebbelsian-Polish propaganda’.

**7 May 2020** - employees of the Medical University in Tver (where the NKVD prison was located during the World War II) together with activists from the nationalist organisation NOD (see Chapter III) dismantled two memorial plaques from the walls of the university. The plaques commemorated the executed Polish citizens buried in the cemetery in Mednoye and other victims of NKVD. The alleged legal basis for this action was a document issued by Tver prosecutor's office in October 2019: it claimed that the plaques had been installed unlawfully in the 1990s. Moreover, contrary to the facts, it stated that there was no evidence that the executions of prisoners had been carried out in this very building.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>99</sup> The plaques were removed at a symbolic moment - on the eve of Victory Day, 9 May. There is no information whether any binding administrative decision was issued in this case, apart from a recommendation by the prosecutor's office, but the dismantling took place with the consent of local authorities. It followed the dominant trend to re-Sovietise the Russia's politics of memory.

### III. THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF RUSSIA'S POLITICS OF MEMORY - TOOLS, ACTIONS, ACTORS

The politics of memory is pursued by state institutions and the media, the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as social organisations established and financed by the authorities. Laws, archives, the system of education and the prolific sphere of pop culture have all been harnessed to promote the Kremlin's desired version of the past.

#### 1. The toolkit of Russia's politics of memory

**The politics of memory in Russia is framed in a centralised way** (its main assumptions are formulated in the Kremlin), **but with the use of an extensive network of institutions of various kinds**, generously financed both from state coffers and the budgets of state-owned and private enterprises. These (cooperating or competing) institutions jointly shape the politics of memory as desired by the authorities and construct an ideological message from the intersection of persuasion, propaganda and repression of opponents. They include government agencies (ministries of education and science), universities, social organisations financed by the state or Kremlin-linked businesses (the so-called GONGOs – government-organised non-government organisations), associations of 'patriotic' historians, Kremlin-sponsored political parties and the state media. The two most active entities in the field of historical propaganda – the Russian Historical Society and the Russian Military-Historical Society – are headed by senior public officials: the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, Sergei Naryshkin, and the president's assistant, Vladimir Medinsky<sup>100</sup> (for the most important GONGOs, see the table in Chapter III.3). The absence of a specialised body similar to Poland's or Ukraine's Institute of National Remembrance helps to fabricate a spontaneous, grass-roots nature of defending the 'historical truth' against 'Russia's enemies'. One characteristic feature of Russia's politics of memory is the active involvement of the secret services and the Ministry of Defence. Their zeal in developing and guarding the orthodoxy of historical research has been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>100</sup> The scale of support for such initiatives from the state budget alone is illustrated by the case of the Russian Military-Historical Society. It received 2.5 billion roubles (about \$35 million) in subsidies between 2017 and 2020, and is set to receive another 690 million roubles (nearly \$10 million) in 2021. See 'РВИО получит почти 690 млн рублей из бюджета в 2021 году', МБХ медиа, 3 October 2020, [mbk-news.appspot.com](https://mbk-news.appspot.com).

<sup>101</sup> J. Darczewska, '„Wojny pamięci”: historia, polityka i służby specjalne Federacji Rosyjskiej', *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2019, nr 20 (11), [abw.gov.pl](http://abw.gov.pl).

The desired picture of history is shaped on domestic political grounds mainly by media content (high culture and pop culture – theatre, cinema, literature, daily news coverage), educational and academic content (state-funded historical research, school and university textbooks), narratives disseminated by Kremlin propagandists and officials, the calendar of national holidays, and finally the symbolic organisation of public space, monuments, museums and archives. Laws, including criminal code provisions, are also an important tool for defending the ‘canonical’ vision of the past.

Historical propaganda addressed to the foreign audience is spread via media outlets with international reach (such as the multilingual RT television channel or the Sputnik news agency), GONGOs, a part of foreign academia, agents of influence, popular culture, and finally trolls and bots operating on social media. Recipients of the outward-facing message include foreign decision-makers, as well as broadly defined opinion leaders and the general public. The narrative that falsifies history is an important element of Russia’s active measures, including information warfare aimed at manipulating public opinion and decisions made by political elites through reflexive control.<sup>102</sup>

A special case in point is Russia’s activity targeting post-Soviet societies and elites. In October 2019, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov came up with an initiative to set up a commission of historians within the CIS to combine efforts aimed at countering distortions of historical facts – although the only largely uncontroversial topic inside the group is the Great Patriotic War (according to unofficial information, researchers from the Baltic states would also be invited to join its work).<sup>103</sup> It seems no coincidence that an extensive lecture presenting the Russian perception of the causes of World War II, with a strong anti-Polish bias, was delivered by Putin in December 2019 at a summit of CIS leaders. It was a clear signal that Russia sees the common historical heritage as a mandate to claim special influence in the ‘near abroad’.

### 1.1. Laws as gatekeepers of the historical canon

In Russia, the language of law – along with quasi-religious language – has become a tool of the official historical discourse and is used to censor politically inconvenient content. The first example of a criminal provision explicitly

<sup>102</sup> For more on reflexive control see M. Wojnowski, „Zarządzanie refleksyjne” jako paradygmat rosyjskich operacji informacyjno-psychologicznych w XXI w., *Przegląd Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego* 2015, nr 12 (7), abw.gov.pl.

<sup>103</sup> М. Беленькая, Е. Черненко, ‘Будущее СНГ усмотрели в прошлом’, *Коммерсантъ*, 11 October 2019, [kommersant.ru](http://kommersant.ru).

referring to ‘falsification of history’ (the first Russian memory law) was Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code, introduced in May 2014, which penalises ‘exoneration of Nazism’.<sup>104</sup> It applies both to overt propagation of Nazi symbols and content and to free discussion on the USSR’s role in World War II, especially its alliance with the Third Reich in 1939–1941. Its enactment coincided with an ideological offensive accompanying the military aggression against Ukraine. During the first four years of the amendment, 19 convictions were handed down under this article. So far, no one has been sentenced to imprisonment, yet – in line with the practices of Russian judiciary – there have been no acquittals either.<sup>105</sup> Courts have also convicted people for inaccurate statements about the history of the USSR and Russia under other provisions, including Article 282 of the Criminal Code on combating extremism, which sometimes results in prison sentences.<sup>106</sup> Another restriction is a ban on publishing certain materials deemed ‘extremist’ (based on a special list kept by the Ministry of Justice<sup>107</sup>). Administrative pressure on historians and ordinary citizens is also common.<sup>108</sup> Politically motivated laws (such as the law on ‘foreign agents’,<sup>109</sup> repeatedly used against the Memorial Association) and morality-related ones (as in the Dmitriyev case) are also utilised to suppress undesirable research into the past, including commemoration of the victims of repression.

**The Kremlin is seeking to extend the application of national memory laws beyond Russia’s borders.** In particular, it protests at the de-Sovietisation of public symbolic space, including the removal or relocation of monuments honouring Soviet ‘soldiers-liberators’. It sometimes happens that in such cases the Russian Investigative Committee initiates proceedings under Article 354.1, as in response to the dismantling of a statue of Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague in April 2020. One of the recent amendments to the Criminal Code (initiated by Putin, who signed the relevant law on 7 April 2020) introduced criminal liability for removing or damaging war monuments and military burial sites both inside and outside Russia.

<sup>104</sup> For the text of Art. 354.1 see [УК РФ Статья 354.1. Реабилитация нацизма](#), КонсультантПлюс, consultant.ru.

<sup>105</sup> ‘История под запретом’, Победобесие. Спецпроект «Граней» и Фонда «Свободная Россия», [pobedobesie.info](#); ч. 1 ст. 354.1 УК, ОВД-Инфо, [ovdinfo.org](#).

<sup>106</sup> ‘Доклад Международной Агоры: История становится опасной наукой’, Agora, 10 May 2018, [agora.legal](#).

<sup>107</sup> The list is available on the ministry’s website: ‘Экстремистские материалы’, [minjust.gov.ru](#).

<sup>108</sup> For example, St. Petersburg-based historian Kirill Alexandrov was stripped of his habilitated doctor degree for a dissertation in which he explained Soviet citizens’ collaboration with the Nazis as a result of mass terror employed by the Soviet authorities before the war. See ‘Доклад Международной Агоры...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>109</sup> For more details see K. Chawryło, M. Domańska, ‘Strangers among us. Non-governmental organisations in Russia’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 184, 28 September 2015, [osw.waw.pl](#).

## **Patriotic paragraphs.**

### **Law and state institutions in the service of ideology**

**May 2009** – a group of deputies from the party of power, United Russia, submitted to the State Duma a draft amendment to the Criminal Code, introducing criminal punishment for the “exoneration of Nazism” (the code was to be supplemented with article 354.1). Among other things, it banned the denial of the USSR’s victory in the Great Patriotic War. The initiative to adopt such an act was put forward in February 2008 by Sergei Shoigu, the then minister for emergency situations. He referred to laws on the prohibition of Holocaust denial, present in foreign legal systems. In January 2010, the government gave a negative opinion on the draft after pointing to formal shortcomings.<sup>110</sup>

**May 2009** – president Dmitry Medvedev established the presidential commission for counteracting attempts to falsify history that were harmful to Russia’s interests. Sergei Naryshkin, the then head of the Presidential Administration and a former KGB officer, was appointed its chairman.<sup>111</sup> There were almost no professional historians in this body. Instead, it was composed of representatives of the Presidential Administration, ministries of education, justice, culture and foreign affairs, the Foreign Intelligence Service, FSB and universities; it also included the general director of the state media holding VGTRK. At one of the first meetings of the commission, Naryshkin stressed that their purpose was to oppose “revisionists” who try to undermine the geopolitical effects of World War II and attempt to create an “ideological basis” for making political, financial and territorial claims against Russia.<sup>112</sup> The commission was abolished by Medvedev in February 2012.

**March 2013** – a group of deputies of the Federation Council submitted to the State Duma a bill prohibiting the “exoneration of Nazism”, including Holocaust denial. It was not considered by the parliament.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Борьба с фальсификаторами истории забуксовала: правительство не захотело их сажать’, 14 January 2010, [newsru.com](http://newsru.com).

<sup>111</sup> Указ Президента Российской Федерации от 15 мая 2009 г. N 549 «О Комиссии при Президенте Российской Федерации по противодействию попыткам фальсификации истории в ущерб интересам России», see *Российская Газета*, [rg.ru](http://rg.ru).

<sup>112</sup> ‘Доклад Международной Агоры...’, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

**May 2014** – the Criminal Code was amended by article 354.1 that criminalised the “exoneration of Nazism”. It penalises dissemination of knowingly false information about the activities of the USSR during the Second World War and denial of facts established by the judgment of the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. The law provides for penalties of a fine, community service or up to five years of imprisonment. Dissemination of “manifestly disrespectful information about the dates of military glory and memorable dates related to the defence of the homeland”, as well as “desecration of symbols of Russia’s military glory”, are punishable by a fine or community service.<sup>113</sup>

**November 2014** – Art. 20.3 of the Code of Administrative Offences, which envisaged sanctions for “promoting or publicly displaying Nazi symbols, symbols of extremist organisations or other symbols prohibited by statute”, was amended. While before it had been required to prove that forbidden symbols were both “propagated” and “publicly demonstrated”, after the amendment was passed, it was enough to prove the presence of any of these two premises. As a result, the number of cases initiated pursuant to Art. 20.3 increased nine times by 2018 and six times as many suspects were arrested (during this period 6,622 people were punished for publicly displaying the forbidden symbols). In February 2020, Duma adopted amendments to the administrative code that abolished penalties for the use of Nazi symbols, as long as no hallmarks of promoting the Nazi regime are revealed. This followed a series of scandalous judgments from previous years: courts used to fine individuals and institutions for publishing archival materials that contained the swastika, even though it was not accompanied by the affirmation of Nazism.<sup>114</sup>

**November 2019** – Russian authorities once again announced that they would demand the UN General Assembly to adopt a resolution in 2020 in which victory over Nazism and the monuments of ‘soldiers-liberators’ would be recognised as part of the World Heritage (the formal goal of the initiative was to “prevent Nazism”). The legal protection of victory and its recognition as a part of the World Heritage would facilitate Russia’s moral

<sup>113</sup> УК РФ Статья 354.1. Реабилитация нацизма, *op. cit.*

<sup>114</sup> ‘Доклад Международной Агоры...’, *op. cit.* In St. Petersburg, the organisers of an exhibition on the Great Patriotic War had to tape the swastika on Nazi leaflets displayed there for fear of punishment. One of the sentences for ‘rehabilitating Nazism’ involved the online posting of a photo from the joint Soviet-Nazi parade in Brest in 1939, which can be found in Russian textbooks. See ‘Госдума отменила штрафы за демонстрацию свастики без признаков пропаганды нацизма’, 18 February 2020, newsru.com.



and legal pressure on other states, including interference with their internal affairs on issues particularly sensitive and important for the Kremlin. These measures would attempt to restrict the freedom of historical research, grant special status of monuments to Soviet soldiers and defy claims relating to USSR's illegal annexations of a number of territories in 1939–1945.

**April 2020** – the Russian Investigative Committee launched an investigation under Art. 354.1 of the Penal Code against the Prague councilors in connection with the dismantling of the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev. According to Vladimir Medinsky, the councilors who supported the demolition were “impious”, they “mocked the greatest sanctities” and should be punished by Russia with all the severity of the law if the investigation proves their “personal guilt”. Among the methods of prosecuting them, Medinsky mentioned the intervention of Interpol. He also explicitly stated that the actions he proposed were intended to effectively deter other people from making similar decisions in the future.

**April 2020** – another amendment to the Criminal Code was adopted on Putin's initiative. It introduced criminal liability for the removal or devastation of war memorials and military burial sites, both in Russia and abroad. Such acts are punishable with a fine of up to 3 million roubles, community service or imprisonment for up to three years (in the case of group actions, the penalties are higher and include imprisonment of up to five years).<sup>115</sup> Previously, the code provided for criminal liability only for damage to monuments of history and culture.

## 1.2. The archives as an ideological battlefield

**Another weapon the authorities can use to protect authoritarian-imperial myths is restricted access to the archives.** After the collapse of the USSR, despite far-reaching changes in the law and a climate of political transparency, Soviet records were never fully examined by historians. The problem was both a lack of will and insufficient financial resources to efficiently carry out the process of declassifying the released CPSU documentation, alongside sabotage from the security services which, contrary to the original plans, did not transfer the extensive KGB archive to civilian control (it was taken over by

<sup>115</sup> The text available on the official website of the President of the Russian Federation: [Федеральный закон от 07.04.2020 г. № 112-ФЗ, Президент России, kremlin.ru.](#)

the FSB). There is still no reliable information about its contents and access to materials remains restricted – contrary to law – on the basis of internal FSB regulations and arbitrary decisions of the management of individual institutions (it is similar with the archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).<sup>116</sup>

**The tendency to block access to archival resources and to make previously declassified documents secret became apparent by the late 1990s.** In this context, Putin’s 2001 decree dissolving the commission for the declassification of CPSU documents, established in 1994, was of symbolic meaning. Its functions in this respect were transferred to the inter-ministerial commission for the protection of state secrets.<sup>117</sup>

It is standard practice that the Ministry of Defence regularly publishes a biased selection of World War II documents – usually on significant anniversaries. Its prime goal is to glorify the Red Army as the liberator of Central Europe, but also to discredit Russia’s contemporary opponents (see the distorted picture of the Warsaw Uprising in the materials published in January 2020, or the ministry’s publications on ‘Banderites’ during the Russian-Ukrainian war).<sup>118</sup> One of the latest initiatives in this field is a plan announced by Putin in January 2020 to create a comprehensive archive of materials (including audiovisual ones) about World War II, accessible to Russian citizens and foreigners.<sup>119</sup> According to the Russian president, it would “shut the mouths” of those who try to “distort” and “falsify” history and belittle the role of the “heroes who saved the world from the brown plague”.<sup>120</sup>

At the same time, archival documents that could cast a shadow on the official version of history (e.g. on crimes committed by Soviet soldiers in the ‘liberated’ territories) remain inaccessible. It is also increasingly problematic to access records relating to the Stalinist terror, including dossiers on the victims of political repressions. In recent years, it has become more and more difficult

<sup>116</sup> For more on the problem of access to the archives see e.g. Н. Петров, ‘Десятилетие архивных реформ в России’, Индекс, index.org.ru.

<sup>117</sup> The members of the commission included deputy heads of the FSB, the Defense Ministry, the Interior Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, i.e. ministries interested in classifying rather than declassifying information. See А. Меленберг, ‘Никогда вы ничего не узнаете’, Новая Газета, 17 April 2008, novayagazeta.ru.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Варшава в огне. К 75-летию освобождения города’, warsaw75.mil.ru; И. Нагорных, В. Хамраев, ‘О роли точности в истории’, *op. cit.*

<sup>119</sup> ‘Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию’, Президент России, 15 January 2020, kremlin.ru.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Встреча с ветеранами Великой Отечественной войны и представителями патриотических объединений’, Президент России, 18 January 2020, kremlin.ru.

to examine the archives of the FSB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which explicitly build their professional ethos on the tradition of the Cheka, NKVD and KGB. It reveals a coherent picture of neo-Soviet motivations behind the actions of the ruling elite in today's Russia.

**The archives are treated by the authorities as their property, and thus public access to them is not a question of 'rights' but of obtaining a special 'privilege'.** Everything related to state power is a carefully guarded secret. The archives are meant to protect the sovereignty of the authorities, including the 'sovereignty' of the secret services, which stand above the law. This approach reflects an extreme politicisation of history in authoritarian Russia, but above all a systemic, instrumentalised approach to the law. Particularly noteworthy is meticulous protection of the personal data of NKVD investigators responsible for repression, which is maintained for years after their deaths. This is a clear promise to their successors: in return for their loyalty, Putin's Russia will give them the same unlimited guarantees of impunity.

### **Archives wide shut**

According to the Act "On State Secrets" (Art. 13), the period of classifying information that contains state secrets may not exceed 30 years. In exceptional cases, the classification may be extended, but by default the documents should be declassified after this period. In practice, the opposite presumption prevails: materials remain secret until a decision is made to declassify them, and even then access to them is often made difficult under any pretext.

In 2014, the inter-ministerial commission for the protection of state secrets decided to extend the declassification date of the archival collections of the Soviet security services (Cheka, NKVD, KGB) from 1917–1991 for another 30 years – until 2044. This refers, among other things, to documents on the Great Terror of 1937–1938. The decision formally applies to materials containing information about intelligence, counterintelligence and operational work of the security apparatus and was justified by the "ongoing sensitivity" of these data and their importance for Russia's national security. In actuality, given the lack of independent supervision of the archives, access to any document from this collection can be denied.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Д. Евстифеев, 'КГБ не рассекретится', Газета.Ру, 19 January 2016, gazeta.ru; 'Доклад Международной Агоры...', *op. cit.*

In order to control archival resources and limit free access to documents, the authorities most often use the following methods:

**1) Invoking the “secrecy of private life”**  
(even when it means breaking the law)

In September 2017, a court in Moscow rejected a request by Marie Dupuy, the niece of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, to grant access to the FSB archives in order to fully explain the circumstances of his death. Wallenberg was murdered by the Soviet security services in 1947. The court accepted the FSB’s argument that it was impossible to disclose documents containing “sensitive personal data of third parties”.<sup>122</sup>

**2) Invoking state secrets**

The FSB refuses to disclose the names of NKVD officers participating in repressive measures, relying on internal instructions and a 1995 presidential decree that classified information on security services personnel as a state secret. However, the FSB’s interpretation contravenes both the spirit of that decree (it concerned mainly active employees of the secret services) and the law “On State Secrets”. In accordance with the latter, secrecy applies neither to the data of NKVD officers (their names, ranks, signatures), nor the information about violations of human and civil rights and freedoms, or violations of the law by state authorities.<sup>123</sup>

**3) Bending the law on the rehabilitation of victims of repression**

In September 2018, a Russian citizen, Dmitry Ostryakov, asked the FSB to declassify documents in the case of Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, who was executed by the Bolsheviks. In March 2019, he received information that the materials had been declassified, but that access to them was impossible due to the fact that Kolchak had never been officially rehabilitated. Differentiating access to documentation based on the status of victims is contrary to the law “On Archives”. Of the approximately 11–12 million people who suffered some form of repression in the USSR, less than half have been rehabilitated. Hundreds of thousands of victims cannot be rehabilitated due to the lack of relatives interested in submitting a relevant

<sup>122</sup> А. Колесников, ‘Тело Валленберга: Лубянка защищает свой «суверенитет»’, Московский Комсомолец, 27 September 2017, mk.ru.

<sup>123</sup> А. Курилова, ‘ФСБ своих не раскрывает’, Коммерсантъ, 29 February 2020, kommersant.ru.

application or the absurd interpretation of the legal provisions. The application should be substantiated by archival information but – in the case of non-rehabilitated persons – access to such information is increasingly denied. However, as practice shows, researchers loyal to the authorities have no problem obtaining access to such data. This is evidenced, for instance, by a 2015 publication by two Kremlin-linked historians (Andrei Artizov – head of the Federal Archives Agency, Rosarkhiv, and Vasily Christoforov – head of the FSB archives) devoted to general Andrei Vlasov, who is considered a traitor in Russia. The study contains numerous quotations from the FSB archives.<sup>124</sup>

#### **4) Impeding access to documents relating to repression without legal justifications**

One example is the practice widespread in the FSB Central Archives in Moscow and the FSB Archives in Saint Petersburg. Researchers are not only prevented from copying (photographing) documents by themselves, which runs counter to the law, but the employees also refuse to make copies for them or even issue certificates confirming their content. This also applies to materials from investigations into rehabilitated victims of repression. According to researchers, such practices have intensified since around 2017.<sup>125</sup>

### **1.3. The school as a laboratory of neo-Sovietism**

**Another field where the politics of memory is implemented is the education system.** It is an integral part of the power vertical, both in the administrative-financial and political-ideological dimensions. It is geared towards the dissemination of a specifically understood patriotism as a kind of state ideology, with strong militaristic features, affirmation of the authoritarian power and the imperial idea. The official version of Russian history is passed on through the content of textbooks and history lessons, and also through patriotic education programmes, including paramilitary classes.

The moulding of young minds in this imperial, militaristic and state-centric fashion begins in Russia as early as in pre-school. **In kindergartens**, as part

<sup>124</sup> П. Полян, 'Нереабилитированные и заархивированные', Ведомости, 19 April 2019, [vedomosti.ru](http://vedomosti.ru).

<sup>125</sup> Н. Шкуренко, 'История закрывается, далее – забвение', Новая Газета, 20 September 2019, [novayagazeta.ru](http://novayagazeta.ru).

of 'patriotic education', little children are taught war games and songs, watch films about the Great Patriotic War and learn patriotic poems, and to mark military holidays they are dressed in uniforms, perform war-themed plays, etc. On 9 May anniversaries, many towns organise festivities and war games where little children are taught things like how to fire dummy guns (including machine guns), and in some towns they even march in parades as 'kindergarten troops'.<sup>126</sup> Military-patriotic clubs and groups are springing up in some kindergartens. Military clothing shops, such as the Voentorg chain, offer a wide range of children's uniforms or outfits with military elements, even 'themed' baby rompers, and there is also a huge range of military-related toys on the market.<sup>127</sup> In the consciousness of little children, this romanticises the image of war, devalues the price of human life and accustoms them to a confrontational vision of the world from their earliest years. All this lays the groundwork for further stages of indoctrination at school level.

**The school is designed to develop a reflex of subordination to the state and the government-imposed system of myths and symbols.** In doing so, it reproduces an authoritarian culture that excludes dialogue and discussion and strives to mould pupils through restricting the permitted interpretations of history. The themes to be internalised by pupils in the course of their education include the apotheosis of a strong authority that protects the state against enemies. It is presented as the only subject enjoying political agency, while military conquests are qualified as the main criterion of state strength. Boosting the leader's personal power and expanding territory are portrayed as a priori positive developments. State power is thus reduced to the person of the leader, who acts arbitrarily (treats the state as 'his own'). At the same time, pupils are not familiarised with issues relating to the importance of the state's institutional system or the empowerment of society. This is consistent with servile statements by some representatives of the ruling elite (e.g. the remark by Vyacheslav Volodin, the current speaker of the State Duma: "there is no Russia without Putin"). Pupils are taught the official narrative of a 'voluntary' accession of conquered lands to the Russian and Soviet empires and the threat of destabilisation and bloodshed ('smuta') arising from popular protests. The affirmation of stability and 'peaceful' Russian foreign policy contrasts with the negative image of enemies who incessantly wage aggressive

<sup>126</sup> К. Меркурьева, 'Дошкольные войска: детсадовцы маршируют в военной форме', Радио Свобода, 8 Май 2019, [svoboda.org](http://svoboda.org); «Бессмертный полк» в детском саду № 20', Администрация Санкт-Петербурга, 9 Май 2019, [gov.spb.ru](http://gov.spb.ru).

<sup>127</sup> See e.g. the products of Детский камуфляж, [voen-torg.ru](http://voen-torg.ru); Детская одежда милитари, [armrus.ru](http://armrus.ru); Игрушки для мальчиков (Оружие), [toyway.ru](http://toyway.ru).

wars against Russia.<sup>128</sup> It appears that the ultimate goal of the authorities is to shape a uniform ‘Homo neo-Sovieticus’, a passive recipient of the official ideological message, a soldier in the new ideological wars. The spirit of militarism gives a disturbingly literal tinge to the understanding of war, if we take into account the growth of paramilitary child and youth organisations (see further).

**From 2012**, after Vladimir Putin’s return to the Kremlin, **ultra-conservative and ‘patriotic’ content began to dominate school curricula.** That year, the subject *The Basics of Religious Cultures and Secular Ethics* was introduced (within which around 30% of pupils chose *The Basics of Orthodox Culture* and 42% selected *The Basics of Secular Ethics*)<sup>129</sup>. These trends were further reinforced by the appointment of Olga Vasilyeva, a conservative-minded official with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church and a friend of Patriarch Kirill, as Minister of Education in 2016. Under Vasilyeva’s leadership, the ministry has implemented changes to the so-called federal educational standards (FGOS) serving as the basis for the core school curricula. The ongoing changes are intended to centralise the education system and greatly reduce the didactic autonomy of schools, including the choice of textbooks. An obligation to equip schools with textbooks purchased with state funds has been introduced, while the criteria under which they are included in the official register of the Ministry of Education and approved for use have been tightened; many history textbooks highly rated by experts have been left off the list.<sup>130</sup> It has resulted in a monopoly over substantive content for the state as well as a commercial monopoly for Kremlin-linked structures. The “Education” publishing house (Russian: “*Просвещение*”), controlled by entities linked to president Putin’s friend Arkady Rotenberg, holds almost 100% of the textbook market. It currently receives 80% of budget funds for the purchase of textbooks.<sup>131</sup>

A ‘unified standard’ for teaching history was adopted in 2014, which limited independent choice of content by teachers. It was initiated by Putin and implemented under the supervision of the Russian Historical Society, led by then Duma speaker Sergei Naryshkin. On its basis, publishing houses, generously

<sup>128</sup> Н. Потапова, ‘Школьный экзамен по истории и доминирующие дискурсы российской исторической политики’, *Контрапункт* № 12 (June 2018).

<sup>129</sup> See e.g. Ю. Синяева, Г. Смолицкий, ‘В Московской области объединят мировые религии’, *Благовест-инфо*, 15 February 2012, [blagovest-info.ru](http://blagovest-info.ru).

<sup>130</sup> Б.И. Чевтаева, ‘Новые учебники замалчивания истории’, *Deutsche Welle*, 26 November 2015, [dw.com/ru](http://dw.com/ru).

<sup>131</sup> А. Якорева, ‘Учебники под редакцией Аркадия Ротенберга. Почти 100% школьного рынка получили структуры, близкие к другу Путина. Вот как это произошло’, *Meduza*, 21 October 2019, [meduza.io](http://meduza.io).

supported from the state budget, prepared a set of textbooks presenting official interpretations of Russian history in the spirit of ‘respect for all its pages [both bright and dark]’. It means that critical assessments of the past of the Russian state – expressed on moral or legal grounds – are left out. The textbooks were included in the curriculum for the 2016/2017 school year. They included passages on the role of Crimea and Sevastopol in the history of the Russian Empire, the USSR and contemporary Russia, with the aim of legitimising the annexation of the peninsula.

### **An alternative history from Russian textbooks**

The main change brought to the history curriculum in schools under Putin’s rule is the dominance of imperial-great power ideas and the tendency to rehabilitate, albeit indirectly, the Stalinist period. The shameful and dark pages of Russian and Soviet history are presented in textbooks either cautiously, cursorily or simply covered up.

The presentation of the Stalinist period does not constitute an unequivocal apology for the tyrant (the 2010 textbook, which contained an unambiguously positive assessment of Stalin’s rule, was withdrawn from circulation after a scandal erupted<sup>132</sup>). However, indirect apology is a frequent phenomenon. It is based on relativisation, a vague and superficial presentation of tragic events, and avoidance of unambiguous moral judgements. The acts of repression are justified by “exceptional” circumstances or presented as a historical necessity and the price to pay for the rapid development of the country and victory in World War II. Most of the textbooks do not mention the Gulag at all. The period of repression itself is often limited to the years 1937–1938, while its other waves are ignored. It is significant that the textbooks of the aforementioned “Education” publishing house devote a lot of attention to the history of the Soviet counter-intelligence, especially during the war (NKVD, SMERSH). Their activities are presented solely as a fight against the “enemies of the motherland” and their participation in repression carried out against the civilian population are covered up.

These measures are to instil a belief in the peaceful nature of Soviet wartime policies towards neighbouring countries. For example, the aggression

<sup>132</sup> ‘К использованию в учебном процессе непригоден’, Полит.ру, 24 November 2010, polit.ru.



against Poland in 1939 is described as “the crossing of the Polish border by Soviet troops”.<sup>133</sup> The Katyn massacre is presented in some textbooks as Stalin’s retaliation for the tragic fate of the Red Army soldiers in Polish POW camps in 1919–1921.<sup>134</sup> The treaty of friendship between the USSR and the Third Reich is referred to as an “agreement”, without mentioning the content of its secret protocols. Experts and educators have repeatedly assessed this superficial approach as a deliberate policy inspired by the authorities.<sup>135</sup>

On the other hand, school history textbooks contain a relatively extensive description of the “history after 2000”, presented in apologetic tones – as a period of stability and growing living standards, contrasted with the 1990s – a period of Russia’s weakness and humiliation.<sup>136</sup>

The idea of **patriotic education of children and youth (PE)** has been implemented for years at the federal, regional and local levels. Both state bodies (primarily military circles) and formally non-state organisations controlled or financed by the Kremlin (including veterans’ organisations, the Russian Orthodox Church, Cossack organisations,<sup>137</sup> youth clubs) are involved. The PE sphere is financed exclusively with state funds.<sup>138</sup> The Great Patriotic War is at the centre of educational programmes.

The idea of introducing PE elements into the educational process dates back to the 1990s. A 1996 decree by president Boris Yeltsin provided for state support for social organisations involved in the military and patriotic education of young people. In 1997 the Ministry of Defence was instructed to take steps to strengthen cooperation between the military and entities operating in the field of education, with a view to further preparing young people for military service.<sup>139</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Б.И. Чевтаева, ‘Новые учебники...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>134</sup> М. Шакиров, ‘«Это плевок в лицо»’, Радио Свобода, 10 April 2017, svoboda.org.

<sup>135</sup> Б.И. Чевтаева, ‘Новые учебники...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>136</sup> К. Ларина, В. Дымарский, в гостях: Л. Гудков, ‘Вожди и нация: секрет народной любви’, Радио Эхо Москвы, 17 February 2017, echo.msk.ru.

<sup>137</sup> For more details see J. Darczewska, *Putin’s Cossacks. Folklore, business or politics?*, OSW, Warsaw 2017, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>138</sup> E. Khodzhaeva, ‘Mobilizing Patriotism in Russia: Federal Programs of Patriotic Education’, *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 207, 26 September 2017.

<sup>139</sup> Указ Президента РФ от 16 мая 1996 г. N 727 «О мерах государственной поддержки общественных объединений, ведущих работу по военно-патриотическому воспитанию молодежи» (с изменениями и дополнениями), see Гарант, base.garant.ru.

In 2003, a strategic document was adopted as a basis for the development of PE programmes: *The Concept of Patriotic Education*, which set an explicit goal of reviving Russia as a great power.<sup>140</sup> In addition, five-year federal government programmes called *Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation* have been adopted since 2001; military education was defined as an integral part of them from the outset. The 2011–2015 programme emphasised state security and the fight against extremism, and also reactivated Soviet forms of education focused around the military dimension of patriotic education (such as military camps and classes on military history). The 2016–2020 programme, with a budget of 1.67 billion roubles,<sup>141</sup> encouraged the creation of cadet classes in ordinary schools, mainly for boys (children wear uniforms, take an oath, military symbols are omnipresent). It is expected that many of these children will then choose a military career, although it is not compulsory. Of particular note is the Young Army (Yunarmia) created under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defence.

### Youth paramilitary organisations

The military-patriotic organisation Young Army (Yunarmia, Russian: *Юнармия*) was established in 2016 on the initiative of Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, by several GONGOs gathered around the Ministry of Defence. It operates under the supervision of this ministry and receives funding from the ministerial budget. It is also financed by some state-owned banks, such as Sberbank and Vneshtorgbank (VTB). In June 2019, Yunarmia and the enterprises of the military-industrial complex signed a cooperation agreement aimed at encouraging young people to choose military-linked careers in the future.<sup>142</sup> Yunarmia has its branches in all regions of Russia (including occupied Crimea).

According to official data, in January 2021 Yunarmia had 760,000 members – children and youth, aged from 8 to 18.<sup>143</sup> Its goals include: strengthening

<sup>140</sup> Концепция патриотического воспитания граждан Российской Федерации (одобрена на заседании Правительственной комиссии по социальным вопросам военнослужащих, граждан, уволенных с военной службы, и членов их семей (протокол N 2(12)-П4 от 21 мая 2003 г.)), Музей памяти воинов-тагильчан, погибших в локальных войнах планеты, музейпамяти.рф.

<sup>141</sup> О государственной программе «Патриотическое воспитание граждан Российской Федерации на 2016–2020 годы», Государственная система правовой информации, pravo.gov.ru; О. Чуракова, 'Правительству не понравился законопроект о патриотическом воспитании', Ведомости, 29 March 2018, vedomosti.ru.

<sup>142</sup> А. Жукова, «Юнармия» и предприятия российского ОПК подписали соглашение о сотрудничестве', Центр 71, 28 June 2019, 71.ru.

<sup>143</sup> See the official website of Yunarmia, [yunarmy.ru](http://yunarmy.ru).

the authority of military service in these age groups; promoting patriotism; popularisation of historical knowledge, local history and military achievements (including the search for anonymous burial sites of soldiers fighting in the Great Patriotic War); counteracting extremism; sports activities (including shooting), technical activities and classes on the basics of Orthodox culture. By 2020, over 100 centres for military and patriotic education were to be created to prepare staff for regular military service. According to Minister Shoygu, 1,660 summer patriotic (military and sports) camps for children and adolescents were organised in 2019.<sup>144</sup> The peculiarity of this ‘patriotism’ is illustrated, among other things, by the activities of the Tver regional branch of Yunarmia. It has been organising such training camps since 2018, including shooting exercises in the Mednoye cemetery complex, where Polish POWs murdered in 1940 and Soviet victims of Stalinist terror are buried.<sup>145</sup>

**Yunarmia is actively advertised in schools. Membership in the organisation is perceived by many parents as a guarantee of their children’s future careers in state administration (military families are expected to enroll their children in Yunarmia). Its members are treated preferentially during the university entrance exams.**<sup>146</sup>

As of the end of 2015, there were 177 cadet schools in Russia with almost 62,000 students. In addition, there were 7,000 cadet classes in other schools (including classes run by Cossack organisations).<sup>147</sup> In Moscow, cadet classes appeared in 2014; they were opened in 231 schools, and a total of 20,000 children are enrolled there. The profiles of these classes include: military logistics, land forces, missile forces, navy, specialities of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry for Emergency Situations, and the FSB.<sup>148</sup> Almost all law enforcement agencies in Russia (even the Investigative Committee or the prison service) have opened their own cadet classes to recruit future officers.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Сергей Шойгу рассказал, как спасали российскую армию’, Концерн ВКО Алмаз – Антей, 24 September 2019, [almaz-antey.ru](http://almaz-antey.ru).

<sup>145</sup> ‘Юнармия’, Мемориальный комплекс «Медное», 8 June 2018, [mk-mednoe.ru](http://mk-mednoe.ru).

<sup>146</sup> ‘Вузы будут добавлять баллы к ЕГЭ участникам «Юнармии»’, Все новости, 30 March 2019, [vsnovostint.ru](http://vsnovostint.ru).

<sup>147</sup> E. Khodzhaeva, ‘Mobilizing Patriotism in Russia...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>148</sup> ‘Логисты, переводчики и юристы: в кадетских классах появились новые профили’, Официальный портал Мэра и Правительства Москвы, 16 September 2019, [mos.ru](http://mos.ru).

In addition, thousands of clubs and associations for children and youth operate throughout Russia and military and sports camps are regularly organised. The participants take part in war reenactments, festivals of military song, classes of patriotic education (entitled, for example, “Children – heroes of war”) and are trained to use weapons.

PE programmes are coordinated by the Russian Centre for Civil and Patriotic Education of Children and Youth (RosPatriotTsentr) under the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (supervised by the Ministry of Education).<sup>149</sup> The main ministries at the federal level are the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Defence. Relevant bodies have also been established at the regional and local levels. The regions have adopted their own PE programmes or PE legislation.

At a meeting with representatives of social organisations in 2012, Putin framed the patriotic education of youth in the context of information warfare and the imposition of foreign systems of values and worldviews as part of international competition. He said that the distortion of national and historical consciousness results in the weakness of states and loss of sovereignty.<sup>150</sup>

Despite the adoption of a number of documents of different status and the operation of an extensive network of institutions, the PE sphere had not been fully formalised until recently, as its regulation was left to educational facilities.<sup>151</sup> However, the parliament passed a law in July 2020, initiated by the president, introducing a compulsory patriotic education component into the school curricula. This has resulted in the unification of PE programmes and the Kremlin’s monopoly on shaping their content.

## **2. The Russian Orthodox Church – one of the pillars of the Kremlin’s politics of memory**

**Another important tool in the Kremlin’s politics of memory is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which carries on with its traditional, centuries-old ‘mission’ of legitimising the secular rulers. Its task is also to**

<sup>149</sup> E. Khodzhaeva, ‘Mobilizing Patriotism in Russia...’, *op. cit.*

<sup>150</sup> ‘Meeting with public representatives on patriotic education for young people’, President of Russia, 12 September 2012, [en.kremlin.ru](http://en.kremlin.ru).

<sup>151</sup> В. Рувинский, ‘С военно-патриотическим приветом’, *Ведомости*, 24 May 2020, [vedomosti.ru](http://vedomosti.ru); ‘«Это девальвирует нормальную любовь к Родине»’, *Знак*, 22 May 2020, [znak.com](http://znak.com).

**emphasise the historical continuity of the Russian state, the invariability of its conservative values and ultimately, its very essence and the specific relations between the rulers and the ruled.**

For most of its history, the ROC enjoyed limited autonomy and was embedded in the hierarchical structure of the state, headed by a monarch. The political function of the Orthodox Church was to legitimise the secular rulers and the continuity of their rule: anointing the monarch to the throne, granting him quasi-sacral legitimacy, promoting messages and values compatible with the interests of the rulers, who were presented as God's anointed. After a hiatus during the Soviet period, this function was regained by the Church following the collapse of the USSR,<sup>152</sup> particularly under Vladimir Putin. **President Putin, echoing the traditions of the Russian Empire, portrays Orthodoxy as a state-forming element, pointing out that "Russian statehood does not exist in isolation from the spiritual and historical legacy of the Orthodox Church".**<sup>153</sup> **Elements of the Orthodox religion are instrumentally used by the Kremlin to emphasise the historical continuity of Russia and the invariability of its state model,** and thus to justify the Kremlin's desire to consolidate and preserve power. The Kremlin also uses Orthodoxy to provide an ideological foundation for the assumption that Russia is eternally and fundamentally distinct from Western civilisation, to create a counterbalance to liberalism, to justify Russia's confrontation with the 'degenerate' West and to buttress its aspirations to the role of a superpower that has some sway over the world order.<sup>154</sup>

The Orthodox Church plays a servile role in the Kremlin's efforts to **legitimise Russia's geopolitical ambitions and hegemonic claims towards the regions historically considered by Russia as its sphere of influence** – including Eastern Europe, first and foremost Ukraine and Belarus. The ROC has played a prominent role with regard to Ukraine, particularly in the context of the annexation of Crimea<sup>155</sup> and the war in Donbas. In order to justify the

<sup>152</sup> К. Солянская, 'Служитель и служащий', Газета.Ru, 5 December 2008, gazeta.ru.

<sup>153</sup> В. Путин, 'Российскую государственность невозможно представить без духовного исторического опыта Церкви', Правмир, 25 May 2017, pravmir.ru.

<sup>154</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, J. Rogoża, *Potemkin conservatism. An ideological tool of the Kremlin*, OSW, Warsaw 2015, osw.waw.pl.

<sup>155</sup> In the context of the annexation of Crimea, many ROC activities were closely coordinated with the Russian authorities and intelligence. The ROC-affiliated 'Orthodox oligarch' Konstantin Malofeev, founder of the St. Basil's Foundation, publicly admitted to funding separatists in eastern Ukraine. It was Malofeev, along with the separatist leader Igor Girkin (formerly an FSB officer), who appeared in Crimea back in January 2014 as part of an official ROC pilgrimage with relics from the Holy Mountain of Athos; see. K. Chawryło, *The altar and throne alliance. The Russian Orthodox*

annexation, the Russian authorities led by president Putin have repeatedly resorted to religious and historical arguments, emphasising the close **historical link between present-day Russia and Crimea as the ‘cradle of Russian Orthodoxy’**.<sup>156</sup> The Church has also been an active actor in the political and diplomatic efforts to thwart the process of granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. This process was detrimental to the interests and position of the Moscow Patriarchate, as it jeopardised its position as the largest autocephalous Orthodox Church in the world, as well as to the interests of Russia itself as a country striving to maintain its role as the political, economic, cultural and religious hegemon over Ukraine. The Russian propaganda campaign highlighted historical, confessional and moral arguments: representatives of the Russian state and the Moscow Patriarchate outlined the disastrous consequences of granting autocephaly to Ukraine, accusing both Kiev and the Constantinople Patriarchate of causing another schism in global Orthodoxy – the largest one since the Great Eastern Schism in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>157</sup>

**The Orthodox Church often refers to historical traditions of the Russian Empire to support the Kremlin’s projects aimed to strengthen the ‘state-centric patriotism’ and the fighting spirit**, often in cooperation with the Russian army or secret services. Thus, it means to legitimise – grant God’s blessing to – military and security operations by the Russian state, including in Ukraine and Syria. The Orthodox Church hierarchs consecrate military facilities, soldiers participating in war operations and exercises, armaments and weaponry, even nuclear weapons, which some clerics have called Russia’s Guardian Angel and a ‘miraculous invention’ without which the state would not exist.<sup>158</sup> **The glorious history of the Russian armed forces and**

*Church vs. the government in Russia*, OSW, Warsaw 2015, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl). On the eve of the annexation, along with specnaz troops of the Russian Armed Forces, many Russian clergymen arrived on the peninsula and were included in negotiating groups that persuaded Ukrainian soldiers to surrender (those clergymen who rendered ‘outstanding services’, were later awarded state medals and orders). Russian clergymen also gave blessings to ‘volunteers’ heading to Donbas to join the ranks of the separatists and even organised religious processions with the participation of the separatists in forward areas controlled by the so-called DNR and LNR. See Л. Яппарова, ‘*Вежливые ба-т्यूшки. Как священники РПЦ участвовали в присоединении Крыма*’, Meduza, 16 March 2020, [meduza.io](http://meduza.io); О. Виноградов, ‘*Российские священники и боевики на Донбассе*’, Радио Свобода, 21 January 2017, [radiosvoboda.org](http://radiosvoboda.org).

<sup>156</sup> In his address to the Federal Assembly on 4 December 2014, Putin emphasised that Crimea is the spiritual source of the formation of the Russian nation and the centralised Russian state, for it was in ancient Kherson that Prince Vladimir, who later baptised all of Rus, was baptised himself. See ‘*Послание Президента Федеральному Собранию*’, Президент России, 4 December 2014, [kremlin.ru](http://kremlin.ru).

<sup>157</sup> J. Rogoża, ‘*Moscow’s harsh reaction to Ukraine’s expected autocephaly*’, OSW, 19 September 2018, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>158</sup> Zob. ‘*В РПЦ назвали ядерное оружие «замечательным изобретением»*’, Лента, 8 May 2020, [lenta.ru](http://lenta.ru); Л. Суркова, ‘*Освящение ядерных ракет вызвало спор среди священников*’, Взгляд,

**military power** is highlighted by the largest historical-religious-military project of recent years – **the construction of the Resurrection of Christ church complex** on the grounds of the ‘Patriot’ military park in Kubinka near Moscow, which has the status of the official Patriarchal Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>159</sup> The monumental temple – one of the tallest in the world, accommodating 5,000 worshippers – opened in 2020. Its interiors are decorated with frescoes and mosaics depicting key battles from throughout Russian history – from the Battle of Kulikovo Field back in 1380 to the annexation of Crimea and the Russian operation in Syria. It had also been adorned with images of Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Putin, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and other contemporary leaders of Russia’s power and state structures, but they were removed following an outcry.<sup>160</sup> **The message conveyed by the very appearance and decoration of this monumental temple is to emphasise the historical and sacral dimension of the Russian government and its military actions** – as bearing the hallmarks of higher historical motives, God’s anointed, and thus beyond evaluation by and accountability to ‘mere mortals’.

The initial placement of frescoes depicting Joseph Stalin in the temple (approved by Patriarch Kirill) aroused objections from parts of the Orthodox clergy, even those as loyal to the Kremlin as Metropolitan Hilarion, the head of Orthodox Church diplomacy. Hilarion publicly opposed honouring “a persecutor of the Orthodox Church, with the deaths of millions on his conscience, including new martyrs and followers of the Church”.<sup>161</sup> Hilarion’s stance demonstrates the anti-Stalinist attitude of many Orthodox clergymen of the younger generation and illustrates the **paradoxes of the attitude of the entire Russian Orthodox Church towards the Soviet period of history, in particular the Stalinist terror**. In that period, tens of thousands of clergymen fell victim to the security organs, and the Church as a whole was profoundly infiltrated by them.<sup>162</sup> Today, considering the Kremlin’s indirect apology for Stalin, the ROC

21 June 2019, vz.ru. The practice of blessing weapons has been around for years, although it has caused controversy within the Orthodox Church itself: some hierarchs disapprove of blessing weapons of mass destruction, but still favour giving a ‘blessing to soldiers defending the homeland’, as well as blessing combat vehicles and individual weapons.

<sup>159</sup> A video of the temple’s construction is available on YouTube.

<sup>160</sup> Е. Малаховская, ‘Без Путина и Сталина, но с алтарём по задумке Шойгу: как выглядит построенный храм Вооружённых сил в Кубинке’, Открытые медиа, 13 May 2020, openmedia.io.

<sup>161</sup> ‘Митрополит Иларион высказался против изображения Сталина в главном храме ВС России’, Интерфакс, 10 May 2020, interfax.ru.

<sup>162</sup> Historians’ estimates of the scale of Soviet repression against the clergy vary quite widely and are often fragmentary. According to calculations by historian and publicist Roy Medvedev, about 800 bishops were arrested in 1936–1938. Anatoly Levitin has reported that about 670 bishops were murdered in 1937–1939. Dmitry Pospilovsky estimates the number of bishops murdered by 1956 at 300, and the number of clergy who fell victim to Stalinist terror in 1918–1929 at 5,000–10,000,

hierarchs refrain from expressing unequivocal moral criticism of the Soviet clampdown on the Church, while some lower-level clergy even manifest their sympathy for Stalin. It can be presumed that the ROC's restraint stems both from the fear of openly opposing the authorities in their assessment of modern history, especially the events on which the Kremlin builds its historical legitimacy, and from the awareness that many current believers (who joined the Church after the collapse of the USSR) nurture a sentimental attitude not only to the USSR, but also to Stalin himself.<sup>163</sup> Interestingly, **the Church has nowadays assumed the role of Russia's largest institutional custodian of the memory of Stalin's repression. It even seems to be seeking to 'privatise' this memory** and place Orthodox memorials at crime scenes wholly unrelated to the ROC and discovered by other organisations, primarily by the Memorial Association, as was the case with a memorial at the Butovo firing range near Moscow, which was handed over to the ROC.

### 3. Quasi-NGOs as enforcers of the Kremlin's politics of memory

**The Kremlin's politics of memory is supported and implemented by an array of organisations which endorse, affirm and disseminate the propagandist version of history in various forms.** Many of them have the formal status of non-governmental organisations, whether social or non-profit, but in fact they are what is called GONGOs, government organised NGOs – structures set up, controlled and financed by the authorities, which follow instructions and carry out tasks under direct orders from the Presidential Administration or security agencies. Their areas of activity include: broadly understood patriotic and historical education, erecting monuments and memorials, and identifying the final resting places of World War II victims. Also, their activities include fighting opponents of the Kremlin's version of historical memory – whether in the form of campaigns in the virtual space or physical attacks on critics of the Kremlin's vision of Russian history and opposition activists. Many of these organisations receive financial assistance from the state, both official, such as presidential grants, and informal.

and in the 1930s – at 45,000. Estimates by the Moscow Patriarchate's Commission for Rehabilitation put this number before 1941 at 140,000 at least. The largest estimate was provided in 1995 by the then chairman of the Presidential Commission for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression, Alexander Yakovlev, who put the number of murdered clergy during the entire USSR period at 200,000 and the number of clergy-victim to Stalinist terror at 500,000. See М.В. Шкаровский, *Русская Православная Церковь при Сталине и Хрущеве. Государственно-церковные отношения в СССР в 1939–1964 годах*, Москва 1999, azбука.ru.

<sup>163</sup> К. Кобрин, Н. Митрохин, 'РПЦ и сталинизм: приватизация памяти о репрессиях', Настоящее Время, 2 November 2015, currenttime.tv.



These organisations include countless **associations of veterans of various wars** – from the Great Patriotic War to the intervention in Afghanistan, the war in Donbas and the operation in Syria. One of the largest is the ‘Brothers In Arms’, which has 90,000 members and brings together veterans of 35 wars and conflicts in 19 countries. It aims to promote patriotic values associated with Russia’s great power status. With branches in all Russian regions, it is involved in patriotic education programmes for young people and organises numerous sports, military and educational events. To carry out these tasks, the ‘Brothers In Arms’/Combat Brotherhood has received several large presidential grants (totalling 17.6 million roubles in 2015 and 24 million roubles in 2017). This organisation, like many similar ones, is a natural source of (and an intermediary in recruiting) volunteers fighting on the Russian side in Donbas or Syria, although it officially admits only to carrying out humanitarian operations in those regions.<sup>164</sup>

There are a number of **nationalist-imperialist militias in Russia, formally operating as legal social organisations, whose aim is to support Russia’s imperial status and fight Kremlin opponents**. One such organisation is the **National Liberation Movement (NOD)**, which claims to fight for Russia’s sovereignty and against ‘colour revolutions’, founded by nationalist State Duma deputy Yevgeny Fyodorov. NOD members have been employed for ultra-nationalist historical actions, including those targeting Poland: picketing with posters of Stalin at the cemetery in Mednoye, the resting place for thousands of Polish prisoners of war murdered by NKVD, and assisting in the dismantling of a plaque commemorating those murdered Polish prisoners in Tver.<sup>165</sup> NOD members have also taken part in the Russian military operations in Crimea and Donbas and assaulted opposition activists in Russia.<sup>166</sup> One high-profile scandal provoked by the NOD was a 2016 attack on participants in a youth history competition organised by the Memorial Association. The contestants, along with a juror, prominent Russian writer Lyudmila Ulitskaya, were attacked by members of the organisation dressed in military-like outfits and doused with the so-called *zelenka* (brilliant green, a popular disinfectant in Russia).

A similar function is performed in Russia by the **SERB (South-Eastern Radical Block) movement**, involved in supporting separatists in southeastern Ukraine

<sup>164</sup> ‘Сергей Гаврилов: Организация «Боевое братство» доказала эффективность работы с молодежью’, КПРФ, 24 July 2017, kprf.ru.

<sup>165</sup> ‘В Твери убрали мемориальные доски в память о расстрелянных НКВД поляках’, Настоящее Время, 7 May 2020, currenttime.tv.

<sup>166</sup> See E. Сурначева, ‘Поиск движения. За кем пойдут патриотически настроенные граждане’, Коммерсантъ, 15 September 2014, kommersant.ru.

and targeting the Russian opposition, including its leader Alexei Navalny, who was doused with *zelenka* in 2017 and almost lost his eyesight. Using activists of this movement, the Russian authorities have also tried to inflame historical divisions between Poland and Ukraine: SERB members laid flowers at the Polish Embassy in Moscow on the anniversary of the massacre of Poles in Volhynia and expressed solidarity with Poland.<sup>167</sup> Another organisation of this kind is the **Night Wolves motorcycle club**, widely known both in Russia and abroad. Members of the organisation, headed by Alexander Zaldostanov (a.k.a. Surgeon), identify themselves as supporters of the superpower status of Russia and Stalin, and at the same time as adherents of conservative Orthodox values. In 2015, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, the Night Wolves tried to organise a motorcycle rally ‘Roads of Victory: towards Berlin’, which was blocked due to Poland’s objections (some of the motorcyclists ultimately reached Berlin via a detour). Many of the organisation’s activities have been aimed at legitimising Russian claims to Crimea. Members of the club were involved in Russian campaigns on the peninsula even before its annexation, e.g. in *Via Crucis* organised by the Russian Orthodox Church in Sevastopol in 2009. After 2014 they took part in the Russian military operation in Crimea and Donbas, which resulted in the organisation being placed on the US sanctions list. The Night Wolves have also engaged in campaigns of support for the Russian Orthodox Church and ‘traditional values’.<sup>168</sup> In return, they have repeatedly benefitted from financial support offered by the state, whether in the form of presidential grants or decisions to allocate attractive plots of land in occupied Crimea,<sup>169</sup> and president Putin has personally participated in their initiatives – he joined a rally in annexed Crimea in 2019.

Finally, the Kremlin’s politics of memory and remembrance involves various **Cossack, or more precisely neo-Cossack organisations**, which implement the historical, political and cultural concepts advocated by the Kremlin. Although most of them have been established in the last 20 years by the Kremlin and are under its strict control,<sup>170</sup> they invoke the historical traditions of

<sup>167</sup> SERB members thus tried to play tragic cards in Polish-Ukrainian relations, including the slaughter of the Polish population in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in 1943–1944, when units of the nationalist Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) with the support of the Ukrainian population murdered – according to various estimates – between 50,000 and 100,000 people of Polish origin.

<sup>168</sup> ‘«Ночные волки» за Патриарха’, Авто, 19 April 2012, auto.mail.ru.

<sup>169</sup> See e.g. Д. Ломакин, ‘«Если говорить о суммах – недостаточно выделяют»’, Газета.Ru, 7 May 2015, gazeta.ru.

<sup>170</sup> The number of organisations referring to Cossack traditions has skyrocketed under Putin’s presidency and many historians point to their imitative or self-styled nature; the very continuation of Cossack traditions by organisations operating today is also often questioned. In today’s Russia, the state de facto regulates the functioning of the Cossacks: the condition for being a member is

the Russian Cossacks, their cultural distinctiveness, military-defensive way of life and, more broadly, Russian imperial traditions. The customs cultivated by the Cossack communities **are supposed to strengthen the sense of historical continuity and permanence of the Russian state as an heir to the traditions of the Russian Empire.**<sup>171</sup> Today, these communities are an obedient tool of the Kremlin: they demonstrate statist attitudes, profess support for the authorities, glorify and cultivate the militaristic traditions presented as the pillar of the Russian state model, perform security and protection functions<sup>172</sup> and also declare themselves to be Orthodox and attached to conservative values and traditional mores.<sup>173</sup> This attachment has been emphasised in the activity of Cossack structures (particularly since 2012) as support for the conservative ideology championed by Putin that refers to traditional Russian values as a counterbalance to Western liberal values, which the authorities view as alien to Russia in cultural and civilisational terms.<sup>174</sup> Moreover, the Cossacks support the authorities in shaping the historical awareness of society by carrying out ideological and educational tasks involving children and youth (starting from pre-school age). They conduct various campaigns of military and patriotic education – teaching history with an emphasis on Cossack traditions and war victories, organising patriotic camps and mass events, and establishing profilled ‘Cossack classes’ in schools, especially in the southern regions of Russia.<sup>175</sup> Cossack circles cooperate with the Russian Military-Historical Society (RVIO), organising remembrance actions and various military exercises to emphasise the historical continuity of the military traditions of the Russian state. This continuity is also highlighted by close cooperation between Cossack

an entry in the state register. Moreover, a 2019 law centralised the dispersed Cossack organisations and increased their subordination to the Kremlin. See e.g. ‘Путин подписал закон о правовом регулировании госслужбы казачества’, РИА Новости, 2 August 2019, ria.ru.

<sup>171</sup> For more details see W. Rodkiewicz, J. Rogoża, *Potemkin conservatism...*, op. cit.

<sup>172</sup> Cossack groups are used as a ‘social force’ supporting the activities of law enforcement agencies – Cossack formations maintained order during the Sochi Olympics, they patrol the streets of Russian cities, participate in searches for conscripts in hiding, many of them have joined the ranks of Rosgvardia. They are also employed for initiatives targeting the Kremlin’s opponents – men in Cossack uniforms have been involved in physical attacks on activists of the anti-Kremlin opposition, on actions by LGBT communities, etc. Cossack organisations were used by Russia during the annexation of Crimea and in the fighting in Donbas, in cooperation with the Russian army, the Federal Security Service, but also with the structures of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate.

<sup>173</sup> For more details see J. Darczewska, *Putin’s Cossacks...*, op. cit.

<sup>174</sup> For more details see W. Rodkiewicz, J. Rogoża, *Potemkin conservatism...*, op. cit.

<sup>175</sup> In Krasnodar Krai in southern Russia, traditionally inhabited by the Cossacks, special profilled ‘Cossack classes’ have been set up in schools (in 2016–2017, there were 2,000 such classes in the region, educating 65,000 children); their students wear Cossack costumes, learn the traditions of Cossack living, the basics of Orthodox culture and military discipline. In each such class, a representative of Cossack circles plays the role of a ‘mentor’. See ‘Патриотическое воспитание казачьей молодежи, как одно из основных направлений деятельности современного Кубанского казачьего войска’, mouschool27.narod.ru.

communities and the Russian Orthodox Church: the Cossacks, who pose as bearers of traditional, spiritual, Orthodox values within the broadly defined ‘Orthodox civilisation’, stand together with the ROC in opposition to liberal values and the ‘degenerate Western civilisation’, which is completely in tune with the assumptions of Putin’s espoused conservative ideology.<sup>176</sup>

**Table.** Selected GONGOs that the Kremlin has involved in projects related to historical memory

Name	Characteristics
“Historical Memory” Foundation	Established in 2008 by historian Alexander Dyukov, aimed at constructing a Russian-centric historical memory of the Eastern Slavic region. Their activity includes downplaying the role of national heroes in those lands who opposed Moscow (they recently targeted the Belarusian leader of the 1863 January Uprising, Kastus Kalinoŭski) and presenting a critical assessment of the Polish contribution to the history of the eastern lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Second Polish Republic. The scope of the foundation’s activities, however, is rather limited: its Facebook posts only garner a dozen or two likes. Dyukov himself was granted a persona non grata status in Latvia in 2012 (Latvian authorities accused him of attempts to falsify this country’s history).
Historical Perspective Foundation	Founded in 2004 (formally as an NGO) by a Duma MP, historian Natalya Narochnitskaya. The Foundation’s projects are aimed at promoting the legacy of Russian civilisation, tracing any signs of “falsification of history” and “colour revolutions”, strengthening of Russia’s sovereignty, with special emphasis on the role of Crimea in the entire history of Russia. In fact, the pompously advertised projects and publications have little scope and impact.
Society for the Development of Russian Historical Education “Double-headed eagle”	Founded by an “Orthodox oligarch”, Konstantin Malofeyev, and headed, among others, by Leonid Reshetnikov, the long-standing head of the foreign intelligence service. The organisation works as a link between the Kremlin, Russian intelligence and the Russian Orthodox Church. Malofeyev himself is a deputy of Patriarch Kirill in the World Russian People’s Council established by the Russian Orthodox Church in 1993; he is also the founder of the Orthodox television Tsargrad.

<sup>176</sup> J. Darczewska, *Putin’s Cossacks...*, op. cit.

Name	Characteristics
Society for the Development of Russian Historical Education “Double-headed eagle” (cont.)	“Double-headed eagle”, whose motto is “We are Russians, God is with us” (“Мы – русские, с нами Бог!”), promotes the imperial, Orthodox nature of historical memory, celebrates the “glorious past” of the Russian Empire and advocates its reconstruction in the future. This organisation and Malofeyev’s other structures and contacts were used by the Kremlin prior to and during the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (Malofeyev organised the transfer of Russian “volunteers” to Donbas, financed their operation, etc.).
Institute for Foreign Policy Research and Initiatives	Established in 2011 by historian Veronika Krasheninnikova, member of the United Russia party council, former employee of the Russkiy Mir foundation (government-sponsored organisation aimed at promoting the Russian language and values worldwide), adviser to the management of RT (Russia Today) television, one of the initiators of the Russian foreign agent law, ardent supporter of the annexation of Crimea and Russian aggression in Donbas. The Institute’s declared goals are fostering education in the field of Russia’s internal and foreign policy, promoting and defending “traditional values”, propagating the Kremlin’s vision of historical memory and ultimately, “restoring historical justice”. According to declarations, the Institute has access to unique archive materials and therefore its publishing activity helps in “revealing a deeper meaning of historical events and processes”. Lately, the Institute has focused on pursuing a narrative that makes Western countries responsible for the outbreak of World War II and criticises interwar Poland for its alleged imperial and revisionist ambitions.

#### 4. Pop culture – a tool for shaping minds

**One of the most effective carriers of ideological (including historical) content, is popular and mass culture.** As the most appealing form, it guarantees reaching a wide audience and multiplies the impact of this content on public consciousness. Back in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks seized a virtually complete monopoly in the sphere of culture. **The cultural and ideological offensive became, alongside mass terror, the most important tool for subjugating citizens to the new order**, swaying their minds and ‘writing history anew’. The public was targeted with a mass ideological message encapsulated in artistic forms (fiction and documentary films, posters and architecture), designed to portray, often without words, the essence of the new order. An invaluable role was played at that time by artists – poets,

writers, architects, graphic artists and designers – who became advocates of the new reality, gave it a new language (Vladimir Mayakovsky), new image (Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky)<sup>177</sup> and architectural forms (e.g. constructivism – Konstantin Melnikov, the Vesnin brothers and others), helping it reach the masses and permanently reshape public consciousness. One of the symbols of the reality at the time were Rodchenko’s graphics and the so-called ‘Pilot’ font (a.k.a. the Rodchenko font) he designed together with Mayakovsky, which is to this day associated with the birth of the new Soviet state.

After a break caused by the collapse of the USSR and the 1990s, which were marked by a decentralisation of state communication, **popular culture in Putin’s Russia has once again become a key carrier of ideological content, aligned with the Kremlin’s priorities.** Popular culture productions, invoking Russian history and laden with ideological messages, are **an important soft power tool that complements widespread use of force and repression,** their common purpose being to demonstrate the power of the state, indicate the desired attitudes of Russian citizens, and stigmatise and intimidate opponents. Some culturologists even argue that culture in this respect has a greater impact than politics, religion and ideology, as it is the most effective channel for reproducing and transmitting key ideological content to a mass audience, a tool for large-scale yet covert ‘implantation’ of certain thinking patterns in public consciousness.<sup>178</sup> Ideological content seems to be most effective when it is contained in a simplified, attractive and easily absorbed form of popular culture productions or conveyed (e.g. to children and youth) by teachers or parents who often unknowingly replicate beliefs about what can be described as the ‘natural order of things’ and instil them in their subordinates, pupils, family.

Contemporary Russian **mass culture is filled with references to historical events.** Even though we can see a great variety of interpretations of history (including the most recent ones, relating to the USSR period), it nevertheless seems to be dominated by a clear **message that aligns with the Kremlin’s ideology and interests,** which can be summed up in the following ideas:

- **an emphasis on the continuity of Russian history and non-alternativeness of the ‘eternal order’,** which reflect the essence of the Russian

<sup>177</sup> See e.g. ‘[Строки Маяковского о Кузнецкстрое напишут шрифтом «пилотка»](#)’, КузПресс, 20 August 2015, kuzpress.ru. Incidentally, after 2000, the Rodchenko font and stylistics experienced a renaissance, perhaps as a result of Putin’s rehabilitation of the USSR.

<sup>178</sup> See e.g. Е. Фанайлова, ‘[Искусство кино](#)’, Радио Свобода, 2 July 2017, svoboda.org.

state; on Russia's civilisational distinctness from the Western world (based on liberal values and the empowerment of societies); on the West's eternal hostility towards Russia which has forced it – for centuries – to take decisive steps, also involving the use of force, in defence of its internal system, borders and influence in the region; moreover, an emphasis on the idea of Russia's imperial status, resulting both from its territorial vastness and historical determinants, which grant Russia the right to decide the fate of the countries and regions that Moscow claims as its sphere of influence;

- **the need to maintain the status quo – the historically justified invariability of the 'essence' of the Russian state**, which is an extension of the traditional model: vertically organised, headed by a ruler with a quasi-sacral status who is beyond public control, who concentrates most powers in his hands and is surrounded by a 'power guard';
- **demonstration of the power of the Russian state**, which is the paramount value in Russian political culture – both to its own citizens, who remain subordinate vis-à-vis the state, and to the outside world;
- **instilling the conviction that critical attitudes towards the authorities are unacceptable and unpatriotic** and equating them with treasonous attitudes, arguing that any attempts to overthrow the authorities (even authoritarian or tyrannical ones) will bring disastrous results, both for those who contest the existing order and for the state as a whole.

Popular film and television productions depict historical events from different periods – starting from the Middle Ages and the baptism of Rus, through the times of the Russian Empire, the October Revolution, up to the USSR period. However, many of them contain a clear message that aligns with the current interests of the ruling class. According to an old Soviet joke, the future is certain, it is only the past that is unpredictable – as a result, **many important events from the past have gained new, surprising interpretations in contemporary culture, with direct references to today's situation**, supporting the current policy of the Kremlin and striking at its opponents.

The historical continuity of Russia and its imperial ambitions is demonstrated by the film epic 'Viking' (2016), which is set in the Middle Ages and tells the story of Grand Duke Vladimir who baptised Rus in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Kherson, Crimea. The film was unequivocally interpreted as an attempt to justify Russia's historical claims to the peninsula, portrayed as the historical baptismal

font of Rus and its spiritual source.<sup>179</sup> Moreover, another event occurring in 2016 was the erection of a huge statue of Vladimir the Baptist in Moscow, in front of the Kremlin, making him the historical symbol of Putin's conservative project.<sup>180</sup> In the public sphere, many comparisons have been made between Grand Duke Vladimir, who baptised Russia, and Vladimir Putin, who has restored Russia to its rightful greatness and reunited historical lands along with the cradle of Orthodoxy.

The contemporary 'moral' is also contained in many productions set in the Tsarist period: their main message is to discredit the idea of an uprising against the authorities. One example is the blockbuster about the 1825 Decembrist uprising titled 'Union of Salvation' (2019). Numerous allusions to today's situation in Russia can be drawn from the film.

### **Decembrists and anti-Kremlin hipsters**

The 'Union of Salvation' film devoted to the Decembrist uprising pictures Decembrists as a group of reckless young officers who do not appreciate the reforms initiated by Tsar Alexander I and organise a conspiracy that eventually leads to bloodshed, and a death sentence for themselves. Against their background, the monarch – Nicholas I, Alexander's successor – is presented as a true statesman, strict but just, and his tough actions have a higher motive behind them – the need to preserve stability and prevent civil war. The Decembrists, as portrayed in the movie, irresistibly bring to mind contemporary Russian 'hipsters' involved in street protests in today's Moscow and other Russian cities: boys from good (in the film: aristocratic) families, well-educated (including, in Western universities), yet naive and inconsiderate, infected by Western ideas of freedom, and thus posing a threat to what is Russia's 'eternal order of things'. This impression is reinforced by the film cast: actors with contemporary faces, reminiscent of today's youth involved in anti-Kremlin street protests. The Decembrists' motives are not presented clearly, and their revolt is shown as thoughtless as it is merciless, leading to bloodshed and doomed

<sup>179</sup> The film can be seen as an illustration of Putin's 'epochal' speech on 18 March 2014, during which he announced plans to annex Crimea: "This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus". See С. Громенко, 'Крым как «сакральная Корсунь». Миф и реальность', Крым.Реалии, 31 October 2016, ru.krymr.com.

<sup>180</sup> For more details see W. Rodkiewicz, J. Rogoza, *Potemkin conservatism...*, op. cit.



to fail. The impossibility of overthrowing the existing order seems to be the guiding idea of the entire film; it recurs in numerous quotes, such as: ‘What is law? It is the highest will of the monarch’ or ‘One should distinguish between the legal authority and the self-proclaimed saviours of their homeland’.

The October Revolution has also acquired an interpretation in popular culture that aligns with the current priorities of the Kremlin elite: maintaining the status quo and preserving power. Although contemporary Russia claims to be the successor to the USSR, the meaning of the term ‘revolution’ itself has clearly evolved over the last decade. It is now portrayed more as an irresponsible attack on the legitimate authorities leading to dramatic consequences, often with comparisons to the wave of ‘colour revolutions’ inspired – in Russia’s view – by the hostile West. The series aired on Russian television in 2017 on the centenary of the October Revolution – ‘Demon of the Revolution’, ‘Trotsky’ – emphasised the perniciousness of any attempts to overthrow legal authorities and their proxy nature (suggestions of being instigated by Western intelligence). At the same time, they were a clear allusion to the 2017 situation in Russia, engulfed by the anti-government protests organised by Alexei Navalny that drew many young people demanding political change.<sup>181</sup> Historians pointed out numerous factual inaccuracies in the series and noted that the image of Trotsky was deliberately demonised to discredit present-day Russian opposition activists, also accused of working for Western intelligence.

### TV series on the October Revolution

‘**Demon of the Revolution**’ (2017) – a TV series from the state-run Rossiya channel, narrated by a counterintelligence officer of tsarist Russia, the type of hero concerned about the fate of his homeland, whose security is attacked by external and internal enemies. The film’s anti-hero is the revolutionary Alexander Parvus, who in 1915 strikes an agreement with the German government and using German money, fuels protest activity in Russia, prepares a revolution to overthrow the tsarist regime, and brings Vladimir Lenin back to Russia from exile. A similarly negative image of revolution and its instigators was also conveyed by the ‘**Trotsky**’

<sup>181</sup> See I. Wiśniewska, J. Strzelecki, M. Menkiszak, ‘Antyrządowe protesty w Rosji’, OSW, 27 March 2017, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl); M. Domańska, J. Strzelecki, ‘Antykorupcyjne protesty w Rosji’, OSW, 13 June 2017, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

series, broadcast on the state-run Channel One TV in 2017. Lev Trotsky was presented as an utterly demonic figure, devoid of principles, pursuing power at any cost (“I am the revolution”), affirming terror (also aimed at his loved ones). Alexander Parvus reappears in this series as well, as the main liaison of revolutionaries with foreign intelligences, who instigates the Bolsheviks to act and covers all costs (a German representative asks Parvus in a private conversation: “How much money do you need for the revolution to crush Russia?”). The message of the series seems nihilistic, there are no truly ‘positive heroes’, the new order and the ‘new religion’ are established by the ruthless destruction of the existing tsarist state. Oddly enough, the evil omnipresent in this series indirectly contributed to Stalin’s apology: according to the creators, the series was supposed to refute historical speculations that Russia’s fate would have been less tragic if Trotsky had defeated Stalin in their struggle for power. By many independent observers, the series have been dubbed the ‘triumph of post-truth’ that tells much more about today’s Russia than about any historic events they depict.<sup>182</sup> Despite the controversy, the series was shot with impressive skill and fast-paced action, it enjoyed great popularity in Russia and was purchased and broadcast on the Netflix platform.

A genre that fills almost all television channels and enjoys enormous popularity in Russia is **films and series glorifying the Russian and Soviet secret services and other power structures that form the backbone of the Russian state today**.<sup>183</sup> Regardless of their plots, they are designed to make the viewer believe that Russia is at war with Western secret services, a war often overlooked by the unaware citizen, hence the term ‘fighters of the invisible front’ used to describe intelligence officers. As these productions argue, the frontline runs across Russia rather than along the border, as there are plenty of agents recruited by the West among Russian citizens, officials, or even *siloviki*, and – above all – in the ranks of the opposition and human rights defenders. Many of these productions suggest that the current intelligence warfare is part of an eternal, immanent antagonism between two hostile civilisations – the Western and the Russian.

<sup>182</sup> К. Скоркин, ‘Сериял «Троцкий» стал очередной псевдоисторической халтурой Первого канала’, Новые Известия, 7.11.2017, [newizv.ru](http://newizv.ru).

<sup>183</sup> The above-mentioned films and series are available on the Internet, including on [Rserial](http://Rserial) ([rserial.com](http://rserial.com)), [Ivi](http://Ivi) ([ivi.tv](http://ivi.tv)) and [Pinterest](http://Pinterest) ([pinterest.com](http://pinterest.com)).

## **TV series that glorify the ‘Chekists’**

### **‘Where Homeland Begins’ (2014)**

The title of the series refers to the cult Soviet song ‘С чего начинается Родина’ from one of the most famous Soviet spy series, ‘The Shield and the Sword’ (1968). Over time the title phrase became a byword for patriotic attitudes. The series shows the rivalry between the Soviet and American secret services in the time of perestroika and the first signs of the decline of the Soviet Union. The main character is a young, idealist KGB officer, played by a popular Russian actor. The series is not entirely demagogic, it contains some self-criticism of the Soviet services, shows the conflicts within the KGB, the flaws and weaknesses of the officers, the attractiveness of American lifestyle. However, ultimately the main character’s sense of patriotism takes over and, despite personal costs, he decides to sacrifice himself for the sake of his homeland. The series contains references to current events, such as insinuations that the USA unleashed the war in Ukraine in 2014 to cover up its own scandals. It also features Edward Snowden – a loner who has exposed America’s violations of democracy, to whom the Russians extend a helping hand. The series can be watched on the [vokrug.tv](http://vokrug.tv) website.

### **‘Sleeper Agents’ (2017)**

The series tells the story of the alleged American sleeper agents (spies who are placed in a target country and do not undertake their mission unless activated) in Russia. These include Russian oppositionists, human rights defenders and bloggers, depicted as morally shaky, corrupt, cowardly or simply daft. The CIA is trying to instigate a ‘colour revolution’ in Russia: by murdering an opposition activist and trying to put the blame on the FSB, it seeks to cause a public outcry and provoke street riots that would eventually topple the government. When the FSB thwarts this operation, the CIA transfers its ‘colour revolution specialist’ to Ukraine, where – by implication – this revolution soon happens (the series takes place in 2013). Oddly enough, the wrongdoings that Russian authorities and services have been accused of were attributed in this series to their opponents. The film depicts the CIA-funded farm of Internet trolls who try to stir anti-Kremlin sentiments, anti-corruption activists and whistleblowers who are driven by mercantile motivations, and grotesque Russian opposition figures who are reminiscent of Alexei Navalny, Leonid Volkov, Boris Nemtsov and Anna Politkovskaya. The bottom line is that

their killings or persecution, widely attributed to Russian services, are in fact inspired by the US. The series juxtaposes patriotism and all that is 'eternally Russian' (the FSB director says: "We are what we are – we will never change") to treacherous attitudes, whether conscious (numerous CIA agents in state administration, the media) or unconscious (sympathisers of the West and democracy whose desire for change leads them astray).<sup>184</sup>

**Russian popular music**, with dozens of millions of listeners, is also filled with content that reinforces patriotic attitudes as interpreted by the authorities and an acceptance of the broadly defined status quo. This phenomenon can be illustrated by two extremely popular Russian pop rock bands, one of which supports the Kremlin's vision of the world in an overt manner (the band Lube), while the other (Leningrad) does so in a veiled but very effective way. Lube, who have been on stage for 30 years, adopted a military-like style from the very beginning: their members often wear outfits resembling military uniform, perform at concerts and festivals organised by the power structures, and invite Spetsnaz officers, including Alfa Group, to appear on stage. Most of Lube's songs include patriotic and military themes (the dominant motifs are war, courage, solidarity in arms, giving one's life for the homeland), but also nostalgia for the USSR and a certain kind of life in the criminal underworld. In recent years, the band has become involved in legitimising the annexation of Crimea, recording a video about the Crimean Bridge inaugurated in 2018, which connects the peninsula with mainland Russia.<sup>185</sup>

The work of Leningrad, in turn, is seemingly rebellious and countercultural – filled with obscene language, imbued with glorification of violence, drugs and alcohol, disregard for moral and social norms. But in fact, the message contained in Leningrad's songs is not a criticism of the existing, dire reality. Instead, this reality is legitimised through the acceptance of the 'lyrical subject' with his low social status, powerlessness vis-à-vis the state, with his addictions, boorishness, disregard for hygiene and accepted rules. As noted by writer and journalist Sergei Medvedev, in 'the world of Leningrad' there is no encouragement for critical reflection on the reality and the desired systemic changes, no motivation for self-improvement. Instead, there is a deeply rooted sense of helplessness and inability to effect changes. The only possible – and available to the ordinary person – form of relieving frustration is a short-lived, thoughtless

<sup>184</sup> The series can be viewed [on YouTube](#).

<sup>185</sup> The video can be viewed [on YouTube](#).

and anarchic act of protest: a brawl, a bender, promiscuity – after which you inevitably return to your everyday life, which cannot ever be changed. Medvedev argues that Leningrad’s songs actually perform a socio-political function that benefits the state, fostering conformity, stabilisation and acceptance of the existing system, while also acting as a shock absorber allowing frustration to be vented in a way that does not threaten the entire system. In a flamboyant and seemingly rebellious form, Leningrad embodies the age-old compensatory mechanisms used by the Russian people for centuries: vodka, swearing, brawls and iconoclasm.<sup>186</sup>

Another channel for promoting certain historical interpretations to glorify the state, including its authorities and power structures, are **ludic traditions: jubilees, holidays, concerts and festivities organised frequently and grandly to celebrate not only important national holidays but also holidays of numerous militarised institutions.** Here, Russian history is closely intertwined with military themes: it is told through the prism of wars, victories, battles, state and military leaders, but in a game-oriented and accessible form. Well-known and widely celebrated events include: Defender of the Fatherland Day (formerly Soviet Army Day, 23 February), Chekist Day (20 December), Police and Internal Affairs Serviceman’s Day (Interior Ministry, 28 March), Airborne Forces Day (2 August, combined with the now traditional baths of soldiers in city fountains), Emergency Rescuer’s Day (Ministry for Emergency Situations, 7 December) and countless holidays of other power structures, including more than a dozen holidays of the Spetsnaz structures alone, like OMON Day (3 October) and Special Operations Forces Day (27 February).<sup>187</sup> On the occasion of many of these holidays, concerts and events are organised and broadcast on television, with top Russian officials, led by the president, as well as businesspeople, cultural activists and celebrities in attendance. Russia’s largest open-air rock festival ‘Nashestviye’ (about 200,000 participants every year) has acquired an openly military character in recent years. In 2013, it started its cooperation with the Ministry of Defence – the army brings and displays tanks, military equipment and weapons at the festival, sets up mobile recruitment stations where anyone willing can sign a contract with the army. These changes caused controversy among the artists performing at the festival, some of whom pulled out of the event.<sup>188</sup> Military-historical festivals and various reenactments of battles and other military

<sup>186</sup> See S. Medvedev, *The Return of the Russian Leviathan*, Polity Press 2019.

<sup>187</sup> See the entry “[День спецназа](#)” in Wikipedia, ru.wikipedia.org.

<sup>188</sup> See Н. Зотова, ‘[Рок против танков: почему музыканты бойкотируют фестиваль «Нашествие»](#)’, BBC News Русская служба, 24 July 2018, [bbc.com/russian](#).

operations are becoming increasingly popular in Russia, including the Battle of Borodino Day (Moscow Oblast), the 'Battle of Gumbinnen' in the Kaliningrad Oblast, and the 'Open Skies' air show in the Ivanovo Oblast. According to the Russian Military-Historical Society, more than 50 military-historical events are held in Russia every year, with the participation of 11,000 reenactors and about 1.7 million spectators from Russia and the CIS countries.<sup>189</sup> Many of the above-mentioned military holidays and traditions are rooted in Russian everyday culture – from the tradition of newlyweds laying flowers at the grave of the unknown soldier and the so-called eternal flame, to the celebration of the Defender of the Fatherland Day as 'a man's day' on which women give their men 'defence'-related presents (e.g. certificates for shooting ranges, war-themed games, quasi-military clothing or accessories).<sup>190</sup>

<sup>189</sup> See 'Военно-исторические фестивали', Российское военно-историческое общество, [rvio.histrf.ru](http://rvio.histrf.ru).

<sup>190</sup> See e.g. [search results for such gifts on Google](#).

## IV. THE PUBLIC RECEPTION OF HISTORY AND THE KREMLIN'S POLITICS OF MEMORY

### 1. Path dependence: society, empire, a strong authority and Russia's 'thousand-year history'

Russia's ingrained, centuries-long tradition of authoritarian rule has left its mark on public consciousness and attitudes. One of the legacies of the Russian political tradition is the deep-seated conviction that the natural order of things for Russia is a model where the authorities, led by the president, are the driving force. At the same time, society is the object and recipient of decisions made at the top.<sup>191</sup> Although this state model is often oppressive for the citizens, there seems to be a widespread conviction and a sense that the individual is powerless in the face of the state and the tide of history. This, in turn, imposes the attitudes of pragmatism or conformism on the majority of citizens, requiring them to adapt to the existing conditions, which 'cannot be changed' – and creates a vicious circle of government-society relations. As a result, Russian society is highly susceptible to the Kremlin's ideological (and historical) message.

The majority of Russians, 75% currently and no less than 70% throughout Putin's rule, support state paternalism and a 'strong hand' rule.<sup>192</sup> Just as many believe that Russia's destiny is to be a great power – more than 70%.<sup>193</sup> At the same time, public opinion is highly susceptible to official propaganda campaigns and manipulation aimed at fuelling great power sentiments and patriotic mobilisation, in response to both the Kremlin's declarations (such as Putin's 2007 Munich speech) and actions, including military operations (the 2008 war against Georgia, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, as well as several waves of repression against domestic opponents). After the annexation of Crimea, support for the idea of Russia as a great power went up by

<sup>191</sup> For more details see J. Rogoża, *Excess cultural baggage. Social mobilisation in an authoritarian Russia*, OSW, Warsaw 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>192</sup> The level of support for the idea of the rule of a strong hand: 1989 – 41%, 1995 – 61%, 1996 – 69%, 2006 – 73%, 2007 – 74%, 2008 – 72%, 2010 – 77%, 2011 – 71%, 2012 – 74%, 2013 – 72%, 2014 – 77%, 2015 – 71%, 2016 – 72%, 2017 – 78%, 2018 – 80%, 2020 – 75% of respondents. 60% of respondents believed in 2020 that the state should take care of its citizens and ensure that they live a dignified life, 31% believed that the state should respect the principle of equality of citizens, while 7% were of the opinion that the state should interfere as little as possible in the life and economic activity of citizens. See 'Государственный патернализм', Левада Центр, 25 February 2020, [levada.ru](http://levada.ru).

<sup>193</sup> The belief that Russia is a great power is currently expressed by 71% of respondents. This compares with 31% in 1991, 61% in 2009, after the Russian-Georgian war, and a record level of support for this idea was recorded in November 2018 – 75%. See '«Великая держава»', Левада Центр, 28 January 2020, [levada.ru](http://levada.ru).

around 20 pp (from 47% in 2011 to 65% in 2015).<sup>194</sup> A similar correlation can be seen in support for president Putin himself – from January to June 2014, his ratings soared by 21 pp (from 65% to 86%).<sup>195</sup> The main achievements attributed to Putin at the time included restoring Russia's status as a great power and the public's sense of pride in their country. **Foreign policy, which draws on Russia's historical role as an empire, has for years been an essential tool for legitimising the Kremlin's rule and a driving factor for the ratings of the president, the ministers of defence and foreign affairs.** Compared to his performance in the international arena, Putin's record in domestic policy, especially in the economic and social sphere, is assessed much more critically.<sup>196</sup> Significantly, in their assessment of the internal situation, Russians often express criticism of the authorities – that they are corrupt and put themselves 'above the law'. At the same time they proudly point out that the leadership has restored Russia's great power status, recognition and respect. Sociologists note in this context that public attitudes towards the authorities look more like a forced compromise, a loyalty based on fear, rather than fervent support.<sup>197</sup>

It is also worth noting that this **'great power mentality' and taking pride in Russia's global achievements is for Russians a compensatory measure meant to offset both the trauma of the USSR's collapse and the loss of superpower status, as well as the economic problems, development deficits and civil rights violations.** After the USSR disintegrated, there were widespread public expectations that Russia would manage to reform its political model, embark on a rapid growth path and catch up with the development levels and living standards of Western countries. The collapse of these expectations gave rise to deep frustrations, a sense of failure and an inferiority complex that persisted throughout the 1990s. In the absence of sustainable economic and social development, Russia's geopolitical achievements under Putin's leadership became a form of compensation for many Russians, a symbol of regained superpower status – if not on the economic and social level, then in the geopolitical and military domain. The annexation of Crimea is the best illustration of this mechanism, as it triggered a wave of public euphoria. The geopolitical successes acted as compensation that made up for both the economic difficulties of the citizens and their chronic sense of helplessness

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> Over time, however, the mobilising effect of the Crimean annexation tapered off, and after a few years Putin's ratings returned to 'pre-Crimean' levels, fluctuating between 59–69% in 2020. See 'Одобрение Деятельности Владимира Путина', Левада Центр, [levada.ru](http://levada.ru).

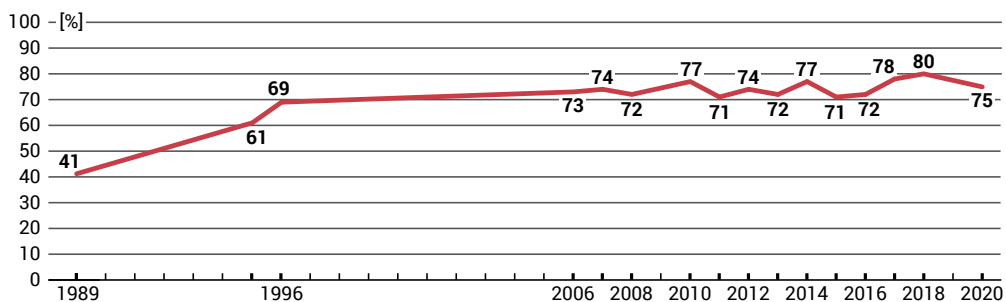
<sup>196</sup> Д. Ермаков, '«Мы возвращаемся в позднесоветские времена»' (an interview with Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Center), Профиль, 10 October 2017, [profile.ru](http://profile.ru).

<sup>197</sup> Л. Гудков, 'Вожди и нация...', *op. cit.*



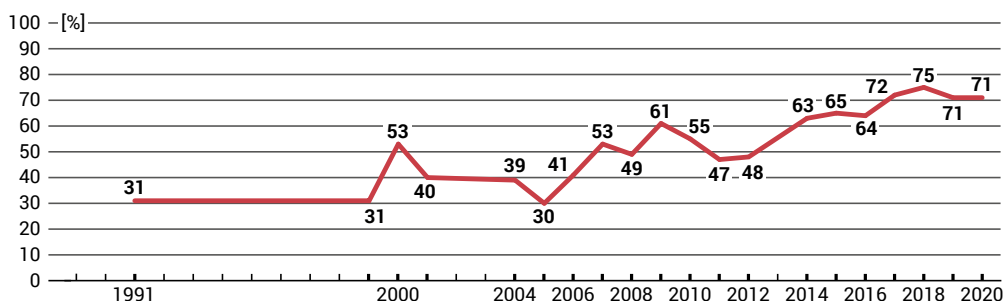
and humiliation caused by their own state. They became an indirect response to the public demand for respect, pride and self-esteem.<sup>198</sup>

**Chart 1.** Supporters of the ‘strong hand rule’ in Russia



Source: ‘Государственный патернализм’, Левада Центр, 25 February 2020, levada.ru.

**Chart 2.** Is Russia a great power?



Source: ‘Великая держава’, Левада Центр, 28 January 2020, levada.ru.

**The collapse of the Soviet Union left an ideological and identity vacuum in Russian public consciousness**, which the incoherent actions of the Russian state in the 1990s under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin failed to fill. Much greater coherence, at the expense of a gradual elimination of pro-Western, pro-democratic and liberal elements, has been achieved in recent years by the Kremlin’s policy. It has boiled down to perpetuating the authoritarian model of government using a cooked-up version of history to legitimise it. The Kremlin invokes the vision of a ‘thousand-year Russia’<sup>199</sup> – a country of military

<sup>198</sup> М. Соколов, ‘Крымский эффект: Путин навсегда?’, Радио Свобода, 2 June 2014, svoboda.org.

<sup>199</sup> Expressions such as a ‘thousand-year Russia’ or the ‘continuity of thousand-year Russian history’ have repeatedly appeared in president Putin’s speeches. This phrase was also included as part of amendments to the Constitution of Russia (Article 67.1) adopted in 2020: “The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of our ancestors who passed down to us

victories and power, predestined to act as an empire. This resonates in the public consciousness due to the trauma induced by the collapse of the empire – the Soviet Union. The Kremlin’s propaganda campaigns clearly influence the historical memory of society. Affected by Putin’s narrative of a ‘thousand-year Russia’, the public increasingly starts to trace the country’s history back ‘to time immemorial’, and the notion of ‘Old Rus’ (Древняя Русь, древнерусское государство) gains importance as a turning point in the country’s history.<sup>200</sup> It is telling that the term ‘Kievan Rus,’ used almost as a synonym of ‘Old Rus’ during the Soviet period, has been gradually removed from Russian historiography after the collapse of the USSR. The term almost exclusively used by today’s Russian historians is ‘Old Rus’ (древнерусское государство).<sup>201</sup>

However, for **an absolute majority of Russians (75%), the Soviet period is the best era in the entire history of Russia**. 65% lament its demise, which is consistent with president Putin’s 2005 statement that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today’s Russians primarily associate the USSR with a welfare state (59%), friendship between nations (46%) and a well-functioning economy with no unemployment (43%). In the context of the USSR’s breakup, Russians most strongly regret the lost sense of being part of a great power (52%), the dismantling of the unified economic system (49%), but also the lost sense that they felt at home across the whole Soviet area (31%). Nostalgia for the USSR is a kind of a ‘retro utopia’, it often embodies a longing for an imagined realm of justice and social equality. It is symptomatic, however, that this **romanticisation of the Soviet past does not translate into an actual readiness to return to that reality**: only 28% would like Russia to resemble the USSR, while the majority favours a different path for the country’s development: its own separate path (58%) or the European variant (10%).<sup>202</sup>

**Most respondents consider the victory in the Great Patriotic War** (the period of World War II after the USSR was attacked by the Third Reich, 1941–1945)

their ideals and faith in God, as well as continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognises the historically formed state unity”. See [‘Новый текст Конституции РФ с поправками 2020’](#), Государственная Дума, 3 July 2020, [duma.gov.ru](#).

<sup>200</sup> 38% of respondents count Russia’s history ‘from time immemorial’, 26% – from the time of Kievan Rus. See [‘История России’](#), Левада Центр, 22 March 2017, [levada.ru](#).

<sup>201</sup> See e.g. Д. Котышев, ‘Киевская Русь, Древняя Русь, Ясская земля’, *Преподавание истории в школе* 2013, № 3, pp. 27–29; Е. Новоселова, ‘Норманская теория» в законе. Российские и украинские историки решили, кто будет отмечать юбилей Древнерусского государства’, *Российская Газета*, 2 November 2011, [rg.ru](#).

<sup>202</sup> ‘Три четверти россиян считают советскую эпоху лучшей в истории страны’, Левада Центр, 24 March 2020, [levada.ru](#).

**as the crucial event in the history of Russia.** Tellingly, in Russia World War II is present in mass consciousness almost exclusively in a form limited to the Great Patriotic War, i.e. one that omits the aggressive phase of the USSR's actions in 1939 and focuses solely on the country's status as a victim of Nazi aggression, and ultimately as the defeater of Nazism and liberator of Europe. **Victory in the Great Patriotic War is a key element of Russian national identity that intertwines the state's history with that of most families.** More than 80% of Russians have or had participants in the Great Patriotic War in their families, almost 60% declare that someone in their family died or went missing during the war.<sup>203</sup>

**In today's Russia, the myth of war has become a pillar of the triumphalist official narrative. It pictures war as a heroic act, a path to victory, a desirable way of resolving international conflicts or building the state's prestige.** War and military elements – including the 'heroic narrative' and arguments about the need to use force, especially in defending the country – are an integral part of historical memory in many countries. However, in the case of the politics of memory created by Russia, these elements become the overarching theme, leading to the affirmation of war, redirecting all attention to the state as a 'war machine', towards which people with their lives and tragedies are supposed to be merely an obedient tool. Public consciousness of the war has been evolving, affected by the government's all-out propaganda: over 60% of Russians now share the conviction that the Soviet Union could have defeated the Nazis even without the support of the Allies. It is also affecting the attitudes towards Stalin, i.e. gradually diminishing his responsibility for the enormous number of victims on the USSR side.<sup>204</sup> As generations of war veterans and first-hand witnesses pass away, the image of the war becomes increasingly mythologised in Russian society, fuelled by the state narrative and propaganda campaigns. **The image of the war as a tragedy of the nation and individuals, both military and civilian, of death, disability, fear, hunger, homelessness, back-breaking labour and the devastation of an entire continent is fading away in the public consciousness.**<sup>205</sup> This image, which was still vivid for decades after the war and nurtured by war participants and witnesses, has now been replaced by **visions of ceremonial parades, a demonstration of the power and omnipotence of the Soviet empire.** Catchy slogans like 'we

<sup>203</sup> 'Великая Отечественная война', Левада Центр, 20 June 2018, levada.ru.

<sup>204</sup> This percentage has been falling steadily since the 1990s – in 1997, 34% of respondents blamed Stalin for the USSR's high losses, in 2001 – 22%, in 2011 – 18%, and in 2017 – 12%. See 'Великая Отечественная война', Левада Центр, 22 June 2017, levada.ru.

<sup>205</sup> See Л. Гудков, 'Эпоха развитого милитаризма', Новая Газета, 8 May 2019, novayagazeta.ru.

can do it again',<sup>206</sup> intended to prove the existence of fighting spirit in today's generations of Russians,<sup>207</sup> have taken root in the mass imagination. The same happened with symbols such as St George's ribbon,<sup>208</sup> which was initially worn during anniversaries of the war victory (9 May). Since the annexation of Crimea, the ribbon has been commonly worn on various celebrations or simply as a **symbol of Russia's military might**.<sup>209</sup>

**The myth of war stems from Russian political culture, which traditionally embraces a cult of strength – both in relation to the power and authority of the state (with its repressive-administrative apparatus) and the strength of individuals.** The 'culture of violence' in Russia, identified by sociologists, manifests itself via the widespread presence and unwritten acceptance of violence on many levels: the state against the citizen, the physically stronger against the weaker, domestic violence, violence as an educational method. State violence is widespread even in today's Russia. According to studies, about 10% of citizens have suffered torture by power structures (Russian 'пытки' means physical and psychological violence in a broader sense than the term 'torture' suggests), including 4–6% in the past year alone, while about a quarter of the population has come into conflict with law enforcement agencies in one way or another and become victims of violence.<sup>210</sup> It is also common for citizens to have experienced incarceration. During the USSR period, a massive part of the population passed through prisons and gulags – the number of victims of the Soviet gulag and prison system is estimated at 15–18 million. These millions of people adopted a whole complex of prison rules, which have become an integral part of social and political culture and permeated virtually all spheres of life. The legacy of this system can still be seen in Russia today. The repressive nature of the justice system persists: the percentage of acquittals is at a record low – about 0.36%<sup>211</sup> (i.e. out of about 300 judgments, only one is an acquittal,

<sup>206</sup> The term took Russia by storm after the annexation of Crimea, which caused public euphoria. At that time, symbols and images (often uncensored) depicting Russia's (and the USSR's) military dominance over Germany, Europe and the West gained great popularity in Russia. See [наклейка на машину Можем повторить 1941-1945, avtonaklejki.ru](http://наклейка на машину Можем повторить 1941-1945, avtonaklejki.ru).

<sup>207</sup> С. Медведев, «[Можем повторить](http://Можем повторить)», Радио Свобода, 15 January 2020, [svoboda.org](http://svoboda.org).

<sup>208</sup> The yellow and black ribbon was established along with the Order of St. George during the reign of Catherine II (1789) and was the highest award for military merit. During the USSR period, its slightly altered version (orange and black) was referred to as the 'Guards ribbon', also awarded for bravery and heroism in defense of the Homeland. After 2005 (the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II), the ribbon became a popular element of mass culture as a symbol of Russian military victories, particularly in World War II, and more broadly as a symbol of Russia's military might.

<sup>209</sup> See 'Акция «[Георгиевская Лента](http://Георгиевская Лента)», Штрих Ру, 14 March 2021, [shtrih.ru](http://shtrih.ru).

<sup>210</sup> See the report *Пытки в России: распространенность явления и отношение общества к проблеме*, Левада Центр, Москва 2019, [levada.ru](http://levada.ru).

<sup>211</sup> 'В России впервые с 2013 года выросло число оправдательных приговоров', Новая Газета, 15 May 2020, [novayagazeta.ru](http://novayagazeta.ru).

and a judge passes such a verdict once in 5–7 years on average). Conversely, the percentage of repeat offenders is very high – up to 70% are subsequently readmitted to prison after being released. In the previous decade, 15 million people went through prisons – every tenth resident of Russia; currently, there are about 500,000 people in prisons and labour camps.

Since various forms of violence have become so prevalent and common, **most of society has adapted to living under repressive conditions. Violence by ‘the stronger’ has itself become a kind of social norm in contemporary Russia.**<sup>212</sup> The so-called AUE movement (the Universal Criminal Code, declared an extremist movement by the Supreme Court in August 2020) is spreading in youth circles as part of a criminal subculture based on cruelty. Within the movement, young people (usually of school age, not only from so-called dysfunctional families) cultivate the traditions of the criminal underworld and commit violent crimes, including murders. Teenage members of the movement argue that there is no guarantee that one won’t end up in prison in Russia, so one should prepare for it beforehand.<sup>213</sup> Despite the economic and lifestyle changes, most Russians still consider ‘male might’ to be the guarantee of state security: the share of people who believe that ‘a real man should do military service’ has risen from 42% to 60% in recent years.<sup>214</sup>

The last decade has also been a period of **glorification of brute force as an instrument in the state’s toolbox** – both towards domestic opponents (escalation of violence by the security forces during opposition rallies, regular use of torture in penitentiaries, etc.) and in Russia’s external environment (the armed annexation of Crimea, the war in Donbas, the intervention in Syria, increased hostility and militaristic rhetoric in relations with the West).<sup>215</sup>

The public consciousness easily absorbs the ideological and historical content propagated by the authorities, imbued with archaic and traditionalist elements: ‘mythical thousand-year-old Russia’, ‘sacred values – homeland, family and land as the nation’s spiritual bond’. The reason is they fall on the fertile ground of Russian political culture, traditionally centred around the state and power. At the same time, both Russian society itself and the authorities combine these traditionalist ideas with the cult of state-of-the-art technologies – the latest

<sup>212</sup> ‘Идет систематическая работа по поддержанию страха’, Левада Центр, 3 July 2019, levada.ru.

<sup>213</sup> See В. Степовой, ‘Дети стали жить «по понятиям»’, Мир Новостей, 31 August 2017, mirnov.ru; И. Надеждин, ‘За понятия с пеленок. Малолетки сбиваются в стаи, чтобы грабить и убивать’, Лента, 19 August 2017, lenta.ru.

<sup>214</sup> Another 24% of respondents believe that military service is a citizen’s duty to the state, even if it is not in the citizen’s own interest. See ‘Российская армия’, Левада Центр, 18 June 2019, levada.ru.

<sup>215</sup> See В. Шкляров, ‘От культа личности к культуре силы’, Новая Газета, 25 April 2019, novayagazeta.ru.

types of weaponry which, as they emphasise, “have no peers in the world”, space technologies, digitalisation of the economy, implementation of the 5G mobile network, etc. As sociologists point out, the authorities don’t mean to return to traditionalism or archaism in the strict sense, but rather to exploit imagined archaism and appeal to contemporary myths about Russian traditions, greatness and history. Strikingly, in the minds of citizens these easily coexist with areas where they behave and act in rational, pragmatic and modern ways.<sup>216</sup> In everyday life, Russians value the achievements of modern (especially Western) civilisation, the comfort of their lives and tend to favour Western consumer products over domestic ones. However, at turning points in modern history – most recently after the annexation of Crimea and during the war in Donbas – Russian society has undergone a visible mobilisation and emotional agitation, in which historical, traditionalist and even mythological elements have been heavily exploited (‘Crimea as the cradle of the Baptism of Rus’). This peculiar cultural and political syncretism, a fusion of modern and archaic dimensions, was aptly captured in Vladimir Sorokin’s iconic book *Day of the Oprichnik*.<sup>217</sup> Released back in 2006, it describes Russia AD 2027, separated from the rest of the world by the Great Russian Wall, behind which autocracy and terror-wielding oprichnina coexist with the advanced technologies of tomorrow.

Sociologists point out that **the young generations of Russians are also susceptible to the official ideological narrative. It is a consequence of poor quality education, fragmentary knowledge, and a high degree of sympathy for the strong hand rule, selfishness, cynicism, conformism and a tendency towards passive adaptation among the young generations.**<sup>218</sup>

Surveys show that 80% of youth are not interested in politics at all, but the institutions they trust most are the president (42%) and the army (44%) because of their strong leadership, the guarantees of national security and territorial integrity they offer, and the restoration of Russia’s status as a great power.<sup>219</sup> On the other hand, a certain portion of Russian youth shows great interest in history (including its grim chapters) and politics, and are able to

<sup>216</sup> Л. Гудков, ‘Рационализация повседневности и слепые зоны’, InLiberty, 5 December 2018, inliberty.ru.

<sup>217</sup> The book was published in English in 2010, translated by Jamey Gambrell.

<sup>218</sup> 65% of young Russians (aged 14–29) share the belief in a ‘strong leader’ and 58% – in a strong party that is supposed to act in the interest of the majority. At the same time, 71% express their aversion to authoritarian models of government and 47% believe that democracy would be the optimal model for Russia. However, only a third of the young people surveyed consider Russia to be a European country. See the study by the Levada Center and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation: *Russia’s generation Z: attitudes and values*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2019/2020, library.fes.de.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

think independently and critically. They also express readiness to participate in opposition activities and suffer the ‘costs’ of being in opposition – being detained or arrested, suffering violence by law enforcement agencies, and bearing personal consequences, such as problems at universities or at work. This politicised youth do not constitute the majority in their age category – according to studies, it is approximately 19%<sup>220</sup> – yet they are a notable presence, in the context of street demonstrations also. High school students<sup>221</sup> participating in protests have attracted the most attention, even though their numbers have not been prevalent. There has also been a noticeable shift in values among the young generations, including values associated with the state, politics and recent history. Youth communities (more strongly than older generations) are experiencing a sense of stagnation in the political sphere. There is also a much stronger contrast between the repressive, top-down organised state with an ossified political structure and the qualities of the young generation of Russians: openness, mobility, individualism, a desire for change.<sup>222</sup>

## 2. The public perception of Stalin: a symbol of nostalgia for the empire and social justice

In the past decade, an indisputable trend related to Russians’ perception of history is a steady increase in support for Joseph Stalin as a historical figure and statesman. In 2019, **the belief that Stalin played a positive role in Russian history reached a historical high – 70% of respondents believed so** (in 2007 – 39%, in 2014 – 52%, and in 2016 – 54% of those surveyed).<sup>223</sup> The increase in sympathy for Stalin is seen in the affirmation of his achievements relating to World War II, for example, and in an increased **presence of his image in various areas of the public space**. Year after year, more and more people lay flowers on his grave at the Kremlin Wall on the anniversary of his death. In the last decade, many busts of Stalin (less often monuments) have been erected in different Russian regions. His image appears on billboards, in public transport (e.g. on the walls and cars of the Moscow metro<sup>224</sup>), on school

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> See e.g. M. Domańska, J. Strzelecki, ‘Antykorupcyjne protesty w Rosji’, *op. cit.*

<sup>222</sup> Е. Омельченко, ‘Говорят, раньше молодые люди в России становились неформалами, а теперь – либералами. Это правда? Протест – новая субкультура?’, Meduza, 14 October 2019, meduza.io.

<sup>223</sup> In addition, 52% of respondents have a positive attitude towards Stalin (41% feel respect for him, 6% – sympathy, 4% – admiration), 27% – indifferent, and 14% – negative (6% feel dislike for him, 5% – fear, 3% – repulsion, hatred). See ‘Уровень одобрения Сталина россиянами побил исторический рекорд’, Левада Центр, 16 April 2019, levada.ru.

<sup>224</sup> See ‘Пассажиры московского метро приучают к ЗОЖ цитатами Сталина’, Новые Известия, 5 February 2020, newizv.ru; ‘Сталина на Курской дополнили Лениным’, ВВС News Русская служба, 24 October 2009, bbc.com/russian.

supplies (notebooks, calendars) and banners during music festivals.<sup>225</sup> There are plenty of T-shirts with his image in the market, especially in online shops – both ‘serious’, reminiscent of Soviet propaganda posters, and ironic, hipster style, e.g. picturing young Stalin sporting a scarf with an inscription “Did you know Stalin was a hipster?”, or with a comic-style Cyrillic inscription “Рашн репрешн” (‘Russian repression’)<sup>226</sup> or “Execute!”.<sup>227</sup> Stalin has become a popular figure in Internet memes, the vast majority of which directly or indirectly glorify him. They may do it through trendy catchphrases and designs, slogans such as “Make even your posthumous monuments scare the living daylights out of your enemies”.<sup>228</sup> **After years of condemnation of the bloody dictator, his image is seemingly becoming more ‘domesticated’, less controversial, filtered through pop culture.** The phenomenon of Stalin’s rising popularity is a clear social trend, although sociologists estimate that the percentage of declared ‘Stalinists’, who openly glorify the generalissimo and deny his crimes, only constitutes around 15% in Russian society.<sup>229</sup> It appears that his growing popularity has its source in two partly contradictory processes.

On the one hand, **the rise in Stalin’s popularity** stems from the public’s susceptibility to **the Kremlin’s propaganda narrative which exploits historical themes.** The figure of the Soviet leader who used terror ‘for higher state objectives’ is supposed to strengthen the legitimacy of the current authorities, who also resort to violence against opponents and in foreign policy. It is also designed to strengthen the conviction that iron-fisted rule is the most appropriate model for Russia, one that is deeply rooted in the country’s history and tradition. The relativisation of Stalin’s crimes, which were a ‘price’ paid for the rapid development of the USSR and victory in World War II, is meant to consolidate the values that the authorities desire in society: the primacy of the state over the individual, and of global state ends that justify the means.<sup>230</sup> The Kremlin’s spectacular foreign operations, evoking the USSR’s might as a superpower (in particular, the annexation of Crimea), have thus strengthened public support for the current authorities and fuelled sympathy for Stalin, who embodies the peak of Russian state power, i.e. the victory in World War II (since 2014, his positive rating has risen from 52% to 70%).

<sup>225</sup> See С. Медведев, ‘Сталиномания’, Радио Свобода, 26 June 2019, [svoboda.org](http://svoboda.org).

<sup>226</sup> See e.g. [мужская футболка Сталин hipster, konasov.com](http://konasov.com) or [мужская футболка Сталин рашн репрешн враги, fanbox.ru](http://fanbox.ru).

<sup>227</sup> See [футболка Сталин расстрелять, rus.myprintbar.ru](http://rus.myprintbar.ru).

<sup>228</sup> See [search results for “демотиваторы сталин”, Яндекс, yandex.ru](http://yandex.ru).

<sup>229</sup> See М. Соколов, ‘За Сталина, за Путина?’, Радио Свобода, 24 December 2019, [svoboda.org](http://svoboda.org).

<sup>230</sup> See С. Медведев, ‘Сталиномания’, *op. cit.*



On the other hand, the rise of Stalin's popularity also has a **socio-economic background**. References to the dictator may be an indirect manifestation of public expectations and frustration caused by today's acute problems. For most of those who view him positively, Stalin embodies not only the power of the empire-state, but also the notions of welfare state, social justice, modesty or even the asceticism of those in power. This vision of the Stalinist period is often invoked when Russians are dissatisfied with the surrounding reality: the lack of adequate social safety nets, the ostentatious corruption and consumerism of the elites, which is something that a growing number of citizens are aware of. Public discontent was seriously exacerbated by a 2018 pension reform that extended working life by five years, which was perceived as a financially adverse and also extremely unfair decision.<sup>231</sup> Against the background of public frustration at the time, Stalin even began to be referred to as one of the symbols of Russian protest.<sup>232</sup> A meme "There was nothing like that under Stalin" (the original contains obscene language), usually referring to social cuts and corrupt elites, is gaining popularity on the Internet as an indirect form of criticism of Putin.<sup>233</sup> Today's sympathies for the Soviet tyrant are thus often a form of passive protest against a reality perceived as unjust, albeit unchangeable from below. Public perception of Stalin is also marked by a high degree of sentimentality, selectivity and wishful thinking: many are guided by the propaganda image of an 'ascetic and caring leader' and the conviction that the leader's 'firm hand' only curbed the nomenklatura (most tend to overlook the fact that Stalin's terror affected all social strata). As with yearnings for superpower status, Stalinist sentiments have become citizens' compensatory mechanism for their helplessness in the face of the surrounding reality. Just as references to Stalin as the triumphant victor in World War II are supposed to compensate for Russia's loss of its great power status, on the social and welfare level Stalin often embodies people's passive longing for a modest, caring and just leader: the truly good tsar.<sup>234</sup>

At the same time, public **sympathy for Stalin rarely translates into genuine, widescale social action or an actual readiness to live in a Stalinist-type state**. Only 5% of Russians declared in 2019 that they would like to live in the era of Joseph Stalin.<sup>235</sup> The same is true of nostalgia for the USSR, which is not

<sup>231</sup> See J. Rogoża, 'Cracks in the marble. Russians' trust in Putin on the decline', *OSW Commentary*, no. 297, 13 March 2019, [osw.waw.pl](http://osw.waw.pl).

<sup>232</sup> See М. Соколов, 'За Сталина, за Путина?', *op. cit.*

<sup>233</sup> See the [search results for 'при сталине такой не было'](#) ('There was nothing like that under Stalin') and [similar](#), [yandex.ru](http://yandex.ru).

<sup>234</sup> К. Мартынов, 'Сталин вместо справедливости', *Новая Газета*, 18 April 2019, [novayagazeta.ru](http://novayagazeta.ru).

<sup>235</sup> 'ВЦИОМ: Жить в эпоху Сталина хотели бы лишь 5% россиян', *НСН*, 18 April 2019, [nsn.fm](http://nsn.fm).

followed by readiness to live in that period. Memorials to the generalissimo have been erected in recent years, mainly on the initiative of local branches of the Communist Party and are usually located on their fenced-off areas rather than in public spaces. In Moscow, his bust was placed in the so-called Avenue of the Leaders of Russia in an inner square of the Russian Military-Historical Society. The vast majority of such initiatives are therefore top-down acts, whether carried out by Communist Party structures or Kremlin-linked organisations advocating imperialistic policies. The ordinary people, in turn, are those who vandalise these memorials, by pouring red paint or scribbling ‘murderer’.<sup>236</sup> It can be estimated that clothing or accessories bearing Stalin’s image are also only moderately popular; it is rare to see people wearing T-shirts with his image on the streets of Russian cities. In the minds of Russians, he remains more of a myth to which they can appeal having lost their trust in state institutions, trade unions and even in president Putin, who was seen for years as a caring and pro-social leader.

### **3. The power of apathy: public attitudes towards the Kremlin’s narrative of memory, great power ideas and the authoritarian state model**

One legacy of the totalitarian period, still present in the Russian public consciousness, is the widespread support for the values imposed by the authorities. These include the leading role of the state, also highlighted in the Kremlin’s narrative of memory; Russia’s status as a great power entitled to claim spheres of influence and determine the fate of the region and the world; and the cult of war and brute force. This support stems from **attitudes that have been ingrained over centuries of living under authoritarian and totalitarian regimes – passivity, inertia, conformism, citizens’ sense of powerlessness towards the state – which have become the norms of social life in Russia.**<sup>237</sup> Passivity (in most cases – passive discontent) is the dominant attitude of the majority of society in the face of state omnipotence, exclusion of the public from decision-making processes, curtailment of individual rights, various forms of abuse and violence by state structures – physical, legal or administrative ones. Active forms of protest are rare and tend to be local and short-lived, expiring after public frustration burns out or a specific problem is at least

<sup>236</sup> See e.g. ‘Недавно установленный в Липецке бюст Сталина облили краской’, Интерфакс, 8 May 2015, [interfax-russia.ru](http://interfax-russia.ru); ‘В Сургуте облили краской «незаконный бюст» Сталина’, РБК, 16 September 2016, [rbc.ru](http://rbc.ru); ‘В Крыму мемориальную доску со Сталиным облили краской и написали рядом «палач»’, Polskie Radio dla Zagranicy, 7 March 2016, [archiwum.polradio.pl](http://archiwum.polradio.pl).

<sup>237</sup> ‘«Идет систематическая работа по поддержанию страха»’, *op. cit.*

partially resolved. Passive dissatisfaction, as already mentioned above, may take various forms, including **references to historical issues. Taking excessive pride in Russia's and the Soviet Union's achievements in the international arena is a kind of compensation for present-day living problems, and the rise of Stalin's popularity is often a manifestation of discontent with the current authorities.**

**The passivity and conformism of Russian society are the Kremlin's 'allies' in its political strategies, aimed at concentrating power, excluding the public from decision-making processes, and imposing a state-centric narrative and agenda. At the same time, passivity is a 'double-edged' weapon which also reduces the quality of public support for the authorities' initiatives.**<sup>238</sup>

Support for or acceptance of the government's policy, even if sincere, is very often limited to the superficial layer of emotions and declarations, and is not backed up by citizens' readiness to take action, to become actively involved in the government's initiatives. Such 'doublethink' can often be seen in the public's attitude to the authorities, starting with president Putin, and their initiatives. This attitude combines contradictory stances: genuine pride in the fact that Putin has 'rebuilt the great empire', and a lack of illusions about how top officials really treat the citizens. Most Russians are convinced that the officials are corrupt (41% think so), detached from the people (31%), parasitic (13%), unprofessional and undereducated (11%). Positive opinions are expressed by a small percentage of respondents: the government is considered as strong (14%), honest (9%), close to the people (8%), fair (8%), effective and competent (6%). Generally, negative opinions about the authorities account for two-thirds of the answers, while positive ones – for one-third.<sup>239</sup> Moreover, many flagship yet controversial initiatives by the authorities often mobilise their opponents to engage in active forms of protest, but not the supporters of those ideas and the authorities in general. For example, despite numerous online shops offering T-shirts with Stalin, Putin, Shoygu or military motifs, the Russian 'street' has not adopted this trend on any visible scale. Only the so-called St. George's ribbons, which became a symbol of Russian power after the annexation of Crimea, are worn in large numbers. However, many people wear them insensitively, without any awareness of their history and significance, and sometimes in an offensive way, tied on shoes or dogs.<sup>240</sup>

<sup>238</sup> J. Rogoza, *Excess cultural baggage...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>239</sup> 'Образы власти, советской и нынешней', Левада Центр, 5 August 2019, [levada.ru](http://levada.ru).

<sup>240</sup> See А. Бильжо, '«Ситуация с георгиевской ленточкой близка к массовому психозу», Коммерсантъ, 7 May 2015, [kommersant.ru](http://kommersant.ru); 'Как правильно носить георгиевскую ленточку? На собаке – считают в Екатеринбурге', Новый День, 11 May 2017, [newdaynews.ru](http://newdaynews.ru).

Just as inert is public involvement in many official initiatives related to historical memory. As far as moods are concerned, Russians demonstrate high support for the ideas promoted by the authorities, in particular the decisive role of the USSR in the victory over fascism. However, public activity is limited to participation (or watching on TV) of the 9 May parades, as this event is a central element of modern Russian national identity and pride and has an important personal dimension: the commemoration of family members who died during the war. In practice, **the vast majority of other historical memory initiatives are initiated and arranged by state administration or various GONGOs**, controlled by the Kremlin, primarily by the Russian Military-Historical Society, which runs a large number of historical projects. GONGOs such as NOD mentioned in the previous chapter, controlled and financed by the Presidential Administration, regularly carry out historical campaigns to glorify Stalin and deny the Soviet perpetration of the Katyn crime.<sup>241</sup> They also conduct campaigns in support of Putin as a symbol of the struggle with the U.S. for 'Russian sovereignty', and actions directed against 'Ukrainian fascists' and others.<sup>242</sup> These campaigns tend to be limited in numbers, attracting a dozen or a few dozen people at most.

**Moreover, the impact and attractiveness of the Kremlin's historical and superpower narrative is not indisputable – it requires constant nourishment and diversification.** The 'Crimean euphoria', which gripped the public after the annexation of the peninsula in 2014 and provided the authorities with a huge boost of confidence, began to fade in the years that followed, giving way to pragmatic economic calculations by citizens. In the subsequent years, **support for Russia's imperial policy diminished, and the public's attention increasingly shifted from global goals to domestic problems** – economic, social and environmental ones. More and more grievances were addressed to the authorities and support for them began to erode. The susceptibility of citizens to state propaganda has also been waning, as Russians increasingly turn to the Internet as their main source of news rather than state-controlled television.<sup>243</sup>

<sup>241</sup> In April and May 1940, the NKVD (the Soviet secret police) at the order of Stalin, carried out mass executions of 22,000 imprisoned Polish military officers and intelligentsia. Up to 1990, the Soviet Union consequently denied responsibility for the massacre, and accused Nazi Germany.

<sup>242</sup> П. Мерзликин, 'Как устроен НОД', Бумара, 24 April 2017, paperpaper.ru.

<sup>243</sup> J. Rogoza, *Cracks in the marble...*, op. cit. Compared to the period following the annexation of Crimea, when support for Vladimir Putin reached an all-time high (89% in June 2015), by 2021 it had gradually fallen by about 25% and stood at 64% in January this year (see 'Индикаторы', Левада Центр, levada.ru). In turn, the Levada Center's September 2020 survey on sources of information showed that 81% of Russians get news about Russia and the world from the Internet and social networks

At the same time, Russian society – especially the metropolitan middle class – is **subject to global economic, lifestyle and consumer trends, which are often at odds with traditional Russian political culture and its core values, which is also reflected in the Kremlin’s narrative and politics of memory.** On the one hand, liberal values and global lifestyle changes are beginning to affect the existing cult of war and male might, the image of a ‘man without weaknesses’, a legacy of Soviet conscription and brutal ‘hazing’ rituals.<sup>244</sup> **The cult of strength, although still present in Russian culture and fuelled by the authorities, competes vigorously with the cult of economic success,** which is associated with intellectual superiority and well-developed social skills, including openness, flexibility and friendliness. On the other hand, citizens are aware of the power and predominance of the state, which can deprive a citizen of all their possessions or put them in a situation of war – as a citizen of an aggressor country or even as a direct participant in combat operations.<sup>245</sup> A clear **duality or doublethink** can be seen in public sentiment: in opinion polls, the army tops the rankings of trust in institutions, verbal support for the army is on the rise,<sup>246</sup> and the majority of Russians consider their country a great power entitled to possess and defend its spheres of influence. In everyday life, however, the priorities of Russians include household, financial and social matters, and young men (and their families) try to avoid conscription and deployment on a military operation at any cost.<sup>247</sup>

**Similar doublethink can be seen in the public attitude towards the Russian authorities, the situation in the country and the grim chapters of Russian history.** Although polls continue to show significant support for the ruling class and the heroic vision of Russian history they have touted, wide-ranging and intense criticism can be seen on the Internet. Popular independent productions dealing with politics and history are usually accompanied

(69% from television), with 54% declaring trust in online sources and 48% in television. (see ‘*Источники информации*’, Левада Центр, 28 September 2020, levada.ru).

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>245</sup> See e.g. ‘*Минобороны проверит жалобы мурманских контрактников на принуждение ехать в Украину*’, Новая Газета, 14 February 2015, novayagazeta.ru.

<sup>246</sup> As already quoted above (footnote 214), the number of supporters of the thesis that ‘a real man should do military service’ has increased from 42% to 60% in recent years. A further 24% believe that military service is a citizen’s duty to the state, even if it is not in the citizen’s own interest. See ‘*Российская армия*’, *op. cit.*

<sup>247</sup> Among the main problems in 2020, respondents mention: rising prices (55%), corruption (39%), poverty and low living standards of the population (36%), unemployment (31%), inaccessibility of medical services (28%), income inequalities (27%). Issues outside the economic and social category are mentioned by far fewer people: weakness of state power (13%), conflicts between different centres of power (6%), threat of terrorism (5%). See ‘*Самые острые проблемы*’, Левада Центр, 5 March 2020, levada.ru.

by thousands of critical, sometimes excoriating comments by Internet users aimed at the government and Vladimir Putin personally – be it films and shows by Yury Dud, TV Rain, independent online news programmes, interviews and investigations produced by Alexei Navalny, Alexei Pivovarov’s Redaktsiya, interviews and films by Irina Shikhman, the opposition youtuber StalinGulag and many others. Videos about the difficult past resonate widely, like Yury Dud’s ‘Kolyma’ about the Stalinist terror, which has gained 25 million views and nearly 200,000 comments from Internet users, most of them writing bitterly about the unresolved past and the similarities between Stalin’s Russia and Putin’s Russia of today. The 2019 HBO series ‘Chernobyl’ also reverberated loudly in Russia: as many as 22% of Russians watched it (according to a Levada Center poll), despite the fact that it was broadcast on a subscription-based TV service. The series provoked heated discussions in Russia about the cost of Kremlin lies and comparisons between the Chernobyl-era USSR and Putin’s Russia, also ‘built on lies’ as many see it.<sup>248</sup>

A paradoxical asymmetry can thus be seen in Russia: most of the population holds imperialist and pro-Kremlin views, which is counterbalanced by the passivity and inertia of most of them, and this stands in contrast with the activity, determination and higher social capital of the minority that opposes the Kremlin’s policy. In today’s Russia, there is a stark competition between the cult of a strong state with imperial ambitions promoted by the authorities, which implies the subordination of the individual to the higher state objectives, and the values and attitudes that prioritise an individual and their well-being, the right to have one’s own independent opinion, worldview and lifestyle. This competition divides society into different groups adhering to different values, but it can also affect the consciousness of the same individual, wherein the pride in imperial Russia and a belief in the strongman rule coexist with a longing for respect for individual rights and dignity and a hope for prosperity. It can be expected that the competition between these two worldviews or philosophies will only intensify in the years to come, along with the Kremlin regime’s efforts to halt the erosion of power by stepping up repression against all dissenters.

<sup>248</sup> Ф. Крашенинников, ‘Сериял «Чернобыль» показал цену лжи, которую платят власти’, Deutsche Welle, 7 June 2019, [dw.com/ru](https://www.dw.com/ru).

#### 4. The 'second memory': grassroots social activism in the field of the politics of memory

Although the majority of Russian society shows a high degree of susceptibility to the political, ideological and historical content propagated by the authorities, the last decade has seen **a growing interest among certain segments of society in an alternative historical memory to that offered by the authorities** – a heroic, glorious vision focused on the state's victories and power. More and more Russians, including the younger generation, are interested in **uncovering the dark and tragic periods of domestic history while focusing not on the fate of the empire, but that of their own region, city, community and family**. Historians and commentators have already dubbed this trend the 'second memory' – in opposition to the heroic 'first memory' promoted by the authorities.<sup>249</sup> It may also be referred to as the phenomenon of **post-memory**<sup>250</sup> – the memory inherited by descendants of victims of repression, by people from 'the generation after' who did not experience persecution directly but who inherited a kind of trauma or anxiety from their ancestors. This subconscious trauma prompts them to search for and uncover hidden family dramas, to experience and reflect on them.

One of the most famous books by Nobel Prize-winning Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, written back in the 1980s, can be regarded as the forerunner of this trend. In the book, the writer offers a different perspective from that of most Russian and Russian-language fiction and non-fiction literature on World War II. Firstly, it is the perspective of women, who – both in times of war and peace – remained in the shadow of men, an appreciation of their contribution to the fight and victory, as well as their insight, sensitivity and values. Secondly, war is shown through the prism of 'small human tragedies' and ordinary everyday matters, activities, experiences. The book paints a picture that shows the struggle against a powerful and cruel enemy, but above all the dramas of individual people, their suffering, fear, as well as everyday worries, duties and joys. In Alexievich's book, it is people, not the state, who are in the centre of the world, and this is a very different perspective from the one that dominates the Russian narrative of memory.

<sup>249</sup> The 'second memory' was first coined and presented in a report by the Free Historical Society entitled *Какое прошлое нужно будущему России* ('What Kind of Past Does the Future of Russia Need'), *op. cit.* See also Г. Юдин, М. Алешковский, 'Вторая память', Открытая библиотека, 23 November 2019, [open-lib.ru](http://open-lib.ru).

<sup>250</sup> A concept formulated by US researcher Marianne Hirsch, see 'An Interview with Marianne Hirsch', Columbia University Press, [cup.columbia.edu](http://cup.columbia.edu).

In recent years, Russia has seen many grassroots, social initiatives aimed at uncovering the previously unspoken, tragic history of small homelands of those involved, their family members who became victims of the Great Terror, or other dramatic events. One of the best known such initiatives was **the ‘Immortal Regiment’**, a campaign initiated in 2012 in the Siberian city of Tomsk by a group of residents with the support of the independent local channel TV2. Participants started coming to World War II marches with portraits of their loved ones who fought or died in the war, rather than with banners and heroic slogans. The first campaign on 9 May 2012 attracted 6,000 residents of Tomsk; in subsequent years, it was joined by participants from other Russian cities, as well as cities in Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Israel. Sadly, this popular campaign was soon ‘taken over’ by the Kremlin: in 2015, president Putin and top officials first attended the march, and today it resembles other state-run, bureaucratic, top-down initiatives. It is financed by the state and its Kremlin organisers, in an effort to increase its numbers, bring participants in an organised manner and equip them with identical posters. One of the most controversial incidents distorting the original meaning of the campaign was the participation in 2016 of Kremlin politician Vyacheslav Nikonov – he marched with a portrait of his grandfather Vyacheslav Molotov, the USSR’s commissar for foreign affairs and a signatory of what is known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany.

Another important social campaign to commemorate the victims of Stalinist repressions has been **the ‘Last Address’**, launched in 2014 by Moscow journalist Sergei Parkhomenko.<sup>251</sup> As part of this campaign, initially in Moscow and later in many other Russian cities, small metal memorial plaques were placed on buildings from which repressed people were taken ‘on their last journey’. The plaques contain the name of the repressed person, their occupation and the date of their arrest, death and rehabilitation. To date, more than a thousand such plaques have been placed in Russia, as well as in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, the Czech Republic, Germany and elsewhere.

**Another notable ‘second memory’ initiative was undertaken by Tomsk resident Denis Karagodin, who spent four years searching the archives, determined to reconstruct and bring to light the fate of his great-grandfather, a peasant from the Tomsk Oblast, who was arrested by the NKVD in 1937 as a ‘resident of Japanese intelligence’, convicted and executed. After much effort, Karagodin managed to identify the names of all those**

<sup>251</sup> See the website of [Foundation Последний адрес, poslednyadres.ru](http://FoundationПоследний адрес, poslednyadres.ru).



involved in the arrest, fabrication of charges and execution of his great-grandfather – starting with the Kremlin initiators of the Great Terror, up to the executioners, drivers and typists of the NKVD branch in Tomsk.<sup>252</sup> **The story resonated widely and encouraged thousands of Russians to uncover and share their family stories from that period.** It turned out that many families spent decades concealing the tragic fate of their loved ones – victims of Stalin’s purges – and it was only their grandchildren or great-grandchildren who began to take an interest in it.<sup>253</sup>

One of the most poignant family confessions came in 2016 with the story of well-known journalist Vladimir Yakovlev, founder of the Kommersant publishing house and grandson of a prominent Chekist. Yakovlev described his happy childhood in his grandparents’ apartment in central Moscow, which, he later learned, had been confiscated from a Moscow merchant, who had fallen victim to Stalinist terror. The sofa on which his grandmother read him fairy tales (and the rest of the furniture) had come from a special warehouse to which the belongings of executed Muscovites were brought and which the Chekists used to furnish the seized flats. His grandmother turned out to be a longtime KGB informer who used her noble background to establish contacts and provoke her friends into confessions. As Yakovlev writes, “under a thin layer of obliviousness, my happy childhood memories are saturated with the spirit of robbery, murder, violence and betrayal, soaked with blood. Am I special? All of us living in Russia are grandchildren of victims and executioners. All of us with no exception. There were no victims in your family? So there were executioners. There were no executioners? So there were victims. There were neither victims nor executioners? Then there were secrets”.<sup>254</sup>

One of the signs of the broader **trend of the young generation’s interest in the difficult history of their own country is the aforementioned documentary film ‘Kolyma. The homeland of our fear’** (Alternative titles: ‘The Home of Our Fear’; ‘The Birthplace of Our Fear’), shot in 2019 by well-known youtuber Yury Dud.<sup>255</sup> An idol of the younger generation and previously apolitical author of celebrity interviews, Dud surprised most observers by taking on the subject of Stalinist terror and its impact on subsequent

<sup>252</sup> Е. Фомина, Е. Рачева, ‘От шофера «черного воронка» до Сталина’, Новая Газета, 23 November 2016, novayagazeta.ru.

<sup>253</sup> М. Дикарева, 1917: моя жизнь после, Сноб, 3 October 2017, snob.ru.

<sup>254</sup> ‘Владимир Яковлев: «Мы все – внуки жертв и палачей»’, Избранное, 13 September 2018, izbrannoe.com.

<sup>255</sup> ‘Kolyma – Birthplace of Our Fear’ (‘Колыма – родина нашего страха’), youtube.com.

generations, including today's Russia. As a production made by the young for the young that gained high viewing figures, the film sparked a huge discussion in Russia. It raised important questions and uncovered the past in a manner characteristic of today's youth, who rarely turn to academic papers or studies by institutions specialising in the history of repression. Nevertheless, Dud's film posed serious questions about the legacy of the totalitarian system, people's deep-rooted fear of the authorities, and the resurgence of sympathy for Stalin even among the descendants of the persecuted. The film has great educational value: it starts with a quote saying that half of young Russians (18–24 years old) have never heard of Stalinist repression, while over 40% of adults justify it. The film, with its dynamic and modern form and its unequivocally critical moral and ethical assessment of Stalinism (which is by no means the rule in Russia), can be considered one of the best history lessons for the younger generation in recent years.

Another product aimed at younger audiences is **the 'Arzamas' project – a platform of video and audio podcasts which feature lectures on Russian and world history, cultural and artistic developments in a concise, cutting-edge and attractive form.** It contains an extensive collection of multimedia lectures on the history of Russia and the USSR, including dozens of podcasts covering the Stalinist period alone.<sup>256</sup> The lectures often introduce history in an unconventional way, seen through the lens of famous writers or people living next door to each other in multi-room communal apartments, the so-called *kommunalkas*. In 2017, the project earned the prestigious 'Promoter of Education' ('Просветитель') award for a series of lectures on the 1917 revolution by well-known historian Boris Kolonitsky, winner of the Gaidar Prize.<sup>257</sup>

**The young generation of historians, activists and volunteers is joining the ranks of renowned institutions** (such as the Memorial Society, the Sakharov Centre, the Gulag History Museum) to create interesting, innovative projects with a strong appeal in youth circles. The young director of the Gulag History Museum, Roman Romanov (born 1982, was appointed head of the museum in 2008 at the age of 26) has turned it into a modern, multimedia facility that attracts many young visitors. He has established a documentation centre in the museum, to help seek information about the fate of persecuted ancestors. Another example is the activity of young historian Pavel Gnilorybov

<sup>256</sup> An example of a podcast about Stalin and the cult of personality: И. Венявкин, 'Культ Сталина в СССР', Arzamas, arzamas.academy.

<sup>257</sup> See the course 'Революция 1917 года' consisting of a series of lectures, Arzamas, arzamas.academy.

(born 1991), who specialises in the history of Moscow and Stalinist repression. He is the author of several books, but also a well-known Moscow guide, and one of his walking tours is called ‘Topography of Terror’ (developed in collaboration with the Memorial Society). Gnilorybov is a colourful figure, well-known to the younger generation, involved in the 2011–2012 protests, active on social networks, he is the author of a YouTube channel on the history of Russian architecture<sup>258</sup> and runs a popular Instagram profile. His original forms of expression attract the attention of young Internet users, becoming non-trivial history lessons with anti-Stalinist and anti-totalitarian overtones.

**The subject of Stalinist repression and the history of the USSR is also taken up by many young authors – writers, directors, documentary filmmakers, musicians, who apply modern, often avant-garde forms.** In the last decade, many books dealing with the traumatic history of Stalinist repression have been published in Russia. An example of literary fiction is *Oblivion* by Sergei Lebedev (born 1981), with a central image of a villain – a Stalinist hangman, a literary trick unprecedented in Russian writing (the book has been translated into more than a dozen languages).<sup>259</sup> An example of popular literature is the novel *Zuleikha* by Guzel Yakhina (born 1977), which describes the dramatic story of a repressed and displaced Tatar peasant woman in the 1930s. The book was very popular in Russia and it was soon adapted into a film.<sup>260</sup> Another reflection on Russian politics of memory – or rather lack of it – is *An Inconvenient Past*<sup>261</sup> by Nikolai Epplee (born 1977), which tackles the scale of concealment and unresolved crimes of Soviet totalitarianism – a book that was enthusiastically received in Russia and the West.

Many plays dealing with the Stalinist epoch have been performed at the Gogol Center, one of the best-known Russian theatres domestically and abroad (thanks to Kirill Serebrennikov, its artistic director until 2021). One of the most famous events was the documentary project ‘Stalin’s Funeral’ directed by Serebrennikov himself. He argued: “Recently there have been more and more attempts to justify dictatorship and repression, which means only one thing: history lessons have not been learned. Statements that Stalin lifted the country out of ruin, that Stalin won the war, that various atrocities did

<sup>258</sup> See the channel [Архитектурные излишества](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCqz8k8k8k8k8k8k8k8k8k8k), youtube.com.

<sup>259</sup> *Oblivion* was published in Poland in 2018 by Claroscuro, translated by Grzegorz Szymczak.

<sup>260</sup> The book was published in Poland in 2017 by Noir Sur Blanc publishing house. The Russian series based on the book can be viewed on [Смотрим: smotrim.ru/zuleikha](https://smotrim.ru/zuleikha).

<sup>261</sup> The book was published in Russia in 2020 – see Н. Эппле, *Неудобное прошлое*. An English version is forthcoming.

not happen under Stalin – this is appalling”.<sup>262</sup> A poignant image of Stalinism and repression also appeared in such Gogol Center plays as ‘Mandelstam’ or ‘Pasternak’ (directed by Maksim Didenko, born 1980). Difficult history-related topics are also tackled by Teatr.Doc, a Moscow-based documentary theatre made up almost exclusively of actors and directors of the young generation. Its performances touching on painful history include: ‘Viatlag’, which describes the gulag experience of a Latvian named Artur Stradinsh, based on his diaries written on cigarette paper; ‘Kantgrad’ about the dramatic fate of Konigsberg residents in 1945 – both Germans who had not yet been displaced and those who had been resettled by force from other parts of Russia; ‘A Short History of the Russian Dissent’, which depicts the tragic fate of opponents of the authorities over the centuries (including the Decembrists); and finally a series of plays telling the history of Rus, based on the old Russian chronicle *The Tale of Bygone Years* dating back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>263</sup> The issues of difficult history are also taken up by **the young generation of documentarians**, such as Ksenia Sakharnova (born 1981), author of documentaries about Stalin, dissident Natalya Gorbanevskaya, and the movement of human rights defenders in the USSR.<sup>264</sup>

**The establishment of the Free Historical Society in 2014**<sup>265</sup> may be regarded as a grassroots effort by the community of historians. It was created in protest against the instrumental use of history by the authorities for current political goals and the restriction of freedom of research. The Free Historical Society is not another formal institution, but rather a platform for information and coordination of independent historical initiatives. It is committed to promoting education in its broader sense, working to liberalise access to archival historical materials, especially the archives of security agencies, fighting against the instrumentalisation of history teaching and the degradation of the academic community under the Kremlin’s ideological pressure. The Society brings together many renowned Russian historians, such as the previously mentioned Boris Kolonitsky, Anatoly Golubovsky, Irina Karatsuba, Nikita Petrov, Jan Raczyński, Leonid Katsva, Ivan Kurilla, and the aforementioned Pavel Gnilorybov. The Society has published an important report on historical memory and the ‘second memory’ (‘What Kind of Past Does the Future of Russia Need’, see footnote 249), it also speaks out on current issues concerning

<sup>262</sup> See ‘Документальный проект «Похороны Сталина» состоится в Гоголь-центре’, Москва24, 22 December 2016, m24.ru.

<sup>263</sup> See Teatr.Doc’s repertoire, teatrdoc.ru.

<sup>264</sup> See information about her on КиноПоиск, kinopoisk.ru.

<sup>265</sup> See ‘Манифест ВИО’, Вольное историческое общество, 28 February 2014, volistob.ru.

history: in March 2020, it published an open letter criticising an amendment to the Russian constitution, especially its provisions on the attitude of citizens to the past and history.<sup>266</sup>

There are more and more grassroots, community-based, non-institutional initiatives in the sphere of historical memory in Russia. However, they cannot compare to the ideological machinery of the state in terms of their impact. This disparity is exacerbated by the growing authoritarianism in Russia and **the omnipotence of the secret services, heirs to the Soviet repressive apparatus. As a result, history is being increasingly instrumentalised, the memory of repression wiped out by the state and its criminal nature relativised.**<sup>267</sup> It is worth pointing out, however, that this 'state memory' is imposed prescriptively from above, usually driven by organised campaigns commissioned and carried out by state structures or entities with purely mercantile motives. They simply seek to 'manage' budgetary resources and generously allocated funds for patriotic projects. Against this background, **the grassroots, 'second historical memory', even though possessing incomparably fewer resources and tools, is an expression of the genuine interest and commitment of citizens. It has an authentic 'drive', i.e. the determination, creativity and passion of the individuals concerned,** and its authenticity often makes it appealing and inspiring for others. It means that projects with no major funding, driven by those involved and volunteers, may prove more lasting than large-scale Kremlin projects which will quickly fade away without adequate funding.

<sup>266</sup> See 'Заявление Вольного исторического общества о предполагаемых поправках Конституции Российской Федерации', Вольное историческое общество, 10 March 2020, volistob.ru.

<sup>267</sup> See e.g.: J. Rogoża, M. Wyrwa, *Katyn. In the Footsteps of the Crime*, op. cit.

## SUMMARY

The deepening ideological exhaustion of Putin's model of government, the prospects of long-term recession or stagnation, and the declining public support are likely to push the Kremlin in the near future to intensify its 'aggressive-defensive' actions, aimed both at protecting the interests of the political and business establishment and at defending its foreign policy assets. In this case, we should expect Russia to maintain or intensify its aggressive, neo-Soviet politics of memory, which is increasingly treated as one of the few remaining tools for legitimising the regime.

However, the social appeal of this narrative may be steadily eroding. In various forms, Russian society manifests its deepening disillusionment with the regime, which fails to satisfy the basic needs and aspirations of ever more groups. As mentioned in Chapter IV.3, a part of Russian society – first of all the metropolitan middle class – affected by global economic, lifestyle and consumer trends, is drifting away from the traditional Russian political culture and its paternalistic attitudes, i.e. recognition of the total primacy of the state over the individual. Many attitudes in today's Russian mentality can be characterised as 'doublethink', also with regard to the Kremlin's ideology and narrative of memory. They combine stances that seem mutually exclusive: support for the heroic vision of Russian history, the cult of a strong state and its imperial ambitions, with the awareness of how oppressive this state is and unwillingness to subordinate one's interests to it. In social perception, the values promoted by the state – pride in the empire and the glorious history – are becoming increasingly abstract, while citizen-oriented values, fostering their well-being, development and sense of security, prevail in everyday life. As indicated by in-depth sociological studies, individual-centered values and attitudes are gradually gaining ground in society, including the right to have a personal opinion, worldview, mores and lifestyle, the expectation of empowerment along with the readiness to assume greater responsibility. Citizens are also increasingly expressing demand for economic, partly political changes, and for real guarantees of civil rights (especially such tangible ones as property rights, bodily integrity, etc.), which cannot come about without a profound restructuring of the system of government. There is a growing demand not for the celebration of the heroic past, but for a vision of the future, not for a policy of costly foreign expansion, but for programmes to develop the country and raise the living standards and security of its citizens. Russians are less and less susceptible to the influence of state propaganda as they more often turn to online sources of information and entertainment beyond the control

of the authorities, and they increasingly vent their criticism of those in power, irrespective of the vast toolbox of state control over the Internet. These trends are likely to develop in the years to come and that will probably widen the gap between further top-down initiatives 'defending the historical truth' and the public perception of the state, officials and the vision of history they offer, encapsulated in the slogan 'Forward, into the past!'

**MARIA DOMAŃSKA, JADWIGA ROGOŻA**