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**9 May celebrations – an instrument for shaping identity
in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova**

The anniversary commemorating the end of WWII is a significant day not only in Russia but also throughout the post-Soviet space. 9 May celebrations are treated as an instrument for shaping national identity and memory, developing political myths, and as a vital element of the politics of memory. However, a rift emerged between Russia's narration concerning the Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War and the narration and formula of celebrations in the remaining countries. In Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, the discrepancy reflects an attempt at becoming independent from Russia's influence. In each of these countries, the process has its own specific character and distinct motivations and determinants.

Ukraine: old traditions but new principles

In recent years, the Victory Day and the general attitude towards World War II triggered considerable tensions among the Ukrainian public. In 2015, based upon the decision of the parliament, the term "Great Patriotic War" was replaced with "World War II". The same year witnessed a shift in the emphasis from 9 to 8 May, which came to be known as the "Remembrance and Reconciliation Day". 9 May, previously known as the Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War, was replaced by the "Victory Day over Nazism in World War II". In addition, a ban on the display of Soviet symbols in public was introduced. A part of the society has been actively supporting changes promoted by presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko with regard to the interpretation of WWII and its symbols. This part of the public believes that the war was waged between two totalitarian regimes: the USSR and Germany. This group also includes people who support the glorification of OUN-UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists – Ukrainian Insurgent Army), which is manifested among other things in the change of names of streets, squares, erection of monuments and torchlight processions organized in Ukraine on 1 January – the birthday of Stepan Bandera.

The other section of the society, those who maintain and cultivate the memory of the Great Patriotic War (which took its toll on the population of the USSR in the form of 8 million casualties) do not perceive the war as the clash of two totalitarian regimes. They believe that the war was a racial conflict waged by Nazi Germany primarily against the people of Jewish, Romani and Slavic descent, and consequently against the population of Ukraine. The glorification of OUN-UPA and its leaders is unacceptable for this part of the society. These people see themselves as the successors of the state, which defeated the Third Reich, and they believe themselves to be a part of the victorious nation. On 9 May they commemorate the end of the Great Patriotic War. They alternatively consider 2 September 1945 to be the end of WWII. For that reason, they usually participate in "No One Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Forgotten" parade while carrying portraits of their relatives who fought in the 1941-1945 war and laying flowers to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In 2019, the events devoted to this particular date were attended by approx. 700 thousand people throughout Ukraine.

The newly elected President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, also expressed his personal attitude towards these dates. On 8 May, as a token of reconciliation, he met a veteran of the Great Patriotic War, who was a Naval Infantry captain in the Soviet Army; he also visited a former UPA liaison. On the other hand, on 9 May, in Kryvyi Rih, the president laid flowers on the grave of his grandfather, Semen Ivanovych Zelensky, who fought in the Great Patriotic War and was decorated with two Orders of the Red Star. That same day Volodymyr Zelensky also addressed fellow Ukrainian citizens via Internet using the following words: "Today is 9 May. This is our Thanksgiving Day. Many thanks to all who battled against Nazism and triumphed". At the same time, he stressed

that nobody had the right to own the victory or claim that the victory could be achieved without Ukrainians. He also called for the remembrance of the dead and respect for the living.

The Immortal Regiment March (*Bessmertnyi polk*) initiated by Russia influenced Ukraine and other post-Soviet states. The event gathers people marching with the portraits of their relatives who fought in the war. In case of Ukraine, such marches took place in Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, and other cities around the country. Not only they boosted the interest in WWII, but they also exposed different attitudes by different parts of the public to the issue. One of the challenges the new president will face will be to overcome the confrontational attitudes and reconcile various segments of Ukrainian society towards this significant and sensitive issue for the national historical memory.

Belarus: new traditions but old principles

In Belarus, the Great Patriotic War occupies a prime position in the politics of memory. The annual celebrations of 9 May, which first emerged in the 1960s in the USSR, and were actively popularized by Belarusian authorities, aim to shape the Belarusian identity, based upon a heroic myth of the struggle against the German aggression. In the independent Belarus, since the end of the 1990s, politicians have begun to take an active part in regulating the practices of the politics of memory associated with the Victory Day. In 1998, pursuant to the Regulation of Alexander Lukashenko, 9 May, the Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War was established as the national holiday. By doing so, the president made a declaration that Belarus would continue to popularize the myth of the Belarusian victory in the Great Patriotic War, and on such a basis, the country would shape its own remembrance traditions and the politics of memory.

The Immortal Regiment event and the distribution of Saint George's ribbon (*georgievskaja lentochka/lenta*) constitute two significant symbols Russia employed in order to influence the politics of memory. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and the country's engagement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014, Belarusian political symbolism was modified. In 2015, during the Victory Day celebrations, Belarusian authorities decided not to use the ribbon and replace it with one in the colours of the present Belarusian national flag. By doing so, Lukashenko sought to demonstrate to Russia that Belarus will pursue its own narration to commemorate the Great Patriotic War. The gesture was a declaration that Belarus will popularize the myth of Belarusian victory in the war. This myth will serve as the fundament for shaping own traditions and politics of memory.

Since 2011, Belarus has also held the Immortal Regiment event during the Victory Day celebrations. Since 2017, this event, of Russian origin, has been replaced by a Belarusian initiative titled "Belarus Remembers". The principles remain basically the same – anyone whose relatives participated in the war can join the march and carry their portraits. In 2019, in face of tensions in the relations with the Russian Federation, Lukashenko announced he did not support the Immortal Regiment event, whose popularity dropped in Belarus this very year. Several cities in Belarus cancelled the march. In Minsk, the event was marginalized and transferred to side streets and squares.

Such changes in the remembrance practices confirm Lukashenko's pursuit of restricting Russia's influence upon the politics of memory, and thus, upon the development of the Belarusian identity. By introducing changes in the commemoration of the Victory Day, Belarusian authorities do not popularize the narration which stands in the opposition to the Russian one, much as it happens in Ukraine, but modify Russian propaganda effort to fit into their own narration. This signifies the endeavour to depart from the Russian influence in the politics of memory, and by doing so, to restrict the spread of Russian propaganda in Belarus.

Moldova – dual celebrations in the shadow of Russia

In Moldova, 9 May, the Victory Day, constitutes an official holiday. However, the public and political elites are deeply divided politically, as well as in terms of remembrance and the politics of memory. The token of the division can be seen in the celebrations of the Victory Day and the Europe Day – both celebrations have been held on the same day, despite president Igor Dodon's (representing the pro-Russian Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova) attempts to prevent such a coincidence.

Such course of the 9 May celebrations in 2019 epitomizes the divisions. All parties of the parliament organized their own commemorations. During official, national celebrations, Prime Minister Paweł Filip, the representative of the Democratic Party of Moldova (social democrats, nominally pro-European), observed that Fascism was defeated by the whole “united Europe”, which rose from the ruin “united and flourishing” after the war. He also commented that war heroes deserve remembrance. However, the pursuit of the “European future of the nation” is necessary because the European integration constitutes the only way for the development of Moldova. Maia Sandu, the leader of anti-systemic and anti-oligarchic ACUM coalition (an electoral bloc called “NOW Platform DA and PAS”) spoke to the similar effect. She stressed her negative attitude towards the *georgievskaja lentochka* and highlighted that the citizens of Moldova frequently fought on the opposing sides during the war. As a consequence, it is difficult to speak about the Victory Day. One should rather focus upon the future when celebrating the Europe Day.

A different narration accompanied the celebrations organized under the patronage of President Igor Dodon. Both the symbolism and slogans, as well as the form of the “Victory March”, *Bessmertnyi polk*, the unfurling of a 75-meter “georgievka” (to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Moldova) constituted a direct reference to Russian celebrations. The events in Moldova were partly organized in cooperation with Russian institutions. In addition, as usual, the evening concert featured Russian performers. President Putin sent his greetings to President Igor Dodon. Putin encouraged the respect for heroes and the protection of memory. He also referred to the friendship and cooperation binding the nations of Russia and Moldova. President Dodon sent his greetings to Vladimir Putin as well. He expressed his concern that the history of WWII is distorted and falsified in certain countries for political reasons.

In Transnistria, official celebrations took a spectacular scale. National authorities, representatives of clergy, and the command of Russian military forces stationed in the republic attended the event. The symbolism and message of these celebrations also reflected those of the Russian ones (including the display of a T-34 tank and military squads dressed in historical uniforms). The event also featured speeches from the authorities concerning the significance of the USSR and the distortion of history, destruction of monuments and the rebirth of Fascism. President Vadim Krasnoselsky referred to the “victory over Fascism” as the most critical event of the 20th century.

The scope and form of the Victory Day celebrations in Moldova indicate the scale and deep-rootedness of Russia’s influence. The role and impact of the Federation in Moldova are likely to increase. Russia will surely pursue such an increase anyway. The elections of February 2019 were won by the pro-Russian PSRM. Apart from this party, the parliament features three additional ones. However, none of these is able to form a government without having the majority. As a consequence, a snap election is likely. Russia will probably strive to spin these and block Moldova’s integration with western structures. The Federation will exploit not only the polarization of the public and strong pro-Russian elements in the country, but also its cultural influences, the politics of memory and symbolism.

Trans. Tomasz Kuraś