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## Special Patriotic War

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**Victory Day celebrated on 9 May is still the most important holiday in Russia, and at the same time an important instrument of the Kremlin's policy, both internally and internationally. The Moscow celebrations in 2023 and Vladimir Putin's speech showed that Russia is in a very difficult military and economic situation. Despite this, Russia's ruling elites intend to consistently continue the war, while disseminating the thesis that Russia is its victim, just like during the so-called Great Patriotic War.**

**The meaning of May 9.** The anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe was an important holiday in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries, used politically to shape national identity and memory in accordance with the Kremlin narrative. Currently, Victory Day is celebrated mainly in Russia, where it consistently constitutes an essential element of state and nation-building myths and an instrument of historical policy. May 9 is also solemnly celebrated in some post-Soviet countries.

In recent years, however, there have been changes in the attitude towards this holiday. Due to different political conditions and the desire to become independent from Russian influence, different countries refer to May 9 in different ways (IEŚ Commentaries, No. 27). On the one hand, there is a complete rejection of the Soviet tradition of celebrating this day (the Baltic states), on the other – continuation of the idea and formula, and the ideological background that invariably accompanies them (in Russia and its dependent territories: the occupied part of Donbas, Crimea, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia).

In the countries of Eastern Europe that were republics of the USSR, a variety of policies are pursued. Belarus cultivates the myth of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45 (WWO), basing its national and state identity on it. However, since 2015, there has been a visible departure from Russian models – this reflects Alyaksandr Lukashenka's efforts to emphasize the sovereignty and independence of Belarus. Despite this, Soviet symbolism and rhetoric are still exposed, complemented by an anti-Western (and recently anti-Polish) narrative.

There is a kind of dualism in Moldova. The pro-Western authorities emphasize the celebration of Europe Day (also on May 9) in the context of World War II, focusing on "we remember, we do not celebrate". In turn, the pro-Russian opposition, led by Igor Dodon's socialists, organized victory parades under red banners in 2023, even though it is illegal in Moldova.

Ukraine has decisively moved away from celebrating May 9 after the Russian aggression. In 2015, the term WWO was officially changed to "World War II", in 2016, May 9 became the Day of Victory over Nazism in the Second World War, and May 8 was celebrated as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation. Currently, May 8 is the Day of Victory over Nazism, and May 9 is Europe Day. In 2023, due to the ongoing war, there were no official celebrations.

The WWO remains an essential pillar of the identity of Russia and Russians. Since Vladimir Putin took power, May 9 has been the most important holiday in Russia, serving not only to consolidate society around the authorities but also to maintain superpower nostalgia and the myth of Russian military power. Importantly, during the USSR period, this holiday was not so spectacular (e.g., only four military parades were organized); the anniversary of the October Revolution was more important.

It was Putin's presidency that gave Victory Day a new political and propaganda meaning, also referring to the heritage of Tsarist Russia (the St. George Ribbon) and introducing new rituals ("The Immortal Regiment").

In addition, in 2008, a new, definitely aggressive theme of the celebrations appeared: “we can do it again” – instead of “never again” [of war].

**Russian celebrations in 2023.** The Moscow celebrations were, as always, spectacular, with an oversized military band. However, they were different than in previous years. The whole event lasted less than 50 minutes, and the foreign guests included only the leaders of Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Armenia (i.e., mostly states belonging to the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which is dependent on Russia).

Units composed largely of non-line troops, but rather of cadets of military schools marched. There was no air parade, as in 2022 (allegedly due to weather conditions). Compared to 2021, the number of vehicles participating in the parade decreased fourfold, from 197 to 51, and only one tank appeared in 2023 – a historical T-34. However, intercontinental missile launchers were shown. In dozens of Russian cities, the celebrations were cancelled (usually “for security reasons”), and in many, they were of a symbolic nature. The few anti-war protests that took place on May 9 were ruthlessly pacified.

**Putin’s speech.** A key part of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow was President Putin’s speech. There were fewer references to the WWO than to the “special military operation” in Ukraine (SWO). Putin firmly emphasized that Russia wants peace, development, and freedom for all, but once again “a real war has been unleashed against us” – just like during WWO. He announced that Russia “will protect the inhabitants of Donbas and ensure its security.” At the same time, he accused the West of aggressive nationalism, Russophobia, Nazism (“creating a cult of Nazis”), ingratitude, cynicism, and of wanting to destroy international law and the international security system. Meanwhile, Russia sees no enemies in other nations, it is only a victim of the conspiracy and revanchism of “globalist Western forces.” The president also stated that Ukrainians were held hostage by a “criminal regime” that came to power in a coup d’état inspired by the West. He considered as “heroes” not only the soldiers from the WWO period (whose memory is maligned in the West) but also those who took part in the SWO.

**The reactions of the world.** Both the Ukrainian authorities and many Western leaders and politicians, including from the United States, Great Britain, Poland, and Germany, made reference to the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, and above all to Putin’s words. In their opinion, the goal of the Russian president was to intimidate the West and discourage support for Ukraine. However, Western politicians have announced that the international community will make joint efforts “for as long as it takes” to stop Russian aggression against Ukraine, described by them as “madness”. It was emphasized that the international security of the “civilized world” also depends on it.

At the same time, on May 9, the United States announced a new military aid package worth 1.2 billion USD, enabling the production or transfer of weapons to Ukraine, and the lower house of the French parliament, the National Assembly, adopted a resolution recognizing the Wagner Group as a terrorist organization. On the same day, a summit of a coalition of states supporting the creation of an international tribunal to try Russian war crimes was held. During the meeting, it was stressed that Russia should be punished for breaking “international law and all principles and values.”

**Conclusions:** Given the relatively modest nature of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, it should be assumed that the war against Ukraine is a significant burden for the Russian armed forces. This applies both to the equipment (no air force, tanks, or artillery at the parade) and the personnel – 90% of the Russian land forces are engaged in Ukraine, hence the need to use cadets to participate in the parade. It is significant that on May 9, as the Ukrainian side feared, there were no intensified, demonstrative Russian attacks, either on the front line or with the use of rockets and drones.

At the same time, the “Immortal Regiment” campaign, which has been accompanying the Victory Day celebrations for years, was cancelled in Russia (limited to the Internet only). It is possible that this was done to

stop people from bringing photos of their loved ones who died in Ukraine – which could cast doubt on official statistics that underestimate Russian losses.

It is also unlikely that Russia deliberately limited the scale of the celebrations to mislead the opponent about its own weakness, as pro-Russian sources suggest. Victory Day is too important for Russians. It must, therefore, be assumed that the modest celebrations were forced by circumstances, i.e., the serious situation at the front, even if the Russian authorities were aware that it would be a blow to their image.

However, it should also be emphasized that Russian propaganda used and still uses the highly politicized myth of the Great Patriotic War to justify this aggression against Ukraine, especially in the face of the increasing number of unexplained fires, explosions, etc. in Russia itself (in this context, it must be assumed that the alleged drone attack on the Kremlin a few days before May 9 was probably a Russian provocation).

Additionally, the WWO was de facto equated with the SWO, emphasizing that the SWO is now the most important for the state and the nation – the veterans of both conflicts are equally important and the fight is currently taking place with the same enemy, i.e., the “Nazis”.

This kind of harsh rhetoric, especially in Putin’s speech, is on the one hand intended to create an enemy threatening Russia, i.e., the “fascist West”, and on the other hand, intended to ensure that Russia is strong and not afraid of war. It is also a message that Russia is preparing for a long war – which has allegedly been launched against it. Therefore, the themes from the speech were immediately picked up by the propaganda apparatus. For some time now, the Russian authorities have been mobilizing society for a long war, who, although passive and intimidated, mostly support the actions of the Kremlin. Comparisons with the WWO are intended to consolidate this support and prepare the Russians for sacrifices and efforts, even if there are no prospects and no guarantees of quick success.

Nevertheless, the reaction from both Ukraine and the West indicates that threats from Russia are now much less important, and it is unlikely that Putin will be able to achieve any foreign policy goals through rhetoric alone. The problem of Russian-Belarusian relations is a separate issue. Lukashenka came to Moscow despite his poor health, did not participate in the entire program, and quickly returned to Minsk. During the ceremony, he sat far from Putin, and in the official report, he was not shown even once. This may indicate a more serious change in Lukashenka’s relations with Putin.