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STRATEGIC CONSEQUENCES OF 'MEMORY WARS' IN EASTERN EUROPE



We are living in an age of small narratives. This is an era when storytelling reigns, a narrative fashion where a successful metaphor or an emotionally strong statement attracts more attention than the historical truth. One story is trending this season and another will be in the headlines the next. This creates niches for regulatory activity or even historical entrepreneurship – a process where an active narrator can plant new social norms in society.

There are several reasons behind the ongoing international friction regarding the memory of the Second World War. First of all, the current political era is significantly different from the period of WWII. We are only 19 years away from 2039, while 1939 was 81 years ago, not far off a century. Given the accelerating pace of global change, these are two different historical eras. One hundred years ago, people rarely gave a thought to the Napoleonic wars because they had enough on their day-to-day calendars.

The second reason is the length of a political cycle. It is always shorter in the West and longer in Russia. This inconsistency generates a gap between major historical milestones in Russia and Western countries, and accordingly, a long and a short historical memory is formed.

And, of course, the difference between the parties' strategic goals also plays a role. Each of them instrumentalizes the memory of the war in its own way.

For Russia, the memory of the Great Patriotic War is a civil religion, so any lack of recognition of our leading role in defeating Fascism is regarded as blasphemy. Russia's strategic task in the development of its own narrative is to restore mutual understanding with its allies in the anti-Hitler coalition. The basis to underlie this understanding should

be common suffering as well as strategic realism in assessing the international situation. But the problem is that the casualties suffered by the allies in the war vary greatly. While the Soviet Union lost about 27 million people, the United States, Great Britain and France put together lost less than 1.5 million.

For the current governments of Poland, the Baltic states or Ukraine, WWII was but one episode of their fight for national independence. At the same time, those countries' current strategic goal is to distance themselves from Russia and receive support from leading Western countries. So within the framework of the Eastern European countries' dominant narrative, their national heroes' cooperation with the Nazis and their assistance in the extermination of Eastern European Jews becomes somewhat downplayed.

For the West, the Holocaust is central to their narrative of war, while their strategic task is preservation of internal unity. The West is overly heterogeneous, and to maintain unity, the leading countries have to turn a blind eye to the historical misconduct of their Eastern European allies. The Soviet Union actually did the same, letting off Hungary's and Poland's cooperation with the Nazis or the division of Czechoslovakia, for the sake of preserving the unity in the eastern camp.

Speaking about the future, there are perhaps three different scenarios for the development of the situation.

The first scenario involves the leading Western countries' return to strategic thinking and seeing advantages in cooperating with Russia. In this scenario, Western Europe gets fed up with the Eastern European narrative, and the region becomes political ballast. This scenario will only be possible in the event of an even deeper erosion of the unity in the West and the emergence of a new geopolitical challenge that would require a deeper partnership with Russia.

In the second scenario, the Polish-Baltic narrative becomes mainstream for the West. This is what is happening at the moment, for populist reasons or under its own momentum, but it will become truly significant only if the entire West ventures to scale its conflict with Russia exponentially.

And finally, the third scenario involves the noise-masking of the WWII narrative by layers of current events. As a result, the historical truth would become relative or would be replaced by a dictate of values.

This is the process we are witnessing right now. It is unfolding as a result of erosion of the unity in the West, its disorganization in the absence of a pronounced leadership. The European Parliament resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe is only one of its signs. In fact, the West now finds common ground only in indulging the whims of its 'younger' members – something that is to a greater extent a consequence of strategic confusion than strategic desire to exacerbate the conflict with Russia.

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