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ABSTRACT

Honing in on how citizens in the former Soviet Union find themselves in an information competition over their own past, this paper explores whether and why ordinary people's perceptions of historical events and figures in their country's past are in line with a Russian-promoted narrative that highlights World War II – known as the "Great Patriotic War" in Russia and some former Soviet states – as a glorious Soviet victory and Stalin as a great leader. We draw on comparative survey data across six states and one *de facto* state in 2019–2020 to examine whether geopolitical or cultural proximity to Russia is associated with a more favourable view on a Russian-promoted narrative about the past. We find that closer geopolitical proximity to Russia is associated with perceiving the past in line with the Russian-promoted narrative, though the findings are less consistent when it comes to measures for closer cultural proximity.

Introduction

People of my age and I believe it is important that our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren understand the torment and hardships their ancestors had to endure. They need to understand how their ancestors managed to persevere and win. Where did their sheer, unbending willpower that amazed and fascinated the whole world come from? Sure, they were defending their home, their children, loved ones and families. However, what they shared was the love for their homeland, their Motherland. That deep-seated, intimate feeling is fully reflected in the very essence of our nation and became one of the decisive factors in its heroic, sacrificial fight against the Nazis.

—President Vladimir Putin on the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II (Putin 2020)

Central to state- and nation-building efforts is the creation of narratives about a shared past – often focused on victorious battles, national heroes (or villains), or collective traumas. This vision of the past is transmitted through socialization processes, manifest in national anthems, historical monuments, days of commemoration, school curricula, and the content of television programs and social media outlets. It is also fostered – and manipulated – through political rhetoric. While much of the effort of fostering collective identities around memories of the past happens within the boundaries of the state, they also transcend state boundaries. President Vladimir Putin and the Russian government have used World War II – known as the "Great Patriotic War" in Russia and many former Soviet states – as a way to forge a collective identity around common sacrifices and shared values both within Russia *and* across the former Soviet countries in Russia's "near abroad." Political elites in some of the former Soviet states see these efforts as threatening to their hard-won national identity and

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have sought to distance themselves from the Russian-promoted narrative about the past – which may have become ever more salient since Putin invoked the Soviet fight against Nazism in World War II when justifying the invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

As a result of this elite-level information competition, many citizens in the post-Soviet space find themselves caught in an information competition over memories of their past (e.g. Torbakov 2011; Laruelle 2012; Siddi 2017; McGlynn 2021). Research in this vein has focused on the elite-level framing of the past, which sheds light on national variation, but we know less about the types of individuals in Russia's "near abroad" with whom the Russian-promoted narrative resonates. As such, the analytical and empirical focus in our study is individual-level variation among ordinary people. Why do some citizens in the post-Soviet space view the "Great Patriotic War" as a glorious Soviet victory and Stalin as a great leader, while others do not?

We argue that variation in how people in the "near abroad" embrace the Russian-promoted narrative of the past is associated with their geopolitical and cultural proximity to Russia, in particular whether they see themselves as part of a Russian civilization, consider the future of their country as oriented towards Russia, or use Russian language in their everyday lives. We draw on comparative survey data across six states and one *de facto* state in Russia's near abroad (Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh) to explore people's perceptions of historical events and figures. We focus on whether individuals' proximity to Russia – be that in the form of geopolitical or cultural orientation – is associated with a more favorable view on a Russian-promoted narrative about historical events and figures, while taking into account how their views of the past may be shaped by age, gender, socioeconomic background, and (il)liberal values. We find that people who are geopolitically oriented towards Russia are more likely to perceive their past in line with the Russian-promoted narrative, though the findings are less consistent when it comes to measures for closer cultural proximity.

Memory wars and memory diplomacy in the post-Soviet space

Central to the formation of nations are narratives and symbols aimed at fostering a sense of belonging (e.g. Anderson 1983). Collective memories of historical events related to a nation's myth of origin, its dark ages, its golden age, or its struggles are central to the "master narratives" (Coakley 2004; Hammack 2011) that guide people in telling their community's history and serve as a template for future action (Hirst, Yamashiro, and Coman 2018). It is telling which historical moments are remembered and commemorated through national holidays, parades, ceremonies, and monuments, as well as which ones are not. Part of constructing a national identity is often to emphasize "glorious" moments of the past while forgetting guilt-laden ones (e.g. Torbakov 2011), and to highlight national heroes and villains (e.g. Coakley 2004; Gugushvili, Kabachnik, and Kirvalidze 2017). Narratives about the past are transmitted both in people's private sphere, through socialization in the family, and in the public sphere, through literature, arts, media, official commemorations, and formal education. And, not least, political elites instrumentally use historical memories and myths for present-day political ends (e.g. Kaufman 2001; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), which the masses "may accept, reject, or reshape" (Smith 2009, 31). In Ukraine, for example, both political elites with geopolitical leanings towards Russia and those oriented towards the West have used historical memories to signal their present-day and future orientation, to the extent that "the issue of historical memories has been traditionally far more controversial than social, economic and foreign policy issues, and is often used to mobilise the electorate" (Hosaka 2019, 553). For years, the Russian government has evoked history to justify present actions, which, if it had not been before, became clear to audiences beyond the academy and the region on 21 February 2022, just days prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Putin presented a narrative of "half-truths, fantasies, and lies of omission" about Russia and Ukraine's shared past, one in which Stalin is presented as "the wise Russian father handing our land to his graceful subjects" (Andrejsons 2022).

Historical memories also travel – and are enabled to do so via media, films, arts, and literature – across the borders of the nation state (cf. Erll 2011). Since the mid-2000s, the Russian government has sought to enhance its power not just domestically but also in its "near abroad" by promoting *Russkiy mir*, an image of a common "Russian world" (e.g. Hill 2006; Toal 2017). It does so through a range of soft power mechanisms, including pro-Russian social media, television programs, films, the church, and civil society organizations (e.g. Chapman and Gerber 2019; Becker 2020).[1] Central to these efforts is the fostering of a shared collective memory of the past across the post-Soviet space, much of which is centered around the "Great Patriotic War." For the Russian government, the memory of the Red Army's victory in the "Great Patriotic War" has been a highly "politically usable" element of the past, used to foster a common identity around a shared and glorious history (e.g. Tumarkin 2003; Fedor 2017; Edwards 2022), both within Russia and in the former Soviet states.[2] Malinova (2017) maintains that, "[t]he notions of a 'joint victory' and 'shared war memory' serve to legitimize the Eurasian integration projects in the post-Soviet space, now claimed as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence." Related to the myth of the "Great Patriotic War," the glorification of Stalin has become part of the post-Soviet Russian historical narrative (e.g. Khapaeva 2016; Hartog 2019; Krastev and Benardo 2020), and neither the myth of the "Great Patriotic War" nor Stalin as a strong leader should be questioned.[3]

The Russian government's efforts can be considered "memory diplomacy," which McGlynn (2021) defines as "a form of public diplomacy in which states or political groups try to improve relations and reputations by exporting commemorative practices and historical narratives and by allying their own historical narratives with those of another country." These efforts can either help foster agreed narratives of the past – and engender "memory alliances" as in the case of Russia and Serbia (McGlynn and Jelena 2022) – *or* they can fuel or foster "memory wars" (cf. Torbakov 2011). Indeed, some political elites in the former Soviet states have considered the Russian government's efforts as threatening to their hard-won independence and national identity and have sought to distance themselves – and their countries' futures – away from Russia (e.g. Feklyunina 2016; Rotaru 2018). In doing so, nationalist elites, too, have used history as "a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012, 12; Halbwachs 1980). Indeed, alongside narratives related to the continuity of the nation and achievement of past and present independence (e.g. Laruelle 2021), anti-Soviet narratives of World War II and accounts of the Soviet regime's violence and repression have been central to several of the post-Soviet nation-building projects (e.g. Torbakov 2011; Yurchuk 2017). In Ukraine, for example, this has been particularly prominent since Euromaidan, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the emergence of the Russian-backed separatist war in the Donbas in 2014. As noted by Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019, 705), "[w]hat was happening on Maidan included taking revenge on and trampling over old symbols of Soviet domination." In April 2015, the Ukraine parliament passed four de-communization laws that included a law on the condemnation of both Communist and Nazi regimes and prohibited their symbols, aimed at clearly reorienting the country's history away from a common Soviet past (e.g. Shevel 2016; Klymenko 2020). As scholars of memory and mnemonic narratives have pointed out, it is not a given that memories that transcend borders will change or take the place of national memory frameworks (e.g. Erll 2011; Wüstenberg 2019; Törnquist-Plewa 2021).[4] As argued by McGlynn and Jelena (2022, 11), central to understanding the emergence of the "memory alliance" between Russia and Serbia are the incentives for Serbian elites to embrace the "exported" Russian narrative, as it gave them "a chance to boost the significance of Serbia and its history in European and global history and politics, as well as strengthen relations with a powerful ally." Conversely, in Ukraine, the Russian-promoted narrative was incompatible with the domestic identity discourse since independence (Feklyunina 2016).

In this landscape of "memory diplomacy" and "memory wars," how do *ordinary people* view past historical events? While, as the literatures discussed above show, there is a significant body of work theorizing and documenting the elite-level dynamics of the politics of memory in the former Soviet space and beyond, which helps us understand national variation, we know less about individual-level variation among ordinary people, which is our focus. There is some evidence suggesting that

the Russian government's narrative resonates. For example, survey evidence has shown high support for Stalin across Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (de Waal 2013). Although there is variation within these countries' populations, with support for Stalin stronger among older respondents in rural areas than among younger and urban respondents (see also Gugushvili and Kabachnik's 2015 work, focusing on Georgia). And, indeed, citizens do not fully agree with the Russian-promoted narrative. Evidence from Ukraine suggests that citizens display "hybrid" memories (Hosaka 2019; see also Gugushvili, Kabachnik, and Kirvalidze 2017 on Georgia). These hybrid memories encompass "both nostalgia for the Soviet Union and positive acceptance of Ukrainian independence" (Hosaka 2019, 552).

Building on research on these post-Soviet historical tensions, we examine the degree to which ordinary people's geopolitical and cultural proximity to Russia – when accounting for alternative explanations – is associated with their understanding of their own past. To do so, we draw on novel survey data across six states and one *de facto* state in Russia's "near abroad," bringing a unique comparative perspective to the debates on memory politics in the former Soviet space.

Argument: proximity to Russia

A useful concept for studying how memories that travel across national borders and among individuals (or not) is "resonance." As sociologists have argued, for resonance to occur, the framing – be that of an event or, as in our study, historical memory – needs to be empirically credible and salient to the target population, in the sense that it is relevant to and congruent with their beliefs, experiences, and culture (e.g. Benford and Snow 2000). While we recognize that age, gender, socioeconomic background, and (il)liberal values are likely to shape how people view their past and whether certain historical memories resonate with them (detailed below), our argument hones in on how individuals' proximity to, or orientation toward, Russia engenders resonance with a certain narrative of the past.

Our central intuition is that a sense of affinity with the "Russian world," geopolitically or culturally, is associated with the embrace of a Russian narrative of the past among individuals in Russia's "near abroad." This is consistent with geographers' emphasis that proximity is not only about "space" and Euclidean distance but also about "place," and our focus is on the latter. As noted by O'Loughlin (2000), "[s]pace is associated with abstractness, quantitative modeling (the spatial approach), freedom, movement, formality and impersonal location; while place is associated with familiarity, security, home, intimacy, historical tradition, social-cultural relations, context, and geo-sociological effects" (see also O'Loughlin 2016). Thus, studying proximity in foreign policy can go beyond physical distance and can concern attitudes as well (e.g. Henrikson 2002). It is about whether people see themselves as close to Russia geopolitically and/or culturally and whether they see the future of their country as oriented towards Russia. We can think of this affinity as a sense of nostalgia about the glorious Soviet past being part of the geopolitical and cultural context in which individuals find themselves. Boym (2007) refers to this kind of nostalgia as restorative nostalgia, which "stresses nostos (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" and in times of change can be a defense mechanism offering continuity.

The logic is consistent with research on dissonance, resonance, and motivated reasoning in social psychology. Because memory plays such an important social role in defining who we are, we may selectively remember certain events and not others, going as far as to "invent" the past to fit present beliefs (e.g. Fentriss and Wickham 1992; Baumeister and Hastings 1997; Doosje et al. 1998; Doosje and Branscombe 2003; Misztal 2003; Dresler-Hawke 2005; Sahdra and Ross 2007; Kahan 2013). Research shows that people process information about the world in ways that preserve their pre-existing attitudes or allow them to arrive at self-serving conclusions based on their present beliefs or identities (Kunda 1990). In essence – and, again, central here is resonance – individuals seek out or emphasize information that resonates with their beliefs or, conversely, ignore information that is contrary to their beliefs in order to prevent cognitive dissonance, a discomfort that one feels when confronted with ideas that are contradictory.[5]

None of this is to say that people lie about their past, but instead that they present and value selective aspects of their history, often subconsciously. It is people's complex and multifaceted pasts that allow them to "muster up the evidence necessary to support" their conclusions (Kunda 1990, 483). This literature suggests that the memory search and belief construction of such "motivated reasoning" allows people to arrive at conclusions that fit their current beliefs. Given motivated reasoning, people may emphasize or downplay certain events of the past, based on how these events resonate with their beliefs today. As such, our first proposition is:

Proposition 1: People's present-day geopolitical and cultural proximity to Russia fosters consistency with a Russian-promoted narrative that glorifies the Soviet past.

Alternative explanations

There are several alternative – or complementary – explanations to consider. Importantly, age is likely to influence people's views of the past. We would anticipate that older people who were socialized during the Soviet Union are more likely to view as central the historical events and figures promoted by Russia as part of the "glorious past" (cf. Munro 2006). While Victory Day was celebrated in the immediate post-World War II years – though not as a state holiday from 1947 to 1965 – the cult of the "Great Patriotic War" began to take form in the Khrushchev years, after his 1956 "Secret Speech" (Tumarkin 2003). From the mid-1960s, this cult, along with "re-Stalinization," became central to "free society from its collective responsibility of the Stalinist terror and Soviet repressions" (Khapaeva 2016, 65). Socialization of the young through "military-patriotic upbringing" was central to the cult of the "Great Patriotic War" (Tumarkin 2003, 600). This sentiment changed, though did not disappear, with perestroika in the 1980s. Thus, those who were late adolescents or early adults – the years most critical for historical memory and identity formation (cf. Schuman and Scott 1989) – during the time of Soviet Union, certainly until it started opening up in the 1980s, may be more likely to view the past along the lines of the "Soviet Golden Age." That said, despite being socialized into the glorified view of the Soviet regime and Stalin, respondents who lived through World War II and the Soviet era may have a nuanced view of the gloriousness of war and of Stalin based on their lived experiences of that regime (Mohr and Brown 2021). We nonetheless expect them to view the Soviet past with a certain level of nostalgia.

Proposition 2: Older people who lived during the Soviet Union are more likely than younger people from late-Soviet and post-Soviet birth cohorts to view the past in line with a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past.

Education and income may also play a role, as demonstrated by Gugushvili and Kabachnik (2015) in their study of Georgia (see also Mohr and Brown 2021). People with higher levels of education and income are more likely than those with less education and income to have more critical attitudes and be skeptical of an authoritarian past. They may also have been more exposed to a diverse set of views about the past – through their schooling, social circles, and perhaps travels. As such, we expect people with higher education and income to be more skeptical of a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past or, at least, hold more hybrid views than people with less education and income.[6]

Proposition 3: People with lower education and lower income are more likely than people with higher education and higher income to view the past in line with a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past.

It is also plausible that men and women view their country's past differently, though few people tackle this topic (but see Gugushvili and Kabachnik 2015). As women have traditionally lived more of their lives in the private sphere than in the public sphere – which has been dominated by men –

women may give more emphasis on home life in their life histories (Fentress and Wickham 1992, 141). Women typically hold most responsibility for childrearing, which comes with the responsibility of "encapsulating (sanitizing, moralizing) accounts of the experienced past for young children, as part of the process of socialization" (Fentress and Wickham 1992, 142). In so doing, they tend to emphasize relationships and situations rather than specific events. Research has also suggested that while women may be less interested in national and international politics, they are more interested than men in local politics (Coffé 2013). But when confronted with specific historical events about the past – in our study, the Soviet past – are women and men likely to have different attitudes?

The Soviet past could be viewed favorably by women, as it was a system with free education, healthcare, and housing (Mohr and Brown 2021), as well as norms of gender equality enabling labor force participation, though not necessarily participation in political life (Lapidus 1975). Studies have suggested that women are more compassionate in the sense that they are more equality-oriented than men (cf. Pratto et al. 1994 on social-dominance orientation). For example, women are more likely to favor government involvement in terms of social welfare spending, which is echoed in Carnaghan and Bahry's (1990) study of Soviet emigrant women. As such, women may look favorably upon narratives of the past that remind them of the glorious days of the Soviet Union. Yet women's more equality-oriented proclivity could also make them less likely than men to view the Soviet past favorably. Indeed, the everyday realities of the totalitarian Soviet state – repression and fear, lack of freedom, food shortages and queues, and an unequal division of labor – may negate any positive views. So may memories of World War II, which are central to the Russian-promoted narrative about the Soviet past. Indeed, public opinion studies in the United States have found that since World War II, women have been more opposed to war and the use of force than men (e.g. Conover and Sapiro 1993; Eichenberg 2016), which can be attributed to different causal mechanisms, including socialization processes shaping views on violence, maternal instincts, feminism, or biological differences. Similarly, Carnaghan and Bahry's (1990) study of attitudes among Soviet emigrant women shows that they were less likely than their male counterparts to support defense spending (though there were no gender differences when it came to questions about the Soviet state's use of force, including in World War II). Seeing that the Russian-promoted narrative about the Soviet past emphasizes Stalin and World War II, we would expect, on balance, that women are more skeptical than men of this narrative about the past.

Proposition 4: Women are less likely than men to view the past in line with a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past.

Finally, people's ideological leanings are also likely to be associated with their view of historical events. For example, Gugushvili and Kabachnik (2015), in their study of attitudes toward Stalin in Georgia, suggest that a favorable view of Stalin is part of a broader belief system. Certain ideological beliefs, such as a pro-democracy and pro–market economy attitudes, are incompatible with the authoritarianism inherent in Stalinism. Similarly, research has found that a key explanation for individual-level support for Russia among populations in Central and Eastern Europe is political attitudes associated with the far right (such as anti-liberalism and social conservatism), though there is variation across countries that may depend on each country's historical relations with Russia. For example, Batta and Ishiyama (2020, 2) argue that, "[f]rom this perspective, the attractiveness of Russia is largely motivated by the idealization of Putin and Putinism as a defender against corrupt Western values and ethno-nationalism, and an upholder of tradition." Thus, to the degree that certain historical events are associated with a pro-Russian narrative, we would expect:

Proposition 5: People who have democratic and liberal political attitudes are less likely to view the past consistent with a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past.

Research design

The empirics in our paper are based on seven nationally representative surveys conducted from December 2019 to March 2020. The same questions were asked in Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine.[7] The surveys give us a rare insight into people's views of their past across these six states and one *de facto* state in which political elites are more or less aligned with Russia. For instance, while Georgia has sought to align geopolitically with the West, Belarus remains aligned with Russia – and increasingly so since the emergence of anti-government protest movement in 2020 and ensuing repression. And while people in these places share the experience of having been part of the Soviet Union, their experiences of the union are not the same and their histories since its collapse vary significantly.

The surveys were conducted face-to-face on people's doorsteps in the language in which enumerators were greeted, usually in a national language or Russian.[8] Respondents were assured that their answers were anonymous and confidential, and they could opt to end the survey at any point.[9] The sample is nationally representative within each state or *de facto* state (in Ukraine, excluding the areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government in the Donbas since 2014 and Crimea). In total, the sample size is 9,207 (1,183 respondents in Armenia, 1,210 in Belarus, 1,579 in Georgia, 1,177 in Kazakhstan, 1,026 in Moldova, 820 in Nagorno-Karabakh, and 2,212 in Ukraine). The surveys were fielded and supervised by experienced and reputable survey firms: the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology and the Caucasus Research Resource Centers in Tbilisi, Georgia. The descriptive statistics and analyses below are based on population-weighted data, to ensure that the samples are nationally representative.

Dependent variables: perceptions of historical events and figures

The outcome variables of interests in our study are people's perceptions of historical events and figures. In particular, we aim to capture people's views on the events and figures that resonate with the Russian-promoted narrative about the shared Soviet past. To do so, we construct two indices indicating alignment or not with a pro-Russian narrative.

The first index aims to capture a Russian-promoted narrative. Given the centrality of both the "Great Patriotic War" and Stalin in the Russian government's narrative about the shared past across the post-Soviet space, we use two statements, to which respondents could disagree or agree on a three-point ordinal scale – (1) disagree, (2) neither agree nor disagree, and (3) agree: "The Great Patriotic War was a glorious victory for the Soviet Union, and no one should criticize it" and "Stalin was a strong leader who brought victory and glory to the Soviet Union." A majority agree to both statements – 80% agree that the "Great Patriotic War" was a glorious victory and 60% that Stalin was a strong leader. The index is the average response to both questions.[10] In Appendix Table A1 we show the findings for the two individual components of each index.

Our argument and alternative explanations hone in on people's views of past events that are central to the Russian-promoted narrative; hence, empirically, that is our focus. We also examine if views of the past more in line with a national-centric narrative serve as the "flipside" to embracing the Russian-promoted narrative. Indeed, in reaction to the Russian government's narrative, political elites in some of the former Soviet states see these efforts as threatening to their hard-won independence and have distanced themselves from Russia, emphasizing anti-Soviet narratives and looked to past periods of independence. To capture these sentiments, we construct an index based on the following two statements, to which people can disagree or agree on a three-point scale: "Breaking away from the USSR was a positive development for our country" and "The formation of [Ukrainian National Republic] in [1917] was an important and positive step in shaping [Ukraine] today," with appropriate inserts in the brackets for the relevant states and *de facto* state, as indicated in Table 1. Just under 42% agree that breaking away from the USSR was a positive development, and 44% percent agree that their respective historic republic was a positive step in shaping their country.

Again, the index is the average response to both questions. Figure 1 shows that respondents who agree with a Russian-promoted narrative tend to disagree with a national narrative, but also that many respondents agree with both narratives. Table 2 shows variation in our dependent variables across the states and *de facto* state surveyed.

Key independent variables: proximity to Russia

We operationalize proximity to Russia in terms of geopolitical and cultural closeness, emphasizing that, conceptually, proximity, or distance, is about place, not just space and includes the study of attitudes (O'Loughlin 2000, 2016). Thus, to assess geopolitical proximity, we use two survey questions that get at respondents' sense of how closely they see themselves oriented towards Russia geopolitically. Our primary measure is a question that asks respondents to indicate where they think their country *should* be placed on a scale between the West (0 on the scale) and Russia (10 on the scale). Bar plots in Figure 2 show the distribution per state/*de facto* state. This question captures aspirational attitudes as to where people see their country, geopolitically, which is well suited to capture whether individuals' directional goals shape their memory search and belief constructions (cf. Kunda 1990). As a second measure, we use a question that asks people to agree or disagree to the following statement on a five-point scale: "I see myself as a person of Russian civilization," which we use to create a dummy variable. Respondents who "strongly agree" or "agree" with this statement (37%) are given a value of 1.[11] This is a broader question than the geopolitical scale, hence the former is our primary measure, but capturing geopolitical orientations by asking about belonging to a civilization speaks to political discourse in the former Soviet space. For instance, many countries that joined NATO in 2004 framed tensions with Russia as a civilizational struggle (Toal 2017, 7).

Cultural proximity is about orientation based on cultural similarity. It is largely based on language and implies that people turn towards media in their own language and, more broadly, from their own culture (e.g. Straubhaar 1991; La Pastina and Straubhaar 2005; Ksiazek and Webster 2008). A conventional measure is common language, so for our primary measure, we rely on respondents' use of the Russian language in their everyday lives. We use an open-ended question about language used at home ("What language do you usually speak at home? If more than one, name one of them, that which you use most"). This is not meant to capture identity but captures proximity in the form of "language embeddedness," which concerns how individuals' social environment has implications for their beliefs. Focusing on Ukraine, Onuch and Hale (2018) suggest – though find only limited support for – that, "since language structures thinking to a significant degree, embeddedness in Ukrainian-language settings is also likely to foster adherence to any belief structures or behavioral norms that may be intrinsic to the Ukrainian language itself and thus cognitively activated when using the language" (2018, 90). Thus, it is plausible that using Russian at home means that individuals are more likely to be embedded in Russian belief structures.[12] As a second measure, we use a question about foreign media consumption in Russian: "How much of the following media (TV, radio, newspapers, internet) do you watch, read or listen to?" We are interested in respondent answers to the option "foreign media in Russian," which has responses on a four-point scale from "never" to "always". Just

Table 1. Site-specific survey questions about past periods of Independence.

The formation of	the Independent Republic of Armenia	*In*	1918	*was an important and positive step in shaping*	Armenia	*today.*
	the Belarusian People's Republic		1918		Belarus	
	the Democratic Republic of Georgia		1918		Georgia	
	the Alash Autonomy		1917		Kazakhstan	
	the Moldavian Democratic Republic		1917		Moldova	
	the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast		1923		Nagorno Karabakh	
	the Ukrainian National Republic		1917		Ukraine	
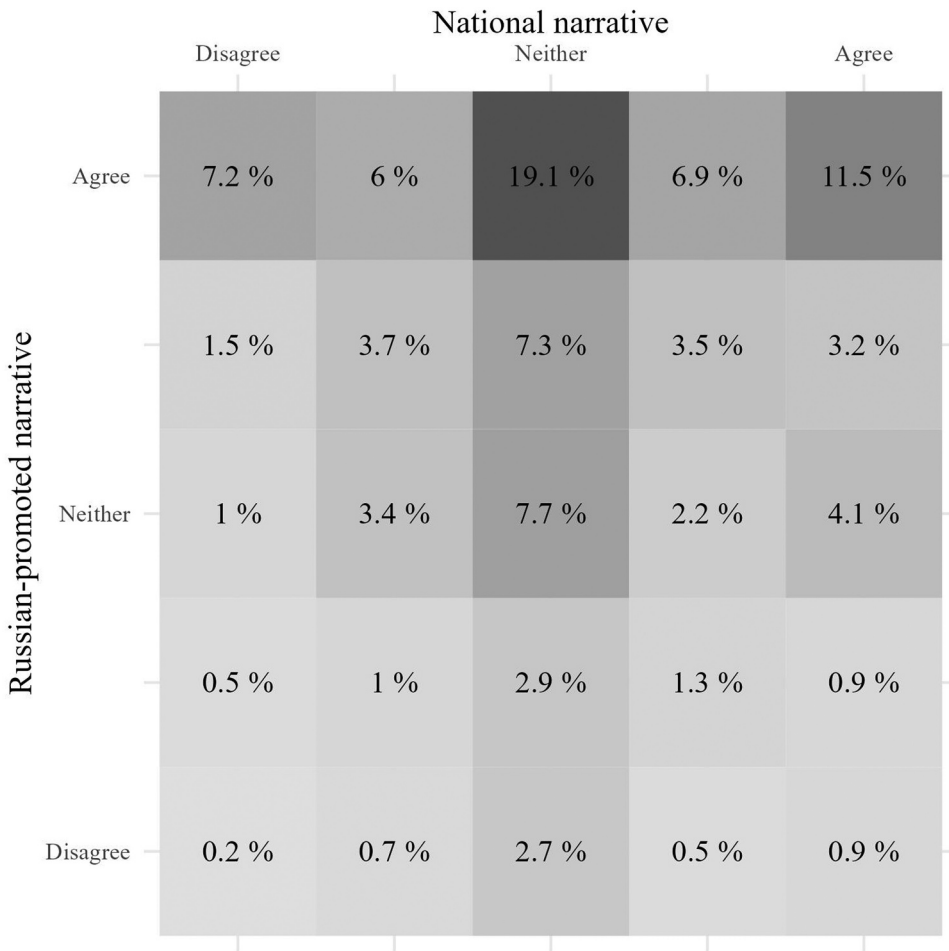
Figure 1. A crosstabulation of the indices for respondents' views of the national narrative (x-axis) and the Russian-promoted narrative (y-axis) shows that some agree with both narratives. Because the "narratives" are constructed as indices of two variables each, the graph shows the 1–3 scale in 0.5 decimals.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the indices of the dependent variables (1–3 scales) by survey site.

Survey site	Russian-promoted narrative		National narrative	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Armenia	2.60	0.02	2.60	0.02
Belarus	2.41	0.04	1.97	0.03
Georgia	2.76	0.02	2.65	0.03
Kazakhstan	2.63	0.05	1.88	0.03
Moldova	2.54	0.06	2.20	0.05
NKR	2.67	0.05	2.27	0.04
Ukraine	2.25	0.03	2.33	0.03

under 46% of respondents report speaking Russian at home, while 21% often or always watch foreign media in Russian.[13]

We control for Euclidian distance, i.e. space, based on respondents' distance to the closest Russian border. We code a binary variable that takes 1 if respondents live within 50 kilometers from the Russian border and 0 if not.[14]
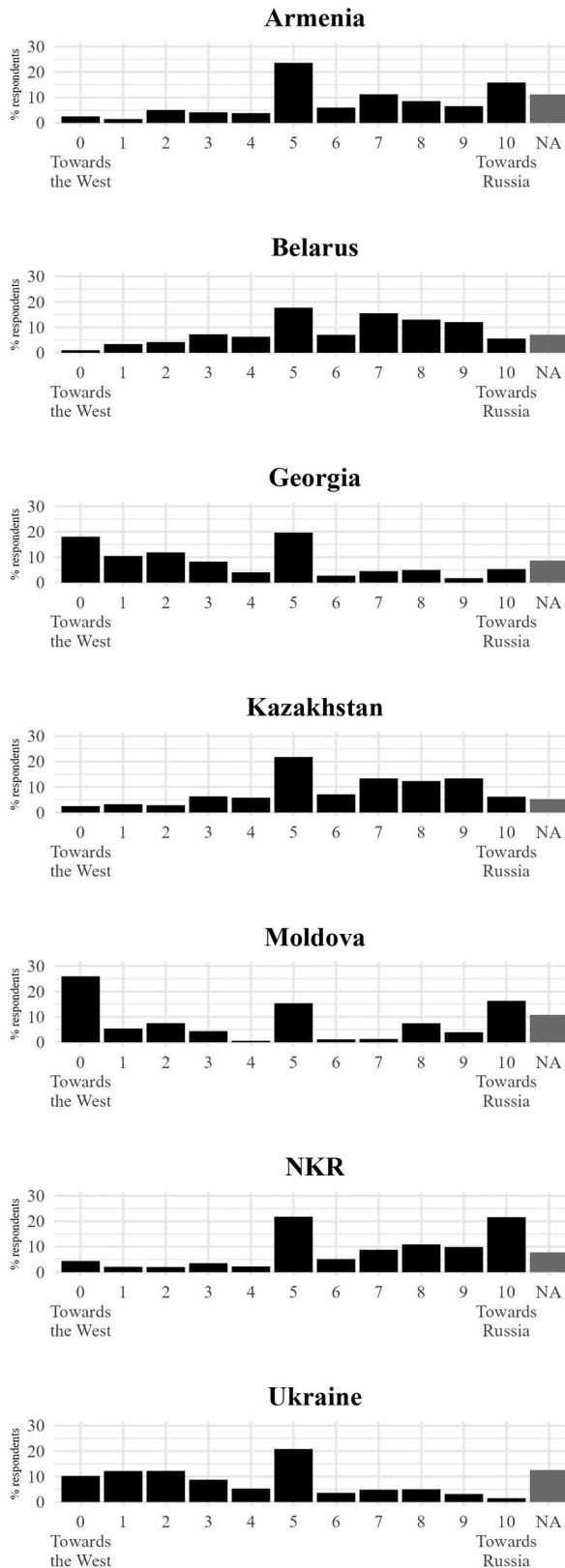
Figure 2. Respondents situating their country on a scale between Russia and the West, in response to "Where do you think your country should be placed on this scale?" Those who did not know or refused to answer are reported as "NA.".

Independent variables in alternative explanations

To assess the role of age, we include a measure of the respondents' self-reported age.[15] To assess socio-demographics, we rely on survey questions that asks people about their level of household income[16] and education, both continuous variables.[17] For gender, we include a binary variable that takes a 1 if the respondent is a woman.

To assess respondents' ideological leaning, we rely on a question that assesses their view on democracy. The question asked, "What political system below do you think is the best one?" The answer options were as follows: (1) "the Soviet system that existed until 1991"; (2) "the current political system of [name of country]"; (3) "democratic political system as in the West"; (4) "the current Russian political system." To test Proposition 5, we created a dummy variable meant to indicate a preference for democratic political systems by coding as 1 anyone who said yes to (3), with all others as 0. Although some of the former Soviet states are also democracies (i.e. we could have included answer option (2) in the coding), we use option (3) as the key indicator as it specifically mentions democracy. Just under 29% of respondents think that the best political system is the democratic political system that exists in the West.[18]

Finally, to assess liberal versus conservative values, we use a question that asked people to agree or disagree (on a three-point scale) to the following two statements: "In a family, the husband should always make the important decisions" and "Marriage should be only between a man and a woman." If, on average, respondents agree with both statements, they are coded as having socially conservative values. This amounts to 68% of respondents.

Empirics

As our dependent variables are average responses to two three-point Likert scales, we run linear regression models. In Table 3 below, we present our main models, which include survey weights, country fixed effects, and robust standard errors.[19] In the appendices, we conduct several robustness checks, as noted in footnotes throughout.

Proximity to Russia

The clearest findings are about *geopolitical proximity* to Russia. Consistent with the expectations in Proposition 1, the findings show that both respondents' preference for their country's geopolitical closeness to Russia and a sense of being part of the Russian civilization are associated with a higher score on the index capturing their view on the Russian-promoted narrative of the past, as measured by questions about the glory of the "Great Patriotic War" and Stalin as a great leader.

The findings also suggest that there is an association between responding that their country should look towards Russia and disagreeing with a national-centric narrative that emphasizes past independence and distances the country from the Soviet past. This does not, however, hold for our second measure for geopolitical proximity, about whether people see themselves as part of the Russian civilization, which has no bearing on people's take on the more national-oriented narrative. Possibly, the geopolitical scale, which is a precise question about geopolitical aspirations, is more likely to trigger motivated reasoning than the broader civilizational question.[20]

The findings are less consistent with Proposition 1 when it comes to *cultural proximity*. Speaking Russian at home, which can capture proximity through language embeddedness, is not associated with agreeing to the Russian-promoted narrative or the more national-centric narrative across the whole sample, though as we discuss below, it does matter in a few of the sites surveyed, including Ukraine. As Appendix Table A1 shows, it is associated with one of the components of our index, namely seeing the "Great Patriotic War" as a glorious victory. Consuming foreign media in Russian is, contrary to our expectations, negatively associated with respondents' agreement with the Russian-

Table 3. Modeling perceptions of the past.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.031***	−0.027***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.145***	−0.064
	(0.034)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.027	−0.014
	(0.041)	(0.041)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.039*	−0.011
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.002*
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.011	0.005
	(0.015)	(0.018)
Education	−0.003	−0.003
	(0.010)	(0.008)
Female	−0.035	0.033
	(0.022)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.144**	0.084*
	(0.048)	(0.038)
Conservative values	0.118**	−0.032
	(0.040)	(0.031)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.138*	−0.050
	(0.065)	(0.051)
Number of observations	6054	5250
R^2	0.167	0.299
AIC	35007.4	29,611.6
RMSE	0.55	0.55

+ $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.
 All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.

oriented narrative, but when we investigate this further, as shown below, a positive association exists only in Armenia and otherwise has little bearing on perceptions across our survey sites.[21]

In sum, in the analysis that pools individuals across six states and one *de facto* state, we find some, though no consistent, evidence that language practices have implications for people's view of the past. Instead, we find that such perceptions are more consistently shaped by the degree to which people's geopolitical attitudes resonate (or not) with a certain view of the past. We can think of a couple of reasons why. First, we conceptualize geopolitical proximity in terms of people's position with respect to questions about geopolitical orientation. Unlike communicative language and media consumption, they may capture respondents' directional goals and thus trigger "selection" of past memories that foster resonance or avoids dissonance – i.e. be more likely to trigger motivated reasoning (cf. Kunda 1990). Indeed, geopolitical proximity directly captures beliefs, whereas (both the concept and measures for) cultural proximity is more indirect. Second, when it comes to the media findings, it is possible that consuming foreign media in Russian is a narrow measure that misses the everyday dynamics of language embeddedness captured by home language[22] – though that, too, does not seem to matter much – and misses how the Russian-promoted narrative can also be promoted through domestic media.

Our argument about proximity is about place rather than space, but we control for Euclidean distance. The main models show that living within 50 kilometers of the Russian border – our measure for Euclidean proximity – is negatively associated with respondents' agreement with the Russian-promoted narrative and has no bearing on their views on the more national-oriented one. Given that the models also include a measure for speaking Russian at home, these results may be driven by non-Russian speaking local minorities in border regions. They could also be driven by strong effects in Georgia and Ukraine, which we explore further below.

Alternative explanations

Turning to the alternative explanations, we find support for Proposition 2, that older respondents are more likely to agree with the Russian-promoted narrative, which emphasizes the glory of the "Great Patriotic War" and Stalin as a great leader, while they are skeptical of the more national-centric narrative. With respect to Proposition 3, education and household income have no bearing on the indices capturing respondents' views of the past. As for Proposition 4, we find no statistically significant relationship between gender and resonance with either a Russian-promoted or national narratives of the past. However, as Appendix Table A1 shows, when examining the components of our indices separately, women are less likely than men to agree that Stalin was a great leader. Preference for a democratic system "as in the West" and social conservative values do generally adhere to the expectations in Proposition 5. As we would expect, preference for democracy "as in the West" does not resonate with the Russian-promoted narrative of the past but does resonate with a more national-centric one, while holding social conservative values is positively correlated with the Russian-promoted narrative glorifying the Soviet past.

Results per survey site

The seven survey sites share a common Soviet past but had different experiences within the Soviet system and have had different relationships with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, in Ukraine and Georgia, political elites have not only actively distanced themselves from Russia, but the countries have also been – and, in the case of Ukraine, at the time of writing, are – engaged in armed conflict with Russia. We would expect that ordinary people's proximity to Russia matters more for their views of past historical events in countries in which these memories are central to present-day political debate and contention.

Figure 3 shows the site-specific results for geopolitical proximity, and Figure 4, for cultural proximity.[23] Consistent with the regression results that pool individuals across all sites, the country-level findings underscore that cultural proximity is less consistently tied to people's perceptions of the past than geopolitical proximity.

In Ukraine, geopolitical proximity has a consistently statistically significant relationship in the expected direction. This is not surprising given how both the country's geopolitical orientation and history has been directed away from Russia, certainly since 2014. Rhetoric vilifying the Soviet past has become a common and dominant national narrative (e.g. Katchanovski 2015; Klymenko 2020). As argued by Feklyunina (2016):

> Russia's soft power vis-à-vis Ukraine in the late 2000s–early 2010s was fundamentally limited because of the ways in which the projected identity of the "Russian world" was based on the markers of the Russian language, Russian culture and the common glorious past that constructed a Russia-centric community. Despite the intensification of Russia's public diplomacy, these efforts could not transform the psychological milieu in Moscow's relationship with Kyiv because the projected identity was inherently incompatible with one of the main identity discourses in Ukraine and was only partially compatible with another.
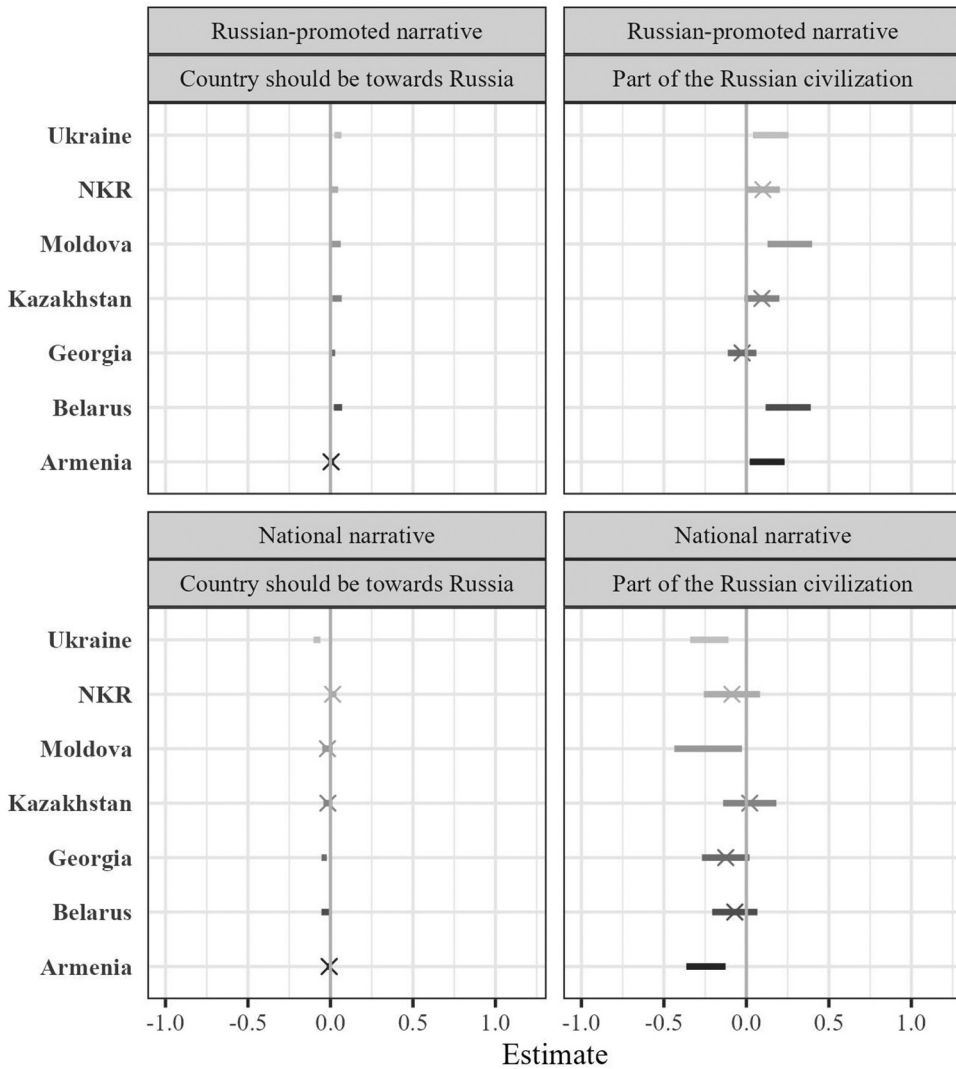
Figure 3. Results for geopolitical proximity shown as coefficient plots. The first row shows the association with the Russian-promoted narrative; the second row, the more nationalist narrative. The left column shows the results for whether respondents think their country should be oriented towards Russia, while the right shows the same for the variable capturing whether respondents see themselves as "part of the Russian civilization." Coefficient points are shown as crosses if they are not statistically distinguishable from zero at 95% confidence levels.

Thus, the Russian-promoted narrative is more likely to resonate among those who already are Russian-oriented. These are people who, on the flipside, are less likely to embrace the national-centric narrative.

There is a debate about how useful language is for explaining people's policy and political preferences in Ukraine (e.g. Kulyk 2011; Frye 2015; Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2018) and researchers have called for conceptual precision in what language measures capture (Onuch and Hale 2018). We do find evidence that in Ukraine, speaking Russian at home is associated with agreeing to the Russian-promoted narrative of the past and disagreeing with the national narrative. However, while consuming foreign media in Russian has the expected negative effect on people's view of the national-centric narrative in Ukraine, it has no bearing on people's view on the Russian-promoted narrative.
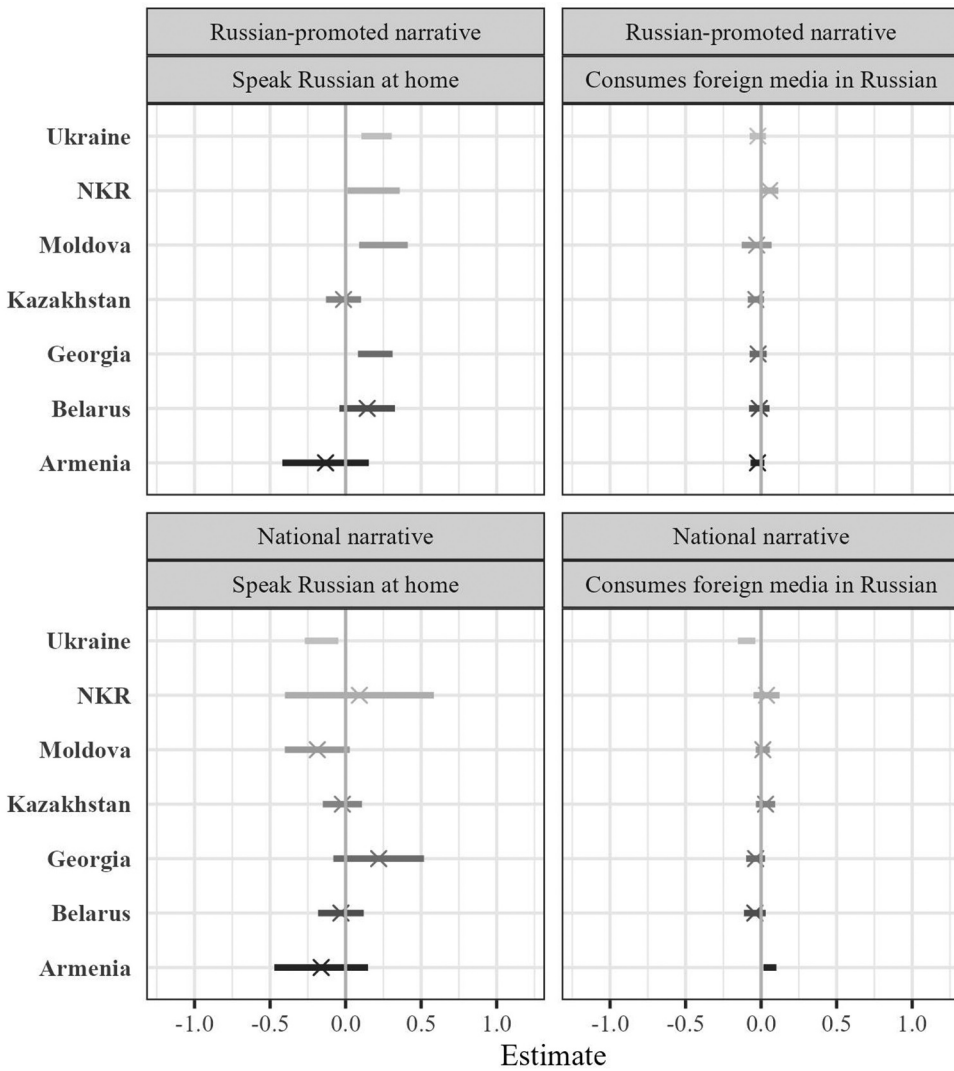
Figure 4. Results for cultural proximity shown as coefficient plots. The first row shows the association with the Russian-promoted narrative; the second row, the more nationalist narrative. The left column shows the results for whether respondents speak Russian at home, while the right shows the same for the variable capturing whether respondents consume foreign media in Russian. Coefficient points are shown as crosses if they are not statistically distinguishable from zero at 95% confidence levels.

Georgia – which, too, has found itself in an armed conflict with Russia and has seen political elites orienting the country towards the West – paints a clear picture when it comes to those who think their country should be oriented towards Russia: they are more likely to agree with the Russian-promoted narrative. However, the findings for the civilizational variable are not significant. In Georgia, even before the 2008 Russia-Georgian war, a strong anti-Soviet narrative had emerged. De Leonardis (2016, 40), "In the 2004–2012 period in Georgia's official state discourse, . . . represented by Saakashvili's speeches and statements and by his politics of memory in architecture, monuments and museums, there prevailed a negative, almost dystopic view of the country's Soviet past, construed as totally alien to Georgia." Indeed, in the National Museum of Georgia, there is a section called "The Museum of Soviet Occupation." Yet there is still nostalgia for the Soviet past in Georgia (e.g. Gugushvili and Kabachnik 2015), also in public memory (for example, there is a Joseph Stalin museum in his birthplace, Gori) (e.g. Kovtiak 2018). In Georgia, support for both the Russian-promoted and national narrative are the highest

across our survey sites (Table 2). This could explain why the more broadly formulated of our two geopolitical variables, about the Russian civilization, does not have the same effect as the more direct geopolitical scale. When it comes to cultural proximity, the only relationship that is statistically significant is that between Russian home language and, as one would expect based on language embeddedness, a positive view of the Russian-promoted narrative.

When it comes to geopolitical proximity, the picture is also generally clear in Belarus, though cultural proximity has no bearing at all on people's views of the past. The regime has oriented the country towards Russia and like Putin, President Alexander Lukashenka has relied on the "Great Patriotic War" in his nation-building efforts. As Marples (2012) notes, "what the Belarusian leader has tried to do is construct a nation by laying claim to a specifically Belarusian version of the Great Patriotic War, one that is linked to, but not necessarily an integral part of the all-encompassing Soviet version or the modern Russian one." The Russian-promoted narrative of the past resonates among the many who are already oriented towards Russia, and they are also less likely to agree to the more national-centric narrative.

In Moldova, findings are generally in line with what we would expect based on geopolitical proximity. Those who are geopolitically oriented towards Russia tend to agree with the Russian-promoted narrative of the past. Also consistent with expectations, those who claim to be part of the Russian civilization are less likely to agree with a national narrative of the past, though there is no such relationship for the geopolitical scale variable. When it comes to cultural proximity, the consumption of foreign media in Russian is not associated with agreeing to either a Russian-promoted or national narrative of the past. While speaking Russian at home is not associated with views on the national narrative of the past, it is – as we would expect – associated with a higher score on the index capturing the Russian-promoted narrative of the past.

The picture is overall quite mixed in Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. In Kazakhstan, the only statistically significant relationship is between those who wish to see their country geopolitically closer to Russia embracing a Russian-promoted narrative of the past. In contrast to Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus, the "Great Patriotic War" and the Stalin legacy have not served such a central role in the post-independence period – neither as something to distance itself from nor something to rally around. Kazakhstan's nation-building efforts have been what Laruelle (2014, 1–2) calls a "hybrid state identity": "Kazakhstan defines itself simultaneously as *Kazakh*, that is, the political entity of the Kazakh nation and its historical accomplishments, as *Kazakhstan*, that is, as a multiethnic nation at the crossroads of the Eurasian continent, and as a transnational country integrated into world trends." Thus, neither geopolitical nor cultural proximity t Russia is central to shaping people's views of the past.

In Armenia, the civilization variable paints a clear picture in the expected direction. Those who see themselves as part of the Russian civilization are more likely to agree to the Russian-promoted narrative of the past and disagree with the national narrative of the past, but the geopolitical scale bears no results. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the geopolitical scale and speaking Russian at home are associated with agreeing to the Russian-promoted narrative of the past. The civilization variable does not seem to matter. In Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, national history (related to independent statehood, territory, and monuments) is central in the struggle to carve out Nagorno-Karabakh's statehood vis-à-vis Azerbaijan (as it is in Azerbaijan) (e.g. de Waal 2003; Broers and Toal 2013), so the contentious discussion about history is less tied up in the relationship to Russia than in, for example, Ukraine. And while Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh both need Russia as an ally for strategic reasons – which has been the cause of concern as Armenia's political elites have also sought to orient the country towards Europe (e.g. Terzyan 2017) – memories of World War II and Stalin have not been used as political tools or been contentious as in Ukraine and Georgia. Thus, ordinary people are not similarly caught in a memory war between Russia and their (*de facto*) state.

In our study overall, the only finding that shows the opposite effect of what we expect is in Armenia, where consuming foreign media in Russian is positively, not negatively, associated with embracing a national-oriented narrative of the past. To the degree that media consumption captures cultural proximity, it goes against our expectations, but it is consistent with research pointing to the limits of "Russian authoritarian diffusion" in Armenia (Roberts and Ziemer 2018). It can possibly be

attributed to the fact that within a political environment in which political elites have looked to the West but for strategic reasons oriented the country towards Russia, consuming foreign media in Russian may reinforce skepticism of the country's dependence.

Though in some of our survey sites, there is no significant relationship between geopolitical proximity and people's views on the Russian-promoted narrative or the more national-centric narrative – suggesting that the latter is not necessarily the "flipside" of the former – it is noteworthy that we find no instances of the opposite relationship of what we expect. In terms of McGlynn and Jelena (2022) "memory diplomacy" argument, this suggests that even if there are domestic political elites with incentives to try to foster resonance with the Russian-promoted narrative, they were not able to sway ordinary people who are not already oriented towards Russia.

A note on causation

Theoretically, our study posits that people's present-day geopolitical and cultural proximities shape their views on the past, and we find most empirical support for a positive relationship between geopolitical orientation towards Russia and a tendency to agree with the Russian-promoted narrative of the past. Though our study does not, empirically, rule out reverse causation – that people's views on Stalin as a hero and the victory in the "Great Patriotic War" affect their views on the geopolitical orientation of their country today – we note that our findings are consistent across multiple model specifications and survey sites. Overall, they present a consistent story. Future work should develop an experimental research design to rule out reverse causality.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and ensuing war was preceded by and has been accompanied by a Russian information campaign that heavily draws on the past to justify the present. Defending his decision to invade Ukraine just days after the invasion, President Putin explicitly referred to the human costs of Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, claiming that Russia "will not make this mistake the second time" (Putin 2022). The Soviet victory of World War II – the "Great Patriotic War" – is a source of immense pride in Russia. But Putin also had an external audience. Addressing the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the same speech, he stated:

> Your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine . . . I urge you to refuse to carry out their criminal orders. I urge you to immediately lay down arms and go home.

In hindsight this was misjudged. Indeed, the Ukrainian army and people have fought back strongly. Putin attempted to tap into a shared understanding of the past to ensure an outcome that was in his interest today, but he clearly overestimated the impact that a Russian information campaign over a shared past could have over people in Ukraine.

Our study shines light on how ordinary people's views of the past in Russia's "near abroad" are shaped by their present-day geopolitical orientations. Given how memories of the past, particularly the cult around the "Great Patriotic War," have become central to the Russian government's soft-power effort of creating a "Russian world" in its "near abroad," the study explores whether proximity to Russia – be that geopolitical or cultural proximity – correlates with views of the past that are in line with a Russian-promoted narrative. We bring novel data to the debate on "memory wars" and "memory diplomacy" in the former Soviet countries, drawing on comparable face-to-face public opinion surveys across six states and one *de facto* state in Russia's "near abroad."

Our findings underscore how geopolitical proximity is associated with seeing the "Great Patriotic War" as a glorious Soviet victory and Stalin as a great leader. That is, to the extent that "Moscow is using memory diplomacy to export its narrative to the world," as the title of a recent *Foreign Policy*

article reads (McGlynn 2021), that narrative shapes the past only among those who already are geopolitically oriented towards Russia.

Notes

1. The Russian government promotes *Russkiy mir* through two international organizations: the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation and the public diplomacy agency *Rossotrudnichestvo*. They both have offices around the world and promote Russian culture in order to increase Russian soft power (Simons 2015).
2. A manifestation of this are the public events known as the Immortal Regiment parade that happen in several former Soviet countries on the 9 May anniversary of the Soviet victory in World War II, in which masses of people march, holding portraits of their family members or friends who died in the war.
3. According to Lev Gudkov, Director of the Levada Center, an independent Russian polling firm, "there's been a quiet rehabilitation of Stalin on the part of the [Russian] government" (Krastev and Benardo 2020). There is evidence that this rehabilitation has worked. In 2019, 70% of Russians believed that Stalin's rule had been good for the Soviet Union, the highest percentage since the Levada Center first asked the question in 2001 (Krastev and Benardo 2020).
4. Just as scholars studying norm diffusion have argued that foreign norms are not necessarily wholly accepted domestically (e.g. Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Acharya 2004).
5. For recent research on motivated reasoning in the context of people's views on violent events, see, for example, Silverman (2019); Pechenkina, Bausch, and Skinner (2019); and Silverman, Kaltenthaler, and Dagher (2021).
6. Similarly, people living in urban locales may be more likely to be exposed to diverse views than people living in rural areas.
7. The project did include plans for surveys in the other *de facto* states as well (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria), but for security and Covid-19–related reasons, we were either not able to complete them (South Ossetia, Transdniestria) or fully complete them face-to-face (Abkhazia).
8. All questionnaires were translated before fieldwork into both Russian and the national language of the survey site. Bilingual enumerators would field the appropriate questionnaire depending on people's doorstep language.
9. The research has been approved by the Internal Review Board at Colorado University and the Ethics Committee at University College London.
10. If a respondent did not answer one of the two questions, we include their answer to just one. If they did not answer any of the two questions, they are not included in the analysis.
11. There is significant variation across states. For example, over 60% of respondents in Belarus strongly agree or agree with this statement compared to just 10% in Georgia. We note that the results in the models below do not change if we treat this as a continuous variable.
12. In Ukraine, Onuch and Hale (2018) find that the relationship between language questions and (geo)political attitudes vary significantly depending on the specific language questions asked and model specifications (see also Kulyk 2011).
13. As a robustness check, we create a binary variable that is 1 when respondents report higher consumption of foreign media in Russian than domestic media in the national language of their state and 0 otherwise. See online Appendix Table A10.
14. The results are substantively unchanged if we use different distance measures or restrict the analysis to border states (see online Appendix Tables A6, A7, and A8).
15. We also, as an alternative measure, create a dummy variable with a cut-off point in 1981, with anyone born before 1981 assigned a 1. If the defining socialization happens in a person's adolescence, then we empirically examine if respondents who were older than 10 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 are more likely to view the past in line with a narrative that glorifies the Soviet past. Over 56% of the full sample were born before 1981. Results using the latter variable are reported in online Appendix Table A9.
16. Question: "Please look at the card and tell me, how would you describe the total revenue of all the members of your family?" Answer options: (1) we do not have enough money even for food; (2) we have enough money for food, but not enough to buy clothes and shoes; (3) we have enough money for food and clothing, and we can have some amount deferred, but not enough to buy expensive things (such as a refrigerator or TV); (4) we can buy some expensive items, such as a refrigerator or television, but we cannot buy everything we want; (5) we can buy whatever we want.
17. Question: "What is your education?" Answer options: (1) primary or below, including no formal education; (2) grade school (grades 7–9 school); (3) vocational schools, trade schools, on basis of 7–9 years of education; (4) average total (10–11 years of schooling); (5) vocational schools, trade schools, etc. based on 10- to 12-year education; (6) secondary education (technical); (7) incomplete higher education (3–4 semesters); (8) higher (university).
18. It could be that people who value democracy might nevertheless see "democracy as in the West" as a negative, reflecting recent years' democratic backsliding in the West. Therefore, in an alternative model shown in online

Appendix Table A11, we also include whether respondents prefer "the current Russian political system" (7.6% of whom do). Our main measure for democratic values is robust to this additional model specification.

19. The sample size drops to 6,054 for the model with the Russian-promoted narrative as the dependent variable and 5,250 in the model with the national narrative as the dependent variable. This is due to row-wise deletion and missingness spread across all variables. We discuss missingness in online Appendix 2.

20. As a robustness check, we run the same models with each geopolitical proximity measure included separately. Online Appendix Tables A2 and A3 show that *both* variables are statistically significant when included in separate models. It is possible that the indicators capturing geopolitical proximity to Russia are correlated. For the national-centric narrative of the past, the dominant association is between respondents' preference for their country's geopolitical closeness to Russia.

21. As a robustness check, we run the same models with each cultural proximity measure included separately. Online Appendix Table A4 shows that speaking Russian at home is statistically significant and positively associated with higher scores on the index capturing the Russian-promoted narrative of the past. Online Appendix Table A5 shows the results when consuming foreign media in Russian is included separately from other measures of proximity. The findings echo the main findings: contrary to expectations, respondents who consume foreign media in Russian tend to have lower scores on the index capturing the Russian-promoted narrative of the past.

22. Based on the findings in Onuch and Hale (2018), an alternative strategy for capturing language embeddedness would be to include also language spoken at work. We did not include that question in the surveys.

23. The results per survey site are shown in tabular form in online Appendix Tables A12–A18.

Disclosure statement

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Data availability statement

The data and materials that support the findings of this study are available here: https://osf.io/r4ba5/?view_only=08ce8903c0cc4c7eb2796586e7a9b77e

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Appendix 1. Alternative model specifications

Table A1. Correlates for perceptions of the past with each component of the historical narrative indices.

	Pro-Russian narrative about the past		National-centric narrative of the past	
	WWII was glorious	Stalin was a strong leader	Breaking away from USSR was positive for our country	Past republic was positive for our country
Proximity to Russia:				
Country should be towards Russia	0.030***	0.033***	−0.034***	−0.022*
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.109**	0.176***	−0.238***	0.117+
	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.057)	(0.063)
Speak Russian at home	0.101*	−0.038	−0.026	0.003
	(0.042)	(0.054)	(0.070)	(0.070)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.029+	−0.051*	−0.004	−0.035
	(0.018)	(0.024)	(0.031)	(0.027)
Alternative explanations:				
Age	0.002+	0.002+	−0.006***	0.002
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.010	−0.005	0.055*	−0.031
	(0.017)	(0.020)	(0.026)	(0.025)
Education	−0.001	−0.008	−0.011	−0.004
	(0.009)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.012)
Female	0.007	−0.081*	0.047	−0.004
	(0.024)	(0.035)	(0.038)	(0.038)
Democratic	−0.094*	−0.184**	0.227***	−0.056
	(0.044)	(0.064)	(0.049)	(0.048)
Conservative values	0.162***	0.079+	0.042	−0.096*
	(0.042)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.046)
Controls:				
50 km from Russian border	−0.109+	−0.186*	0.009	−0.129+
	(0.064)	(0.083)	(0.074)	(0.071)
Num.Obs.	6429	6271	6343	5463
R2	0.098	0.163	0.181	0.340
AIC	33968.9	26,649.4	24,363.4	23,481.4
Log.Lik.	−96,273.058	−106,015.145	−110,823.369	−78,714.326
RMSE	0.64	0.75	0.79	0.70

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.
 All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.

Column 1 of Appendix Table 1 shows a statistically significant and positive association between speaking Russian at home and agreeing that the 'Great Patriotic War' was a glorious victory. This suggests a that there may be an association between cultural proximity and resonance with the Russian-promoted narrative. However, it is suggestive evidence at most compared to the consistent associations between geopolitical orientation and a Russian-promoted narrative of the past.

Table A2. Correlates for perceptions of the past with just 'country should be towards Russia' proximity measure.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.037***	−0.029***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.015	0.008
	(0.016)	(0.017)
Education	−0.005	−0.002
	(0.010)	(0.008)
Female	−0.033	0.037
	(0.022)	(0.028)
Democratic	−0.160***	0.085*
	(0.048)	(0.037)
Conservative values	0.112**	−0.024
	(0.041)	(0.030)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.139*	−0.055
	(0.067)	(0.050)
Num.Obs.	6240	5394
R2	0.149	0.295
AIC	35674.6	30,355.1
Log.Lik.	−103,204.370	−71,776.745
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A3. Correlates for perceptions of the past with just 'part of the Russian civilization' proximity measure.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Part of the Russian civilization	0.179***	−0.106**
	(0.033)	(0.038)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.002**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.013	0.004
	(0.015)	(0.017)
Education	−0.009	−0.003
	(0.010)	(0.007)
Female	−0.033	0.031
	(0.022)	(0.027)
Democratic	−0.220***	0.149***
	(0.051)	(0.032)
Conservative values	0.125**	−0.032
	(0.041)	(0.028)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.164**	−0.042
	(0.062)	(0.052)
Num.Obs.	6589	5644
R2	0.142	0.293
AIC	37340.6	31,415.8
Log.Lik.	−116,272.883	−76,719.778
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
 + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A4. Correlates for perceptions of the past with just 'speak Russia at home' proximity measure.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Speak Russian at home	0.095*	−0.046
	(0.038)	(0.037)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.003**	−0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.013	0.006
	(0.015)	(0.017)
Education	−0.008	−0.002
	(0.010)	(0.007)
Female	−0.027	0.032
	(0.022)	(0.027)
Democratic	−0.249***	0.162***
	(0.049)	(0.032)
Conservative values	0.139***	−0.038
	(0.040)	(0.029)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.159**	−0.047
	(0.062)	(0.049)
Num.Obs.	6689	5701
R2	0.128	0.287
AIC	37709.4	31,643.4
Log.Lik.	−118,854.643	−78,670.311
RMSE	0.55	0.56

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A5. Correlates for perceptions of the past with just 'consume foreign media in Russian' proximity measure.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.038*	−0.016
	(0.018)	(0.017)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.003**	−0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.011	0.004
	(0.015)	(0.017)
Education	−0.006	−0.002
	(0.010)	(0.007)
Female	−0.030	0.028
	(0.023)	(0.027)
Democratic	−0.244***	0.165***
	(0.047)	(0.031)
Conservative values	0.123**	−0.036
	(0.041)	(0.029)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.147*	−0.045
	(0.063)	(0.049)
Num.Obs.	6590	5616
R2	0.125	0.286
AIC	37077.4	31,212.6
Log.Lik.	−114,054.491	−76,445.614
RMSE	0.56	0.56

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A6. Correlates for perceptions of the past with different measure for Euclidean distance (100 km).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.032***	−0.027***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.139***	−0.066+
	(0.033)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.027	−0.014
	(0.040)	(0.041)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.036*	−0.012
	(0.016)	(0.018)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.002*
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.016	0.004
	(0.015)	(0.018)
Education	−0.002	−0.003
	(0.009)	(0.008)
Female	−0.030	0.033
	(0.022)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.124*	0.084*
	(0.049)	(0.038)
Conservative values	0.120**	−0.032
	(0.040)	(0.031)
Controls:		
100 km from Russian border	−0.184***	−0.005
	(0.055)	(0.046)
Num.Obs.	6054	5250
R2	0.178	0.298
AIC	35176.3	29,606.1
Log.Lik.	−98,232.576	−68,500.154
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A7. Correlates for perceptions of the past with different measure for Euclidean distance (200 km).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.033***	−0.027***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.142***	−0.066+
	(0.034)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.035	−0.013
	(0.041)	(0.041)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.040*	−0.011
	(0.017)	(0.018)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.002*
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.016	0.004
	(0.015)	(0.018)
Education	−0.003	−0.003
	(0.009)	(0.008)
Female	−0.033	0.033
	(0.022)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.134**	0.085*
	(0.049)	(0.038)
Conservative values	0.119**	−0.032
	(0.041)	(0.031)
Controls:		
200 km from Russian border	−0.104*	−0.024
	(0.050)	(0.045)
Num.Obs.	6054	5250
R2	0.167	0.298

(Continued)

Table A7. (Continued).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
AIC	35022.4	29,611.1
Log.Lik.	−98,344.553	−68,640.897
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
 + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A8. Correlates for perceptions of the past restricted to states that share a border with Russia.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.035***	−0.029***
	(0.009)	(0.008)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.136***	−0.031
	(0.039)	(0.046)
Speak Russian at home	0.018	0.008
	(0.044)	(0.045)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.040*	−0.020
	(0.019)	(0.022)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.003*	−0.002+
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.009	0.024
	(0.018)	(0.022)
Education	−0.007	−0.005
	(0.012)	(0.009)
Female	−0.029	0.052
	(0.025)	(0.035)
Democratic	−0.133*	0.085+
	(0.055)	(0.046)
Conservative values	0.131**	−0.017
	(0.046)	(0.037)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.138*	−0.053
	(0.065)	(0.050)
Num.Obs.	4081	3421
R2	0.184	0.269
AIC	23900.1	19,412.5
Log.Lik.	−70,498.370	−47,255.827
RMSE	0.55	0.54

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
 + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A9. Correlates for perceptions of the past with age as a binary variable (born after 1981).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.032***	−0.028***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.150***	−0.068+
	(0.034)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.024	−0.010
	(0.041)	(0.041)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.040*	−0.010
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Alternative explanations:		
Born before 1981	0.047+	−0.072*
	(0.028)	(0.032)
Income	−0.013	0.007
	(0.015)	(0.017)

(*Continued*)

Table A9. (Continued).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Education	−0.004	−0.004
	(0.010)	(0.008)
Female	−0.033	0.031
	(0.023)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.146**	0.086*
	(0.048)	(0.038)
Conservative values	0.118**	−0.032
	(0.040)	(0.031)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.137*	−0.052
	(0.065)	(0.051)
Num.Obs.	6054	5250
R2	0.166	0.298
AIC	34993.1	29,607.3
Log.Lik.	−98,851.383	−68,508.404
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
  + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A10. Correlates for perceptions of the past with different measure for Russian media consumption. We create a binary which takes 1 if a respondent reported higher consumption of foreign media in Russian than domestic media in the national language.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.031***	−0.027***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.148***	−0.062
	(0.035)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.014	−0.005
	(0.042)	(0.043)
Foreign media in Russian > domestic media in national language	0.019	−0.047
	(0.045)	(0.042)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002*	−0.002*
	(0.0009)	(0.001)
Income	−0.012	0.004
	(0.015)	(0.018)
Education	−0.005	−0.004
	(0.010)	(0.008)
Female	−0.029	0.035
	(0.022)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.147**	0.084*
	(0.048)	(0.038)
Conservative values	0.118**	−0.031
	(0.040)	(0.031)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.142*	−0.052
	(0.065)	(0.052)
Num.Obs.	6046	5245
R2	0.164	0.299
AIC	34878.2	29,588.2
Log.Lik.	−99,213.749	−68,285.602
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
  + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A11. Correlates for perceptions of the past including whether respondents consider 'the current Russian political system' as the best political system.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.032***	−0.027***
	(0.007)	(0.006)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.149***	−0.065
	(0.033)	(0.040)
Speak Russian at home	0.031	−0.014
	(0.042)	(0.041)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.037*	−0.011
	(0.017)	(0.017)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002+	−0.002*
	(0.0009)	(0.001)
Income	−0.012	0.005
	(0.015)	(0.018)
Education	−0.002	−0.004
	(0.010)	(0.008)
Female	−0.038+	0.033
	(0.023)	(0.029)
Democratic	−0.161**	0.085*
	(0.050)	(0.038)
The current Russian political system	−0.150*	0.012
	(0.060)	(0.062)
Conservative values	0.118**	−0.032
	(0.039)	(0.031)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.134*	−0.051
	(0.065)	(0.051)
Num.Obs.	6054	5250
R2	0.171	0.299
AIC	35085.0	29,621.1
Log.Lik.	−99,858.077	−68,660.346
RMSE	0.55	0.55

All models include robust standard errors and country fixed effects.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A12. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Armenia.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.004	−0.008
	(0.009)	(0.008)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.126*	−0.245***
	(0.053)	(0.060)
Speak Russian at home	−0.133	−0.162
	(0.144)	(0.156)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.024	0.058**
	(0.023)	(0.022)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.001	−0.002
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.022	−0.012
	(0.024)	(0.031)
Education	0.022*	0.008
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Female	−0.135***	−0.054
	(0.040)	(0.042)
Democratic	−0.174*	0.001
	(0.068)	(0.064)
Conservative values	0.155*	−0.159**
	(0.065)	(0.050)
Num.Obs.	874	849
R2	0.068	0.057

(*Continued*)

Table A12. (Continued).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
AIC	5189.4	5081.3
Log.Lik.	−4772.025	−4215.350
RMSE	0.49	0.50

Models include robust standard errors.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A13. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Belarus.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.046***	−0.028*
	(0.012)	(0.013)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.244***	−0.067
	(0.068)	(0.070)
Speak Russian at home	0.142	−0.021
	(0.099)	(0.081)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.012	−0.044
	(0.033)	(0.037)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002	0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Income	−0.038	0.059
	(0.041)	(0.045)
Education	−0.008	0.008
	(0.022)	(0.017)
Female	0.023	0.021
	(0.043)	(0.057)
Democratic	−0.092	0.208**
	(0.064)	(0.072)
Conservative values	0.018	−0.020
	(0.055)	(0.061)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.324***	−0.111+
	(0.067)	(0.064)
Num.Obs.	914	782
R2	0.216	0.095
AIC	4997.0	4256.9
Log.Lik.	−7311.990	−5236.157
RMSE	0.58	0.57

Models include robust standard errors.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A14. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Georgia.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.016**	−0.038***
	(0.006)	(0.008)
Part of the Russian civilization	−0.026	−0.125+
	(0.044)	(0.073)
Speak Russian at home	0.196***	0.219
	(0.058)	(0.152)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.019	−0.036
	(0.029)	(0.032)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.004***	0.001
	(0.001)	(0.001)

Table A14. (Continued).

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Income	−0.005	0.026
	(0.020)	(0.025)
Education	0.003	0.010
	(0.009)	(0.014)
Female	−0.057+	0.012
	(0.033)	(0.036)
Democratic	−0.054	0.193***
	(0.039)	(0.052)
Conservative values	0.079+	−0.041
	(0.042)	(0.046)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.010	0.164**
	(0.111)	(0.055)
Num.Obs.	1149	1072
R2	0.081	0.176
AIC	7144.4	6460.8
Log.Lik.	−8262.276	−7477.871
RMSE	0.42	0.45

Models include robust standard errors.
  + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A15. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Kazakhstan.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.040*	−0.016
	(0.012)	(0.011)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.094+	0.020
	(0.046)	(0.068)
Speak Russian at home	−0.014	−0.021
	(0.050)	(0.055)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.035	0.030
	(0.023)	(0.027)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002	−0.006*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Income	−0.024	−0.018
	(0.023)	(0.033)
Education	−0.006	−0.032+
	(0.016)	(0.015)
Female	−0.066	0.080
	(0.038)	(0.056)
Democratic	−0.159	−0.077
	(0.100)	(0.076)
Conservative values	0.274**	0.003
	(0.078)	(0.066)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	0.254*	−0.021
	(0.100)	(0.107)
Num.Obs.	757	525
R2	0.162	0.061
AIC	4496.9	3235.0
Log.Lik.	−63,400.761	−35,232.144
RMSE	0.50	0.49

Models include robust standard errors.
  + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A16. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Moldova.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.032*	−0.019
	(0.015)	(0.016)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.263***	−0.232*
	(0.068)	(0.104)
Speak Russian at home	0.250**	−0.187+
	(0.082)	(0.109)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.029	0.011
	(0.050)	(0.024)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	−0.007***	−0.003+
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Income	−0.049	−0.090*
	(0.050)	(0.041)
Education	−0.036	−0.022
	(0.035)	(0.025)
Female	0.013	0.022
	(0.087)	(0.067)
Democratic	−0.021	0.141
	(0.156)	(0.093)
Conservative values	−0.058	−0.050
	(0.091)	(0.073)
Num.Obs.	663	589
R2	0.201	0.207
AIC	3329.6	3290.8
Log.Lik.	−5829.316	−4170.020
RMSE	0.61	0.57

Models include robust standard errors.
 + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A17. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Nagorno-Karabakh.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.023*	0.013
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.100+	−0.088
	(0.050)	(0.082)
Speak Russian at home	0.186*	0.091
	(0.083)	(0.237)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	0.057+	0.036
	(0.028)	(0.041)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	0.002	−0.005*
	(0.001)	(0.002)
Income	−0.055	0.069
	(0.040)	(0.052)
Education	−0.001	0.036*
	(0.014)	(0.017)
Female	−0.076	−0.154+
	(0.071)	(0.080)
Democratic	−0.058	−0.038
	(0.072)	(0.074)
Conservative values	0.093	0.056
	(0.055)	(0.087)
Num.Obs.	436	391
R2	0.092	0.078
AIC	2512.5	1943.2
Log.Lik.	−6105.696	−4617.093
RMSE	0.53	0.63

Models include robust standard errors.
 + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table A18. Correlates for perceptions of the past for Ukraine.

	Russian-promoted narrative	National narrative
Proximity to Russia:		
Country should be towards Russia	0.045***	−0.082***
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Part of the Russian civilization	0.148**	−0.225***
	(0.055)	(0.059)
Speak Russian at home	0.205***	−0.159**
	(0.051)	(0.056)
Consumes foreign media in Russian	−0.022	−0.096**
	(0.027)	(0.029)
Alternative explanations:		
Age	−0.003*	−0.003**
	(0.001)	(0.001)
Income	−0.143***	0.062*
	(0.029)	(0.025)
Education	−0.031**	0.012
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Female	0.070*	0.032
	(0.034)	(0.038)
Democratic political system like in the West	−0.343***	0.199***
	(0.052)	(0.048)
Conservative values	0.139***	0.056
	(0.037)	(0.040)
Controls:		
50 km from Russian border	−0.048	0.009
	(0.071)	(0.067)
Num.Obs.	1261	1042
R2	0.293	0.367
AIC	6445.2	5783.5
Log.Lik.	−3690.853	−2448.572
RMSE	0.59	0.54

Models include robust standard errors.
+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

It could be that people who value democracy might nevertheless see "democracy as in the West" as a negative, reflecting recent years' democratic backsliding in the West. Therefore, to measure non-democratic preferences, we include whether respondents prefer "the current Russian political system" (7.6% of whom do). However, the variable is

Table A19. NAs breakdown for the main variables used in the regression analysis.

	Missing (N)	Missing (%)
Dependent variables		
WWII was glorious	589	6.4
Stalin was a strong leader	903	9.8
Breaking away from USSR was positive for our country	638	6.9
Past republic was positive for our country	2238	24.2
Independent variables		
Part of the Russian civilization	249	2.7
Country should be towards Russia	870	9.4
Speak Russian at home	19	0.2
Consumes foreign media in Russian	19	2.2
Income	311	3.4
Education	19	0.2
Democratic	1178	12.8
Conservative values	402	4.37

negatively associated with a Russian-promoted narrative of the past and positively associated with a national narrative of the past. It could be that we are not capturing a preference for autocracy, but a far-right form of nationalism instead.

Table A20. Breakdown of missingness for 'past republic was positive for our country' statement.

Country	Missing (%)
Armenia	10.6
Belarus	20.7
Georgia	16.1
Kazakhstan	40
Moldova	25.5
NKR	22.2
Ukraine	31.1

Table A21. Modelling non-response to the 'past republic was positive for our country' statement.

	Past republic was positive for our country
Age	0.00***
	(0.00)
Female	0.06***
	(0.01)
Income	−0.02***
	(0.01)
Education	−0.03***
	(0.00)
Belarus	0.13***
	(0.02)
Georgia	0.07***
	(0.02)
Kazakhstan	0.14***
	(0.02)
Ukraine	0.22***
	(0.02)
Number of observations	8886
AIC	9439.68

To explore the missingness further, we conduct a logistic regression where the independent variables include respondents' country and demographic variables, and the dependent variable is whether they refused to answer or replied that they did not know. The results of a logistic regression analysis are shown in Table A21. As the reference category is Armenia, the results indicate that people in Armenia are less likely to not respond to this question than in all other states. Demographic characteristics are statistically associated with the likelihood of people responding. On average, older people, women, people from poorer households, and the less educated are less likely to respond to the question. This indicates that non-response may be related to the fact that people simply do not know the answer.