

OSW | COMMENTARY

Centre for Eastern Studies

NUMBER 171 | 20.05.2015

www.osw.waw.pl

Russia marks the 70th anniversary of the victory over Nazism: What significance does it have in an epoch of global confrontation?

Maria Domańska

The Victory Day celebrations held in Russia on 9 May 2015 were special for marking the seventieth anniversary of the end of World War II but the particular international and domestic context they were set in was of yet greater importance. The element which set the celebrations in 2015 apart from those in the preceding years was how the military and moral aspects of Soviet victory over Nazi Germany was made part of the current geopolitical confrontation with the West concerning the Ukrainian crisis.

The escalation of the aggressive rhetoric on Europe and the USA and accusations that the West is destabilising the international situation and striving for conflict was accompanied by a display of the increasing military power of the Russian Federation; the display itself was stronger than has been seen in preceding years. This was a clear sign that Moscow is ready to protect its national interests in the area of foreign policy by any means. At the same time, the creation of an atmosphere of threat and stoking patriotic feelings was intended to mobilise the Russian public around the political leadership while the country's economic problems are deteriorating further.

The background of the celebrations

The unusual tone of the 9 May celebrations this year was to a great extent an effect of the special international situation Russia found itself in and the country's evolution as regards domestic policy. In an epoch of growing tension in international relations, the erosion of global order and security, Moscow has become more determined to protect its own national interests and influence in the 'near abroad' and to rebuild its position as a global power. 2014 and 2015 can be characterised as years of confrontation between the Kremlin and the West provoked by Russia's moves with regard to Ukraine preceded by stagnation in co-operation, ever worse misunderstandings as regards 'common values' and ever stronger disagreements over the rules

of the international order. Mutual political and economic sanctions marked the culmination of growing tension between Russia and the West. The cooling of relations with the European Union and the USA has made Moscow ostentatiously continue its mainly declaratory 'turn Eastwards' and highlight its 'alliance' with China.

The key elements of the evolution of the internal situation in Russia include: the worsening economic crisis, the increasing monopolisation of political life and civil activity by state administration structures, increasing expenses on the development of the armed forces, and also a re-Sovietisation and radicalisation of the public discourse. The latter is manifested through witch-hunts carried out against independent circles and exploitation of the 'enemy syndrome' and the 'besieged castle' syndrome with added

militarist rhetoric. All this is aimed at mobilising the public around the political leadership. The overriding goal of the Kremlin's policy is to maintain the present government system and to add public legitimacy to the regime regardless of the deteriorating economic situation in the country. One of the tools used to achieve this goal is the historical policy which has been pursued for around ten years and which draws primarily upon the Soviet legacy.

The 9 May celebrations in the context of Russia's historical policy

The martyrdom of the 'Great Patriotic War', along with the Soviet victory over Nazism are the central elements of the historical policy, and form the only national myth which genuinely unites the Russian public. This results in the sacralisation of the history of the war, which is used simultaneously as an auxiliary category to support the protection of current national interests, defined by the government as 'existential'. The language of historical discourse includes religious references: any discussions questioning the 'canonical' version of history are branded 'blasphemous' and 'sacrilegious'. At the same time, this topic gained a new sense in 2009, when attempts to revise the role played by Russia in history were defined in the national security strategy of the Russian Federation as adversely affecting state security¹.

One constituent of the war and victory myth is the Messianic idea combined with the thesis that the Soviet Union was morally superior to the rest of the world due to the war martyrdom. Important aspects of this construction include the memory of over twenty million victims, the mass slaughter of the Soviet nation in the name of liberating the world from the 'brown plague', the refusal to accept the knowledge about the Stalinist repressions

¹ *Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации до 2020 года*, published on 13 May 2009, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/424>

and the overly nervous reactions, fomented by the government, to any attempts to besmirch the image of the USSR (this especially concerns the Soviet Union being co-responsible for causing the war).

The historical policy, which focused to a great extent on upholding this myth, began in 2004–2005, although the first signs of it were seen already in 2002–2003². The key elements of this policy include: defending the Soviet vision of 20th century history; the affirmation of the territorial and military power of the Soviet Union as a "peaceful" superpower; negating Communist crimes and the Soviet Union's joint responsibility for aggressive military actions during World War II; emphasising the special merits of the USSR in liberating the neighbouring countries; and the glorification of a strong government and public mobilisation in the militarist spirit.

The martyrdom of the 'Great Patriotic War', along with the Soviet victory over Nazism are the central elements of the historical policy, and form the only national myth which genuinely unites the Russian public.

The cultivation of the constitutive elements of the myth of the Great Patriotic War has allowed the Russian government to achieve important goals in domestic policy. These are above all: the cult of a strong leader, public approval of the system evolving towards authoritarianism, and a readiness to make sacrifices in the name of the state's power. One peculiar illustration

² Then Vladimir Putin suggested that historians should adopt a more patriotic approach when working on the content of history textbooks. Magdalena Ostrowska, 'Znaczenie rosyjskiej polityki historycznej dla odbudowy statusu mocarstwowego państwa', *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations*, no. 1–2 (vol. 41) 2010, p. 130. The first attempts to comprehensively formulate the historical policy were made as a reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and as the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II was approaching in 2005.

of this success is the noticeable increase in the percentage of Russians who justify Stalinist repressions³. In turn, as regards foreign policy, the apotheosis of the USSR and its imperial policy might signify that Russia is determined to rebuild its status as a powerful state (including by forcing other countries to 'respect' Russian national interests even beyond the borders of the Russian Federation).

The political message of the celebrations

The preparations for the celebrations this year and the publicity given to them by the media, as well as statements from official representatives of the Russian Federation all added to the confrontational vision of the world⁴ and suggested that the stance taken by the West not only on Russia but also in the wider context on international security issues⁵ was making the risk of war at least on the regional scale ever more real. Nazism (more often referred to as Fascism) has been used as one aspect of the

pivot of this message, suggesting that it is undergoing a revival, for example, in Ukraine, and thus poses a threat to European security. The other aspect of the pivot is the emphasis put on Russia's growing military power, especially as compared to previous celebrations.

The cultivation of the constitutive elements of the myth of the Great Patriotic War allows the Russian government to achieve important goals in domestic and foreign policy.

One reflection of this was the military parade held on an unprecedented scale⁶. This latter move had an almost explicitly anti-Western tone in the context of the amendments of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation towards the end of 2014, where the threats allegedly posed by NATO were emphasised in an especially negative tone. The statement made by Vladimir Putin in March 2015, who announced that plans were being made to possibly place Russian nuclear forces on standby during the annexation of Crimea provided an alarming context⁷. The anniversary on 9 May 2015 was thus less a peace holiday and more an opportunity to show off military triumph and power. Both the preparations for the 9 May ceremony and Vladimir Putin's speech on Red Square carried a clear message addressed to Russia's foreign partners (the West, and especially Europe demonstrating a pacifist approach, should be viewed as the main audience). In his speech Pu-

³ The percentage of respondents who said that Stalinist repressions were worth the great goals achieved by the Soviet Union increased from 25% in 2012 to 45% in March 2015. See the survey conducted by Levada Centre in March 2015: <http://www.levada.ru/31-03-2015/stalin-i-ego-rol-v-istorii-strany>

⁴ See the communications from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (including 'Комментарий Уполномоченного МИД России по вопросам прав человека, демократии и верховенства права К.К.Долгова по поводу антироссийских акций в ФРГ', http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/97C7CDB93890E10B43257E3000543254), the statements from Minister Sergey Lavrov (for example, during the meeting dedicated to the 70th anniversary of victory on 5 May: http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/92EABBBBD7146836843257E3C004BD3F4), the unofficial opinion from Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu published on Twitter ("the rally through Poland should be in tanks", https://twitter.com/s_shoigu/status/591686606727335936), the accusations that the West is destabilising the international situation due to the stance taken by the EU and the USA on the conflict in Ukraine reiterated on many occasions, including by Vladimir Putin himself.

⁵ In this context, the West's stance on disarmament treaties has been criticised, as have the alleged questioning of the fundamental rules of international law and UN prerogatives by the Euro-Atlantic partners; US policy in the Middle East and North Africa; and last but not least – the 'unfair' and 'inadequate' reaction of the West to the Ukrainian crisis in the form of anti-Russian sanctions.

⁶ The topic of new, technologically advanced military equipment and weapon models which "have no foreign equivalents" which were to be presented during the parade on the Red Square was ostentatiously given a great deal of publicity. Over 16,000 soldiers (in previous years this number was slightly over 11,000), and around 200 military equipment units (the number was 150 in 2014, the highest since 1991) took part in the parade.

⁷ Vladimir Putin's statement in the film *Crimea – Way to the Fatherland* broadcast on 15 March 2015 on the Russia 1 channel (available at: http://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/59195).

tin in fact warned that the situation seen in late 1930s could be repeated, pointing out that 'enlightened' Europe had at that time disregarded the problem of Hitlerism, and he appealed for 'vigilance' given the modern challenges. He also raised the issue of threats being created as a consequence of attempts to build a unipolar world order and a 'bloc mindset based on force', which was a clear missive in the direction of Washington. Thus a legible parallel has been built in an attempt to bring about a perception of modern reality through the prism of war martyrdom.

In Russia's view the Soviet Union's victory over Nazism gives Moscow the right to decide on the international order within its 'near' and 'far' abroad.

The thesis that it is the West's current policy that is driving the world into a new war was accompanied by the suggestion that the Soviet Union's victory over Nazism legitimises Russia's mandate to defend the rules of the international order developed as a consequence of the war (as opposed to the West's attempts to revise it). This also gives Moscow the right to decide on the international order within its 'near' and 'far' abroad. Furthermore, this right can be enforced using real military instruments (i.e. those presented during the parade). Thus its Euro-Atlantic partners, wishing to avoid a global conflict, should in the Kremlin's opinion accept the proposal (which was renewed in Putin's speech) to create a new system without any blocs for 'equal' (indivisible) international security, thus diminishing the role of NATO as the guarantor of security in the Euro-Atlantic area.

Although these issues had already been raised on numerous occasions in previous years in official Russian discourse, the new quality is the context in which this rhetoric has been used again. Russia's military aggression on Ukraine and its ostentatious manifestation of military power during the parade on 9 May are causing Moscow's verbal threats and 'warnings' to shift from a strictly political platform to a military level.

Also worth noting is the evolution of Moscow's official stance on the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. During a joint press conference with Angela Merkel on 10 May, Vladimir Putin authoritatively and clearly justified the pact as vital for the Soviet Union's national security which had been put at risk due to Western countries' irresponsible policy. This was the first time the Russian president expressed his opinion on this issue so firmly, and he did it at a high-level meeting⁸. It appears that this statement came above all as a clear sign that Moscow will not accept any discussions concerning the moral and legal aspects of superpower policy – whether one pursued by the USSR or modern Russia – nor does it intend to 'excuse itself' for its actions, and any responsibility for consequences that are undesirable to other countries would be placed on their leaders, who "force" the Kremlin to take the "necessary" measures to take care of the vital interests of the Russian Federation.

Along with the continuation of confrontational rhetoric, approximately one month before the 9 May celebrations, the Russian government introduced elements of a 'constructive' message into the discourse concerning the West, suggesting it would be ready to co-operate and develop mutual relations. Vladimir Putin said

⁸ Although attempts to justify the Ribbentrop–Molotov Pact had already been seen in Russian public discourse (for example, during the discussion concerning this issue in 2009, when some Russian historians and representatives of state institutions argued that the decision to strike the deal was right), Vladimir Putin for the first time backed this opinion in November 2014 during a meeting with young historians (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951>).

this at a teleconference on 16 April, and this was repeated by the speaker of the State Duma, Sergey Naryshkin and the head of the Presidential Administration, Sergey Ivanov⁹. It cannot be ruled out that this move had the tactical objective of attempting to guarantee a turnout at the anniversary celebrations that would satisfy Russian ambitions. In turn the fact that Putin reiterated the declaration of co-operation during a meeting with the Czech president, Milos Zeman, on 9 May, and commented in a rather moderate manner on the absence of Western leaders during the celebrations indicates that the long-term goal of this milder rhetoric is to soften the West's stance on sanctions due to the deteriorating results achieved by the Russian economy.

Moscow will not accept any discussions concerning the moral and legal aspects of superpower policy – whether one pursued by the USSR or modern Russia –nor does it intend to ‘excuse itself’ for its actions.

While the Moscow celebrations were boycotted by almost all Western leaders, the hosts demonstrated ostentatious appreciation to China, presented as the main Russian ally. The significance of the Russian-Chinese summit which saw over thirty bilateral agreements signed and also the manifestation of close relations between the two leaders at the time of the celebrations was additionally strengthened by historical narrative. On 8 May, the Russia 1 channel broadcast a film titled *Russia and China – the heart of Eurasia*, which not only emphasised the long tradition of co-operation and the excep-

tional bonds existing between the two countries, but also extensively presented the Soviet-Chinese struggle against ‘Japanese militarism’ during World War II (this latter subject was, by the way, explicitly raised during Putin’s speech at Red Square). All these moves marked a specific culmination of the Russian ‘turn Eastward’, which is intended as a clear propaganda message that Russia has an attractive alternative to relations with the West as regards both modern politics and the defence of ‘historical truth’ on which the foundations of the sovereignty of the Russian state are based. Furthermore, it should be expected that Moscow will also make use in its propaganda of the fact that soldiers representing the two most populous nations, China and India, took part in the victory parade. The celebrations of the 70th anniversary of Victory Day also contained a message concerning the role of Russia in the post-Soviet area, addressed both to the former Soviet republics and the West: the common victory of the multinational Soviet army over Nazism, according to the Kremlin’s intentions, legitimises Russia’s dominance within its ‘traditional zone of influence’ and also means that the nations living within this zone are obliged to accept the Russian viewpoint on the ‘war on Fascism’ in Ukraine. This message is also intended to promote the reintegration idea based on the Eurasian Union project, which is thus taking on the features of a ‘natural’ process based on a shared history and common system of fundamental values. The authorities’ manifesto addressed to the Russian public on the occasion of the anniversary was equally important. The task of the rhetoric which dominates the public space was to build up national pride and patriotism based on an awareness of the state’s military strength, as well as Messianism and martyrdom as proofs of uniqueness of the Russian nation¹⁰. The build-

⁹ Vladimir Putin noticeably softened his rhetoric towards the West during the teleconference, declaring the will to co-operate “on equal terms”; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgJgAv8bUgQ>. See also: *Нарышкин предложил приступить к объединению России и Евросоюза*, 28 April 2015, <http://lenta.ru/news/2015/04/28/naryshkin/>; *Иванов: РФ готова сотрудничать с Западом по международным проблемам*, 2 May 2015, <http://ria.ru/politics/20150502/1062160639.html>

¹⁰ The apotheosis of the military triumph was strengthened through interviews with war veterans broadcast on 9 May: they made such memorable statements as “our country is invincible”, “Europe should remember who defeated the Nazis and needs to know that we are able to defend ourselves.”

ing up and solidifying of the symbols of national pride and glory in the public space also had the intention of achieving the same purpose¹¹.

Common victory of the multinational Soviet army over Nazism, according to the Kremlin's intentions, legitimises Russia's dominance within its 'traditional zone of influence'.

Regardless of all this, the militarist rhetoric and the stress put on the risk of a conflict on more than a local scale was apparently intended to serve as a means of maintaining the level of the Russian public's mobilisation around their leader in conditions of economic crisis and their decreasing interest in the developments in Ukraine¹². Vladimir Putin in his speech presented himself to the public as a saviour who is making efforts to save the world from a catastrophe. This kind of 'mission' is apparently intended at automatically legitimising the government's moves at home and in the international arena in the eyes of the nation.

However, special attention needs to be paid not so much to the official part of the celebrations but to the 'Immortal Regiment' march which was led by the president himself and which was to a great extent a grassroots initiative¹³. The government has thus used a social initiative which had been developing over the past few years for its own needs, appropriating social enthusiasm and the authentic need to commemorate the fallen. Taking into account the significance of the victory myth as a Russian 'national idea', Putin heading the march accepted the role of the guarantor of the security and development of the Russian identity and in a way personified the greatest achievement in Russian history, while the march itself was presented as a clear manifestation of support for the authorities¹⁴. Loyalty to the state, its 'sacred' historical achievements, and the promise of power and development have become equated to loyalty to the leader.

¹¹ The symbolism of 'the Ribbon of Saint George', the material manifestation of loyalty to the Kremlin, which had been popularised since 2005, was primarily used for this purpose, and on an unprecedented scale.

¹² This tendency was reflected by public opinion polls conducted in April – May 2015. See http://radiovesti.ru/article/show/article_id/136358 (VCIOM survey) and <http://www.levada.ru/05-05-2015/ukrainskii-krizis> (Levada Center survey).

¹³ This is an increasingly popular initiative as part of which people participate in a solemn march holding portraits of those who fought during the Great Patriotic War. The first time this march was held in Tomsk in 2012 on the initiative of workers of the local TV2 channel. In 2013, the march was held in 120 places in Russia, and since 2014 the initiative has also spread to other countries.

¹⁴ One proof of the effectiveness of this move in the international context is the statement by the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, who went to Moscow for the 9 May celebrations. The secretary announced that initially he thought the march was an anti-governmental demonstration, but later he understood that this was a 'pro-governmental manifestation', adding that Putin certainly "deserved the love of the nation." See <http://lifenews.ru/news/153701>

Conclusions

The unprecedented grandeur of the Victory Day celebrations this year, including the scale of the military parade, indicate that the myth of the Great Patriotic War is being more and more intensively used in the Russian public discourse, and that the government wants it to plug the gap caused by the lack of a 'Russian idea', to consolidate a nation which is still looking for a foundation to build their identity on. It should be expected that a strategy of this kind will make Russia more assertive as regards the 'defence of historical truth': it cannot be ruled out that legal acts preventing unrestricted discussions in this field will be passed

in the future¹⁵, and it is likely that the arguments for passing them will include the need to respect the needs, memory and expectations of the public.

This kind of narrative is also intended to implement foreign policy goals. The most important of them include gaining approval from foreign partners for Russia to play the dominant role in the post-Soviet area; the reconstruction of the European security architecture to fit Russian interests; and the maximisation of the economic and political benefits of co-operation with the West without any concessions from Moscow.

¹⁵ The appeal to counteract the 'forgery of history' by legal measures was reiterated in early May. See the statement made by the member of the Council of the Federation, Lilia Gumerova on 5 May 2015: <http://rusnovosti.ru/posts/372654>

EDITORS: Adam Eberhardt, Marek Menkiszak
Katarzyna Kazimierska, Anna Łabuszewska
TRANSLATION: Ilona Duchnowicz
CO-OPERATION: Nicholas Furnival
DTP: Wojciech Mańkowski

The views expressed by the authors of the papers do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Polish authorities

Centre for Eastern Studies
Koszykowa 6a, 00-564 Warsaw
phone: +48 | 22 | 525 80 00
e-mail: info@osw.waw.pl

Visit our website: www.osw.waw.pl