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Katarina Živec

**INFLUENCE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND COUNTER MEMORY ON
FOREIGN POLICY OF LITHUANIA**

'Battle for Memory' on the International Stage

The study of international relations has in recent years increasingly incorporated and relied on the research of collective memory to explain existing patterns in global politics. The constructivist approach to international relations which emphasizes the embeddedness of international relations into socially, historically and individually constructed values and institutions of states increasingly elucidates the role of collective memory in policy-making on all levels of governance. Differing collective memories of individual nations as social groups, concerning extraordinary events in their histories, may account for the divergence in their respective foreign policies. The Post-Soviet landscape, specifically, combines not only varying, but truly polarizing collective memories of newly independent states. The defining moments of all post-Soviet nations have occurred during the Soviet era and typically focus on World War II and independence. As a result of the differing interpretations and recollections of these events, collective memories of post-Soviet states contribute significantly to their national identities and fuel their domestic, but more importantly their foreign policies. Therefore, the study of the development of collective memory of Baltic states and the evolution of their foreign policies in relation to Russia as the heir of the USSR, is an essential part of understanding the trends in



international relations of the post-Soviet landscape.

Collective memory – the concept and politics

The notion of collective memory¹ is ascribed growing significance in international relations because of its strong relation to concepts of power, representation and identity.

“Collective memory, as we conceive it here, signifies narratives of past experience constituted by and behalf of specific groups within which they find meaningful forms of identification that may empower” (Jordan and Weedon 2012, 143). As such, collective memory of a state is a system of representation of the past as perceived by the society, that is influenced by a confluence of actual experiences of citizens and official history. It is selective and highly symbolic, subject to continual evolution (Nikiforov 2017).

Firstly, collective memory is a socially constructed concept that is unique to individual social groups. Due to the crucial role of cultural institutions and practices in the development of collective memory, the latter differs greatly among various social groups and is therefore primarily ‘a terrain of cultural politics’ (Jordan and Weedon 2012). Furthermore, social groups reproduce their understandings of the past via social institutions and cultural practices in a way that constitutes their identity and explains existing power relations.

Secondly, as a product of social interactions, collective memory is constructed by both collective social consciousness and official discourse, thus including both emotional and intellectual components (Nikiforov 2017). Hence, the responsibility of the state to shape

¹ Collective memory is often referred to also as cultural memory.



collective memory through information transmission such as education is of crucial importance, as it reinforces and reflects existing mass social consciousness of past events (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017).

Thirdly, the selective and symbolic nature of collective memory indicates that its dependence on cultural interpretations of history allow it to become the most significant element that enables social groups to come to terms with their past, especially when these memories focus on traumatic events. Both traumatic and positive memories, however, serve as great sources of collective strength and pride, and thus become key elements of a social identity (Langenbacher and Shain 2010). The role of collective memory in the study of international relations is especially important as collective memory of a state or nation as a broad social group constitutes a national identity based on the nation's historic experience – it is the core of national identity. Furthermore, collective memory is a key element of political culture, because it brings forth historical dimensions and a confluence of private and public ideologies and behaviors (Langenbacher and Shain 2010). As such, collective memory has enormous impact on state governance, since its “appropriate reflection becomes a way of meeting domestic political and ideological challenges and an instrument of international politics and diplomacy” (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017, 340). This is especially so in states that have experienced significant historic trauma, such as war or genocide, where the determination of responsibility through the construction of nations' foreign policies bears important international ramifications. Moreover, collective memory has more broadly affected international institutions, laws and norms, for



example the creation of the UN or ICC (Langenbacher and Shain 2010).

In analyzing the collective memory of a particular nation as a unit of varying social groups, in which a particular coalition of social groups has sufficient power to institutionalize their collective memory in domestic and foreign policies of the state, the notion of counter memory is extremely important. “Counter memory is memory that challenges the interest at stake in collective memory,” (Jordan and Weedon 2012, 150) and typically represents a cultural interpretation of the past by a marginalized group within a state. Sometimes, counter memory may challenge the hegemonic collective memory and empower the marginalized group (Jordan and Weedon 2012), however, such a shift in existing power relations may cause significant domestic conflict and distress.

Consequently, collective memory is highly contested. Not only are the links between direct experience and collective memory weakened as memories are passed down to younger generations, but power relations among different social groups that produce collective memory and counter memory, as well as conflict between official and social interpretations of past experiences all distort collective memory in different ways. Collective memory is therefore a “battle for the past..., since historical memory is the value-based foundation of national self-awareness. It is the source of ... the values and ideals that define a nation’s strength, its ability to develop and to overcome difficulties, and its ability to withstand historical ordeals” (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017, 338).



Differences in the development of collective memory are especially important and apparent in post-Soviet states in the Baltics. Furthermore, the evolution of collective memory is clearly exemplified in Lithuanian foreign policy configuration concerning Russia.

Collective memory of Lithuania

“Collective memory is a predominant way that history comes to life to affect the political culture of the present” (Langenbacher and Shain 2010, 26-27). Lithuania is an exemplary case of how collective memory of extraordinary historic events, namely World War II and the restoration of independence in 1991, comes to affect the national identity of Lithuanians, as well as Lithuanian domestic and foreign policy. Furthermore, the case of Lithuania presents clearly the contestation for collective memory both in the Soviet past as a result of the difference between official and social collective memory, and in the present, manifested as the struggle between the Lithuanian collective memory and the counter memory of the ethnic Russian minority. Despite these struggles, however, the hegemonic Lithuanian collective memory resulted in a decisively anti-Russian foreign policy soon after 1991.

A reconstruction of an independent Lithuania was greatly dependent on the reconstruction of Lithuanian collective memory of the 20th century. Ironically, it was Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika that stimulated the renaissance of Lithuanian culture and identity after a period of Soviet repression, officially dictated version of history and Russification (Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013). In doing so, a long suppressed collective memory of ethnic Lithuanians emerged that is mutually exclusive with the Russian narrative. As a consequence, “memory politics related to the Second World War and its aftermath was seen as a zero-sum game” (Budryte 2016, 759).



The collective memory of Lithuania focuses on two transformative events – World War II and the restoration of independence in 1991. ‘Objective’ history describes how the brief inter-war period of Lithuanian independence and parliamentary democracy was interrupted with the first Soviet occupation based on the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between 1940 and 1941, and resulted in mass political repression and deportations, an assault on economic, social and cultural structures that failed to reflect Soviet state ideology, as well as an immediate elimination of the intelligentsia (Bater, et al. 2018, Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013). After the German invasion of the USSR, German occupation of Lithuania between 1941 and 1944 resulted in the genocide of Lithuanian Jews. This was followed with a second Soviet occupation until 1945, which resumed wide-spread repression to consolidate Soviet control of Lithuania. Both Germans and Soviet occupiers were met with a Lithuanian resistance movement throughout World War II, including USSR-supported partisans or the Home Army (Budryte 2016).

Unlike most World War II narratives, Lithuanian collective memory focuses little on the German occupation and violence. Instead, wide-spread narratives refer to the German occupation as a preemptive strike against a certain Soviet attack on Europe as a whole, based on the Communist desire for a global socialist revolution, as well as to the incorrectness of the belief that the Soviet army liberated Europe from fascism; rather, Lithuanian collective memory portrays the Soviet occupation of Europe (Nikiforov 2017). Thus, the early 1990s “emergence of the ‘fighting and suffering’ memory regime, which focuses on the political repression, mass deportations and anti-Soviet resistance under Stalin” (Budryte 2016, 755) became the foundation for Lithuanian collective memory.



The three most important elements of World War II in Lithuanian collective memory are the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the annexation by the USSR, and Stalin's repression. The new collective memory of the anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania directly rejected the 'Lithuanisation' of Soviet partisans who fought against German occupiers, first introduced by the USSR in an effort to make the 'Great Patriotic War' an element of mutual, fraternal Soviet history (Budryte 2016). For example, while the Soviet official memory of the resistance movement vilified Lithuanian fighters as Nazis or enemies of the state, in 1990 the Lithuanian parliament recovered a 1949 document signed by anti-Soviet resistance fighters as a declaration of sovereignty, and voted it into a legal document, 'thus emphasizing the importance of the anti-Soviet resistance for post-Soviet Lithuanian identity' (Budryte 2016, 758). In addition to such reconstruction of collective memory of World War II, Lithuanians today interpret Soviet 'liberation' from Nazi invasion as a half-century occupation and repression (Berg and Ehin 2009). Furthermore, the collective Lithuanian memory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Yalta agreement is characterized as a betrayal on behalf of Western Europe, which left Lithuania and the rest of East Europe victim to Soviet domination and aggression (Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013).

Soviet rule over Lithuania as a socialist republic continued until 1990, when Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to proclaim independence (Bater, et al. 2018). This was followed with economic and political sanctions by the USSR, as well as the January 1991 seizure of strategic buildings and Vilnius TV tower by the Soviet army in an attempt to overthrow the independent government. The attack resulted in the death of 14 civilians but ultimately failed to



reincorporate Lithuania in the unraveling USSR (Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013). After finally gaining its independence, Lithuania immediately initiated political and market reform in an effort to join the EU and NATO, which it achieved in 2004. Lithuanian collective memory of the restoration of independence is a continuation of the reinterpretation of the history of World War II and Soviet rule, that first occurred in the 1990s. Just as the decades under the USSR are perceived as a period of an illegal occupation, the *restoration* of independence is crucial in establishing the continuity of Lithuanian nation and national identity. For the vast majority of the population, the 1990 independence was the first truly transformative social and political event, and as such crucially defines Lithuanians' collective memory (Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013).

In sum, “the bedrock of Baltic statehood is the doctrine of legal continuity, which construes the three states as restored states, re-emerging from 50 years of Soviet occupation” (Berg and Ehin 2009, 9). The reconfiguration of Lithuanian collective memory that was made possible by the liberation of Lithuania from the USSR and its policies of a Soviet historic narrative permeating all spheres of life, including the official memory of World War II, was crucial in the reconstruction of Lithuanian national identity, as well as Lithuanian domestic and foreign policy.



Counter memory abroad

When considering Lithuanian collective memory as the hegemonic form of collective memory in Lithuania, mainly shared by ethnic Lithuanians and manifested in both domestic and foreign policies of the state, counter memory that exists both internally and externally holds an important role. These interpretations of the past are mutually exclusive and result in continual conflict – while, externally, Lithuanian collective memory contradicts both the collective memory of West Europe and most importantly of Russia, it internally counters collective memory of the ethnic Russian minority within Lithuanian borders. As a result, the Lithuanian version of history is challenged on both national and international levels. The main stage for this ‘battle for memory’, however, is located in international politics.

The main source of counter memory that fuels conflict within and outside of Lithuania is Russia. As the heir to the USSR, the ‘most favored nation’ within the former USSR, but most importantly the architect of the Soviet-centric memory of the Great Patriotic War, it largely preserved the official memory of the past from the Soviet era.

“The political elites in power exert an enormous influence on historical ..., because their foreign policy orientations include preserving or reexamining the net results of past wars in a process that, as a rule, engages current geopolitical, political, economic, and other interests.” (Seniavskii and Seniacskaia 2017, 350). As the political elites in the 1990s governed a population in distress, with a loss of purpose and diminished national identity, new Russian leadership increasingly



turned to ‘Sovietcentrism’ – the nostalgia for Soviet heroes and Soviet power (Kirschenbaum 2011), to inspire its citizens. Moreover, Putin’s presidency has intensified this process and facilitated the consolidation of Russian collective memory as a “revived cult of the Great Patriotic War... the only Soviet myth that survived the destruction of Soviet mythology without the slightest damage” (Kirschenbaum 2011, 98). The collective memory of the Soviet past is entirely based on World War II and focuses only little attention to other important events of the former USSR, for example its dissolution. Instead, the USSR is remembered through the lens of the Great Patriotic War and Victory day – perhaps the only bright moment of its existence, when the Soviet military power saved Europe by defeating fascism on the Eastern front (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017). Furthermore, while the history of the Bolshevik revolution, as well as Soviet domestic and foreign policy all underwent extensive reconsideration both in the USSR under Gorbachev’s policies of glasnost and perestroika, and in the new Russia, the memory of the Soviet victory in World War II remains unchallenged and a pillar of Russian national identity, specifically Russian masculinity (Kirschenbaum 2011, Nikiforov 2017).

The manifestation of Russian collective memory is particularly evident in annual Victory day parades, which serve a dual purpose; as a commemoration of Russian strength and invincibility during World War II the Victory day parade primarily displays emotional veterans and symbols of the past, as well as directly indicates present Russian might, thus inspiring young generations and promoting Russian national identity. For Russians, Victory day “marks a victory of civilization over barbarism in the form of fascism,” and commemorates “... the last event in which modern Russia can proudly claim something universal in its specificity” (Malksoo 2009, 664).



Russian counter memory to the Lithuanian collective memory of World War II also allows for the persistence of the collective memory of a minority social group within the Lithuanian borders – the ethnic Russian population, which across the Baltic states faces high levels of discrimination and statelessness. Since 1990s, the revival of Lithuanian ethnic and national consciousness caused a “fragmentation of memory tied to ethnic identity. Ethnic Russian’s collective memory reveals a Moscow-centric orientation” (Corning, Gaidys and Schuman 2013, 382), whereas ethnic Lithuanians’ collective memory consists of previously described anti-Soviet interpretations of the past. Such a polarizing memory of the shared past contributes to constant domestic conflict in Lithuania. This, however, further fuels the strife in bilateral relations between Russia and Lithuania.

An additional source of counter memory to the Lithuanian collective memory is West Europe. Although specific states in West Europe certainly have developed their own, unique collective memories based on domestic events and experiences, as well as ethnic, cultural, religious and social characteristics, the similarities in their collective memory of World War II in particular contradict the Lithuanian collective memory. As a consequence, West European collective memory functions as counter memory in Lithuanian society, because it challenges existing national perspectives of their past and identity.



“The Baltic state and Poland have emerged in the vanguard of the so-called ‘new European’ commemorative politics, demanding the inclusion of their wartime experiences in the pan-European remembrance of this war” (Malksoo 2009, 654). Such calls for the recognition of subaltern East European World War II experience stem from two main reasons. Firstly, the different power relations within the European Union have caused an unequal acceptance of conflicting collective memories of specific states. Secondly, the need for reaffirmation of Lithuanian collective memory stems from the need to secure Lithuanian identity, for which collective memory is crucial (Malksoo 2009).

Lithuania, as well as other East European nations, has been during the Soviet period deprived from forming an appropriate collective memory, as the official Soviet history dictated all spheres of life. Once the re-evaluation of collective memory has started in the 1990s, however, EU states expected the Baltic states to accommodate for differing West European perspectives. While crimes committed by the Soviet regime received little attention in West Europe, European journalists and historians recently started to discover evidence of cooperation between anti-Soviet partisans and Nazi officials during the Holocaust, as well as evidence of that same partisans targeting civilians (Budryte 2016). West European condemnation of Nazism and Fascism was given quickly, however, the crucial antagonist of the Lithuanian people – the USSR, was not perceived as negatively as Nazi Germany and its crimes against humanity. Whereas during the EU integration process Lithuania and others were willing to forgo their national identities and related collective memories, today the ‘Baltic calls for equal remembrance



of their pasts emerge as an essential part of their individuation process as European, of their becoming a European subject” (Malksoo 2009, 655).

‘Battle for memory’ on the international stage

In determining the role of collective memory in foreign policy-making and broader international relations, the argument must show precisely the *nature of memories*, the *availability of choice* in policy-making and *a compatibility between collective memory and foreign policy* (Langenbacher and Shain 2010).

Thus, in establishing a link between Lithuania’s collective memory and its effect on foreign policy, it is important to stress that after 1991, Lithuania had much maneuvering space in formulating its policy towards Russia; “in 1991, the prospects for creating good neighborly relations looked promising” (Berg and Ehin 2009, 3). Not only was Lithuania only starting to begin its process of formulating a coherent collective memory and national identity free of official Soviet propaganda or any other external influence, it has also not yet joined multilateral organizations that would require it to express its explicitly pro-European orientation through an aggressive foreign policy against the weakened Russia.

Quite on the contrary, up to 2004 as Lithuania joined both NATO and the EU, the integration process compelled Lithuania to moderate its overtly anti-Russian sentiments, settle border disputes, as well as normalize relations with domestic, ethnically Russian minorities in



accordance with EU standards (Berg and Ehin 2009). Soon after, however, the ‘permafrost’ in Lithuanian-Russian relations worsened. “Seeking a pan-European acknowledgement of East European sufferings in the war, has become one of the key missions of Polish and Baltic post-EU accession foreign policy” (Malksoo 2009, 660). Thus, the issue of Lithuanian collective memory of World War II became the driving force of its foreign policy in relation to both the EU and Russia.

The Baltic states today continually initiate discourse comparing Nazi and Stalinist regimes and their crimes in an effort to emphasize USSR’s collaboration with Germany, demand official apologies and recognition for Stalinist repression from the Russian government, as well as pressure the EU to condemn Soviet crimes on the same level as they had the Nazi crimes. Such invoking of past events and aggression is in Russia perceived as overt pressure and threats, thus severely inhibiting the possibility of an improvement in Lithuanian-Russian relations (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017). The president of Lithuania has, for example, refused to accept Putin’s invitation to attend the Victory Day parade in Moscow in 2005 on the 60th anniversary of World War II victory, that was to be attended by many world leaders. She also urged Lithuanians to not celebrate the occasion domestically (Nikiforov 2017). Furthermore, Lithuania blocked EU-Russian negotiations for a new PCA in 2008, continually supported democratic reform in post-Soviet landscape that Russia considers its ‘near abroad’, and backed efforts by Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova to join NATO (Berg and Ehin 2009). The Lithuanian diaspora in the U.S. in collaboration with broader Baltic diplomacy has, for example, successfully lobbied for the U.S. Senate’s resolution demanding from Russia a statement of guilt



in an illegal occupation of the Baltic Trio (Seniavskii and Seniavskaia 2017).

While Lithuanian efforts have certainly been matched, if not raised by Russian aggressive foreign policy that includes measures of hybrid warfare, it is clear that Lithuania has chosen to bandwagon the hegemonic power – the EU regionally, and the

USA globally. Thus, NATO and EU now serve as central stages for the ‘battle for memory’ between Russia and Lithuania, while at the same time trying to settle its own internal disputes over varying collective memories of Western and Eastern Europe.

“Baltic-Russian conflict can thus be seen as structural in the sense that it stems from an in-built antagonism at the level of identity constructions underlying state- and nationhood” (Berg and Ehin 2009, 9). Due to the consolidation of collective memories in Lithuania and polarizing counter memories in Russia that crucially define the sense of national purpose and identity in both countries, the conflict is unlikely to disappear. While the asymmetry of power prevents Lithuania to challenge its historic oppressor directly, its foreign policy allows it to redirect its hostility and express animosity on the international stage. In seeking international ramifications for the historic trauma Lithuanians had experienced during World War II, Lithuania has developed a foreign policy aiming to rectify causes of the trauma – namely Russian aggression and expansionism (Langenbacher and Shain 2010).

The gloomy sentiments concerning the Soviet past shared by all Baltic states are of profound importance in shaping their collective memory and resulting national identities. The



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belief that the Russian people have not yet been held accountable for the horrors inflicted onto the ethnic minorities of the USSR will continue to guide Lithuanian paranoid policy-making. As “the late Estonian president Lennart Meri remarked with some irony in the early 1990s ... - everybody was talking about the death of communism, yet no one had actually seen its body” (Malksoo 2009, 661).



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