

Talking Politics: Vladimir Putin's Narrative on Contemporary History (2019-2022)

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Abstract

This paper looks at Vladimir Putin's public statements and articles devoted specially to historical issues which were published in 2019 through 2021 (with reference to the first such article published in 2009). The Russian President's statements and extended texts on history are scrutinized in this paper as political messages having a certain target audience and political goals. The analysis has revealed a rapid evolution of Putin's approach to relations with the West in 2019-2021, from attempts to reanimate the dialogue to a sharp confrontation. It has also proved the

hypothesis that Putin's views on history serve not so much as the basis for his political decisions as instruments of their legitimization for society and opponents.

Keywords: Putin, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the EU, memory politics, memory of WWII.

Vladimir Putin has revisited history in his speeches quite often, both as Russia's president and prime minister. A thorough analysis of his references to the past in his speeches up to 2018 was done by Olga Malinova (2015; 2019; 2022). There are some other detailed studies of this subject (for example, Pakhalyuk, 2018). In most of Putin's speeches on topical issues, brief references to the past served as spices adding flavor to the main dish. Quite often, Putin spoke on the occasion of various memorable dates and anniversaries, when a look back on history is implied by default. Also, there were somewhat "didactic" speeches at meetings with members of the "historical community" that contained recommendations as to how to organize the work of historians, history classes at school, etc.

During this rather long period Putin authored a special article on history only once. It was a piece entitled "Pages of History—Cause for Mutual Claims or Basis for Reconciliation and Partnership," which *Gazeta Wyborcza* published in a run-up to Prime Minister Putin's speech at Westerplatte during his visit to Poland (Putin, 2009).

Since the end of 2019, Putin's appeals to historical issues have taken on a new quality and form. There were comprehensive speeches and two special articles by the head of state on historical issues—something unprecedented since the 2009 essay. Loyalist organizations, such as the Russian Military Historical Society and Russian Historical Society accepted them as being above criticism, while Putin's political opponents were quick to rail against them. And only on very few occasions these texts became the subject of solid critical analysis. For example, historian Stephen Kotkin (2020) rightly noted that historical

articles published by the incumbent president of a large state were rare and therefore worthy of close scrutiny. He examined Putin's article on World War II in detail to find no significant factual errors in it, but at the same time disagreed with some of Putin's interpretations. Another American, Philip D. Zelikow (2020), opposed Putin in the press in a similar fashion.

For all the attention, both positive and negative, that Putin's recent statements on history have received, it is striking that they have hardly been analyzed as political messages, although they should be undoubtedly regarded as such in the first place. In other words, we are still to examine the target audience of these speeches and their political objectives. This article offers answers to these questions, which, I believe, significantly complement our understanding of the dynamics of political processes in this dramatic period.

2009 — A HAND OF RECONCILIATION

First, let us turn to 2009, when Putin set a precedent for a comprehensive written statement on a sensitive historical topic. His visit to Poland at the invitation of his counterpart, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, took place on the day that marked the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. It was preceded by a long period of very uneasy relations between Moscow and Warsaw, as well as between the collective West and Russia. The thaw in relations between Poland and Russia took place alongside the "reset" in Washington's relations with Moscow, launched by the new, Barack Obama-led administration. So, Putin's speech at Westerplatte and his article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* should be examined in this particular context.

Predictably, the focus of Putin's historical arguments was on the German-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of August 23, 1939, and on the Katyn massacre. Putin put both these events in a broader context, stating from the outset that "the prewar situation in Europe is often presented as fragmentary and devoid of a cause-and-effect analysis." Putin prefaced the fundamental claim that "one can justifiably condemn the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded in August 1939" and assess it as "immoral" along with a number of earlier events, namely

the 1938 Munich Agreement that France and Britain concluded with Hitler, the dismembering of Czechoslovakia (with active participation of Poland), and the Anschluss of Austria. Speaking about the execution of Polish prisoners of war in 1940, Putin said that “the Katyn and Mednoye memorials, as well as the tragic fate of Russian soldiers taken prisoner by Poland during the 1920 war, should become symbols of common sorrow and mutual forgiveness” (Putin, 2009). In a speech in Gdansk, Putin repeated this formula once again to condemn the Soviet leadership's actions and urge other countries to repent their sins of that period. “All attempts to appease the Nazis by concluding various agreements and pacts with them were morally unacceptable, and politically dangerous and senseless. These mistakes must be acknowledged. Our country has done this. The State Duma condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. We expect other countries to do the same” (NG, 2009).

Putin's speech and article was emphatically respectful and conciliatory in wording, which in itself was a message sent to several recipients. In the spring and fall of 2009, the European Parliament and the OSCE passed resolutions suggesting that August 23 should be marked as a day of remembrance for the victims of Nazism and Stalinism (Miller, 2016). Politicians in the Baltic states played the most active role in making this decision. In Russia, those events did not remain unnoticed, and sparked criticism and protests. Tensions in relations with the Baltic republics and Poland had been growing since 2005, when the idea of boycotting Victory Day celebrations due in Moscow on May 9 was widely discussed and partially implemented in these countries. The 2007 campaign involving the relocation of the Bronze Soldier memorial in Estonia and other similar events added fuel to the fire. Putin's Munich speech in 2007 was the most graphic manifestation (but far from the only one) of how unhappy Moscow was with its relations with the West. Ahead of Putin's visit to Poland, there had been many statements in the Russian media that the trip would be both ill-timed and meaningless. The balanced and conciliatory tone of the Russian prime minister's statements was a clear signal to the Russian public that the country's authorities would be ready to give up

confrontational politics, if they saw an adequate partner on the other side.¹ Such a signal did follow from Tusk. Putin accepted it, and in this speech, he carefully avoided naming the Baltic states, waiting to see if they would change their bearings as well. He confined himself to mentioning anonymous opponents “who distorted history.”

And, of course, Old Europe was high on the list of the recipients of Putin’s message. Criticizing the historical policy of the EU newcomers—the Baltic states and Poland—Moscow traditionally turned to Old Europe whose position was strikingly different from the consensual memory politics that had formed in the EU by the end of the 20th century. Moscow was asking Berlin and Paris to call the newly-admitted EU members to order and was bewildered to see the newcomers from Eastern Europe begin to change the culture of memory in the EU. It was to the leaders of the EU and the U.S. that the final words of Putin’s article and his appeal to the consensus of the Nuremberg trials were addressed: “The creation of the anti-Hitler coalition was, without an exaggeration, a turning point in the history of the 20th century and one of the largest, trend-setting events of the last century. The world saw that countries and peoples, whatever their distinctions, diversity of national aspirations and tactical contradictions, are capable of uniting in the name of the future to counter global evil. Today, when we are held together by common values, we are simply obliged to use this experience of partnership to effectively counter common challenges and threats, expand the global space for cooperation, and erase such anachronisms as dividing lines, whatever their nature” (Putin, 2009).

2019 — DISSAPOINTMENT

Next, let us make a leap one decade forward, into pre-COVID 2019. During President Putin’s meeting with Valdai Club experts on October 3, 2019, German political scientist Alexander Rahr asked the Russian leader about the resolution the European Parliament had adopted two

¹ This circumstance often escapes the attention of those researchers who mark 2009 as the point of escalation in Russia’s confrontational politics of memory with reference to the creation of the well-known Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests. See, for example, Kasianov, 2022.

weeks earlier (Kremlin, 2019a). The EP resolution “On the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe” of September 19 placed equal and exclusive blame on the Soviet Union and Germany for the outbreak of World War II (EP, 2019).² Putin then did not admit that he had not seen the resolution yet, but his answer, which consisted of general reasoning, clearly testified to this. However, he remembered the question, and soon studied the resolution, as well as the circumstances of its adoption.

On December 20, 2019, it became clear that he found that resolution extremely important. He mentioned it in his opening remarks in a very unusual lengthy speech at the informal CIS summit in St. Petersburg: “I was surprised, even somewhat hurt by one of the latest European Parliament resolutions dated September 19, 2019 ‘On the Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe.’ We, too, have always strived to ensure the quality of history, its truthfulness, openness and objectivity. I want to emphasize once again that this applies to all of us, because we are to some extent descendants of the former Soviet Union. When they talk about the Soviet Union, they talk about us” (Kremlin, 2019b). The first intended recipients of that speech were immediately clear—the leaders of the CIS countries sitting at the same table with Putin. He would mention their states as heirs, along with Russia, of the memory of victory in WWII, more than once in that speech to emphasize that the dismantling of monuments to the liberator soldiers in Eastern Europe offended people in their republics, too.³ While addressing the CIS leaders, Putin also had in mind the group of countries where, as is now quite clear, he could find the sole source of more or less consistent support for and solidarity with Russia's World War II narrative (for more about the memory of World War II outside Europe and the post-Soviet space see Miller and Solovyov, 2022).

Yet the leaders of the CIS countries were not, of course, the only target audience, let alone the main one. Quotations from Churchill and

² For Russian media comments on this resolution see Buldakova, 2021.

³ It is noteworthy that there have been no reports about any protests by other CIS countries, except Russia, against the dismantling of monuments to Soviet soldiers. Meanwhile, their participation in such protests would have been of great importance at that time.

U.S. politicians of the mid-20th century, meant to show that there had been people in the West who had a correct understanding of both the wickedness of the Munich agreements and the great role of the Red Army in the defeat of Nazi Germany, were accompanied by this remark: “I would very much like our colleagues in the West in general and in Europe in particular to keep this in mind. And if they do not want to listen to us, let them heed the respected leaders of their own countries, who knew what they were saying and had first-hand knowledge of the events” (Kremlin, 2019b). By the moment when Putin was making this speech, not a single prominent German or French politician had commented on the European Parliament’s resolution yet, and it was important for Putin to hear such a reaction.

It was only after a long while that a German politician of authority, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, condemned the speculations about the equal responsibility of the Soviet Union and Germany and stated that Germany alone was responsible for unleashing the war and the Holocaust (Maas and Wirsching, 2020). However, his speech at that time was already dissonant with the general tone of statements by Western politicians on this subject. We will get back to this issue below.

Poland was another addressee of Putin’s message. This time, in contrast to what he said in 2009, he did not bother about political correctness at all. On the contrary, he clearly provoked the Poles. Almost half of his speech was devoted to the description of the Polish elites’ unsightly behavior on the eve of World War II. The published transcript of the speech was even edited: for example, the words “bastard” and “anti-Semitic pig” Putin used in relation to the ambassador of pre-war Poland Jozef Lipski were deleted from it. It would be naive to think that Putin was simply “avenging” the leading role of the Polish EP members in the adoption of the September 19, 2019 EP resolution (one of its co-authors was Radosław Tomasz Sikorski).

Putin wished to sound provocative, and he did hit the nail on the head. During the next two weeks the Polish media brimmed with the most aggressive and angry comments. Polish officials made quite a few statements in international periodicals, too (see, for example,

Ziemska, 2029; Radziwinowicz, 2019; Gazeta, 2019; Świerczyński, 2019; Memches, 2019; Łabuszewska, 2019).

What was the political pragmatism of this provocation?

2020 — INVITATION TO DIALOGUE

Putin was making his speech a month before high-profile international events timed to mark the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army on January 27, 1945. Commemorative events on this day in Poland's Oswiecim are a tradition. By the end of December though, it was clear that Putin had not been invited to Poland, which was well expected, but that by no means eased the insulting effect of this gesture. Meanwhile, a forum to commemorate the liberation of Auschwitz and the Holocaust was also scheduled for January 23 at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. Putin was assigned a leading role in that event—he was supposed to make a speech and inaugurate a monument in Jerusalem to the victims of the siege of Leningrad, which can be considered an undeniable example of the genocide of Soviet people during World War II.⁴ More than forty world leaders took part in the forum. After Putin's speech in December, Polish President Andrzej Duda found himself in *zugzwang*. Duda could not afford to go to the forum and silently listen to Putin's speech, which could again contain some painful remarks for Poland. In defiance of Warsaw's requests, Duda was denied an opportunity to speak at the forum after Putin. The Polish president had no choice other than to refuse to participate, which was also a politically disadvantaged move (Nowiński, 2020; Forsal, 2020).⁵ In terms of attendance, the forum in Jerusalem by far surpassed the memorial events at Auschwitz, which was a success of Moscow's symbolic historical policy.

Meanwhile, Putin's address in Jerusalem had a fundamentally different tone in contrast to his December speech. Speaking about

⁴ It was on the eve of the 75th anniversary of Victory Day that the issue of the genocide of the Soviet people began to take an ever more prominent place on the agenda of the historical policy in Russia. This topic had both a foreign policy emphasis, as a response to the narrative of two totalitarianisms, and a domestic political implication. Moreover, the internal political significance of the theme of the sufferings the Soviet (and Russian) people endured during the Nazi occupation kept growing amid the events of 2020-2022, while the international one was dwindling.

⁵ At the last moment, Zelensky also refused to attend the forum, although, unlike Duda, he had arrived in Jerusalem.

the Holocaust, he said that “this crime had accomplices.” “In terms of cruelty, they often surpassed their patrons,” he said. “Death factories, concentration camps were run not only by the Nazis, but also by their accomplices in many European countries.”

This remark can be interpreted as an allusion to those in Eastern Europe who did not repent participation in the Holocaust, but in general it was quite consistent with the European memorial consensus regarding the Holocaust. No country was named, though. In all other respects, Putin’s speech was very reserved both in tone and in comments, which was in stark contrast to what he had said a month earlier.

The emphasis was on the call for dialogue to reaffirm the inviolability of the World War II narrative that was enshrined by the victorious powers. “Destruction of the past and lack of unity in the face of threats can lead to terrible consequences. We must have the courage to be straight about this and do everything to defend peace. I think an example could and should be set by the founding countries of the United Nations, the five powers that bear special responsibility for the preservation of civilization. We have discussed this with several of our colleagues and, as far as I know, have received a generally positive response to holding a meeting of the heads of state of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council: Russia, China, the United States, France, and Britain. We can hold it in any country, in any place that our colleagues would find convenient. Russia is ready for such a serious discussion. We intend to send this proposal to the leaders of the Five without delay” (Kremlin, 2020).

In this way, Putin tried to draw a line between Poland’s (and the Baltic republics’) revisionism, which he attacked so vigorously in December 2019, and “the powers responsible for safeguarding civilization.” In the year of the 75th anniversary of the victory in World War II Putin addressed the leaders of the UN Security Council’s permanent member-states with an invitation to meet and confirm the inviolability of the World War II narrative, which their leaders built in 1945. In other words, in 2020, Putin confirmed his readiness for dialogue-oriented, agonistic memory policy that he demonstrated in 2009 (Berger and Kansteiner, 2021).

The events of 2020, the 75th anniversary year, were expectedly rich in symbolic steps in memory politics. Those steps also exposed serious discord. Perhaps the most illustrative moment in this respect was May 7, 2020. On that day, as we have already noted, German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass published an article in which he objected to the “two totalitarianisms” narrative. In the meantime, U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, together with the foreign ministers of nine post-communist NATO member-countries, published a declaration that condemned “Russia’s attempts of falsifying WW II history” and only briefly mentioned the events of the war, focusing on the occupation of the Baltic republics and the suffering of those countries that fell under the Soviet Union’s influence after the war. In this way the United States openly assumed the role of the main sponsor of the memory policy pursued by the countries of “Young Europe” destroying the former EU memorial consensus. The focus had shifted from the war and the role of the Red Army in defeating Germany and Japan to “postwar occupation” (Joint Statement, 2020). That shift revealed the trend towards a decisive revision of the World War II narrative, but it also made obvious that this course was not shared by everyone in the West.

In these circumstances, Putin came out with the promised article on World War II. Its hastily and poorly translated English version appeared in *The National Interest* on June 18 (Putin, 2020a). The presidential website published the original Russian version the next day (Putin, 2020b).

The article was, in fact, a declaration of intent in the field of memory politics in the international scene. Once again Putin stressed that the causes of the war were not confined to the Soviet-German pact of August 1939, that it was a complex set of events and processes, for which many countries were responsible. He dismissed the interpretation of the Baltic states’ accession to the Soviet Union as “occupation.” Citing the figures of Soviet and German losses on the Eastern Front, he emphasized the decisive role of the Soviet Union in the defeat of Nazi Germany. He also challenged the thesis about the Soviet occupation that merely replaced the German one, citing documents concerning the Soviet assistance to the population of

those countries that the Red Army entered in 1944-1945. In fact, he formulated the positions Russia would continue to firmly adhere to in the confrontation over war memory issues.

At the same time, Putin repeated his invitation to dialogue addressed to the permanent members of the UN Security Council, declared the opening of archives, and suggested leaving it to professional historians to discuss controversial issues. Obviously, that article was addressed primarily to the United States, where it was first published, despite the fact that if there was a country in the West where one could expect a response at that time, it was Germany.

At a Valdai Club session in October 2021, with Vladimir Putin as a guest speaker, I asked him about the prospects for a meeting of the heads of state of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council which he had proposed to hold in order to discuss, among other things, memory politics issues, and Putin did not rule out such a possibility. “The idea of the meeting received a highly positive response, and I hope it will be held eventually. This will definitely be beneficial” (Kremlin, 2021a). It was clear that in his eyes the idea had lost relevance and he no longer had the feeling that the trajectory of WWII memory politics, which made him so active from late 2019 to mid-2020, was being chartered. The narrative of two totalitarianisms, which the countries of Eastern Europe had been pressing for since their accession to the EU, became dominant. Putin’s attempt to salvage the former division of the forces of good and evil failed. The idea of the unity of values with the leading Western countries, primarily partners in the anti-Hitler coalition, to which Putin appealed in 2009, and which he called for restoring in early 2020, was a thing of the past. The emphasis was now on the value conflict with the collective West.

This does not mean that Russia’s historical policy regarding the memory of that war was not active later. On the contrary, many mnemonic actors associated with the Kremlin have worked and continue to work energetically on this track. But this work is relevant almost exclusively for the domestic audience. The West ignores it. Countries outside Europe have always had their own, very specific narratives of World War II (Miller and Solovyov, 2022).

2021 — "THE UKRAINE ISSUE"

A year after the article in *The National Interest*, Putin authored another extensive article on history. On July 12, 2021, the presidential website published Putin's article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" simultaneously in Russian and Ukrainian (Putin, 2021a).

The analysis of this article through the lens of the target audience and the pragmatic dimension of the political statement is facilitated by Putin's own explanation he made the very next day after the publication in a special interview (Kremlin, 2021b). This means that he regarded his article as a fundamental statement and felt it necessary to further clarify its key ideas. Among other things, he was asked: "Who is your article intended for, first of all, 'them' or 'us'?" Putin answered: "I do not divide people into 'them' and 'us.' In the article I also write that we are a common entity, and so it is intended for all of us, including those who live in modern Russia, those who live in modern Ukraine and the sponsors of the current political leadership of Ukraine. They should also know who we are and what we think about each other. I believe that this is important for all of us" (Ibid). It is worth looking into what Putin said in this article to all the listed recipients.

Naturally, this text was also addressed to those numerous Ukrainians who, as Putin believed, did not support the anti-Russian course of the Kiev authorities ("...there are many people in Ukraine, millions of people who want to restore relations with Russia. I am sure there are millions of them" (Ibid). Its publication in Ukrainian was supposed to emphasize the readiness to accept the cultural specificity of Ukrainians: "Of course, some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment. How should we treat that? There is only one answer: with respect!" (Putin, 2021a). And he would repeat this once again: "We respect the Ukrainian language and traditions. We respect Ukrainians' desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous" (Ibid). In the light of subsequent events, it can be assumed that Putin, in this text, while addressing the Ukrainians, hinted that even in the event of a possible armed confrontation he did not see the Ukrainians as enemies, and

understood the task not as the destruction of the Ukrainian state, but as a change of the regime in Kiev that was hostile to Russia.

Russia's residents were also the target audience. The historical narrative that Putin proposed provided a detailed explanation of irredentism. Irredentist ideas would emerge in his speeches since 2007. They were part of the argument for Crimea's reincorporation, but it was for the first time that they were described so thoroughly (for more detail see Miller, 2017).

“Modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era. We know and remember well that it was shaped—for a significant part—on the lands of historical Russia. To make sure of that, it is enough to look at the boundaries of the lands reunited with the Russian state in the 17th century and the territory of the Ukrainian SSR when it left the Soviet Union... It is no longer important what exactly the idea of the Bolshevik leaders who were chopping the country into pieces was. We can disagree about minor details, background and logics behind certain decisions. One fact is crystal clear: Russia was robbed, indeed” (Putin, 2021a). A little further on, Putin quotes Anatoly Sobchak, directly agreeing with him: “You want to establish a state of your own: you are welcome! But what are the terms? I will recall the assessment given by one of the most prominent political figures of the new Russia, first mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak. As a legal expert who believed that every decision must be legitimate, in 1992, he shared the following opinion: the republics that were the founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union. All other territorial acquisitions are subject to discussion, negotiation, given that the ground has been revoked. In other words, when you leave, take what you brought with you. This logic is hard to refute” (Ibid).

It seems that the formula, which is clearly seen in this text—“to leave,” that is, to break allied relations with Russia, is possible only with “what you brought with you,” was heard not only in Russia and Ukraine, but also in neighboring countries. One can only guess whether they were an intended target audience.

Now a few words about the “sponsors of the political leadership of today’s Ukraine.” With this expression, Putin emphasized that he was not addressing the leadership of Ukraine itself, because he did not consider it sovereign. Putin argued that the ties between Russians and Ukrainians were so strong that the project of turning Ukraine into “anti-Russia” had no chances to succeed. He said almost openly that an attempt to build “anti-Russia” would lead to a military clash, and in the event of such a clash, Russia would take back the lands that Ukraine, in his opinion, had received from Russia and thanks to Russia.

In this address, there is no invitation to dialogue anymore, there are no elements of an agonist approach which were clearly visible in Putin’s statements made in 2009 and even 2020. Here we can already see an ultimatum-like approach that would manifest itself in full six months later, in December 2021, in Putin’s message to NATO and Washington demanding written guarantees regarding Ukraine. The United States is unequivocally pointed at as the addressee. A description of the past and historical memory as a space for confrontation with the West will be offered at Putin’s meeting with historians and representatives of Russia’s traditional religions: “It is known that if someone wants to deprive a state of sovereignty and turn its citizens into vassals, they begin by rewriting the history of the country, depriving people of their roots, condemning them to oblivion. We know that such approaches, unfortunately, work and lead to tragedy for the people. Such attempts have been used against Russia too, and they continue today, but we have firmly and quickly put barriers to them” (Kremlin, 2022).

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Putin’s interest in history is genuine. One personal motive is unmistakably present in all the speeches and articles we have reviewed. Putin always mentions that he personally studied archival documents concerning the topic in question. Obviously, for him, archival documents are sources of genuine and undistorted information about the past. However, it seems to us that attempts to analyze these texts by Vladimir Putin as, above all, statements on historical issues, and to see the roots of political decisions in the author’s views on history are

fundamentally wrong. First and foremost, Putin is a politician, and we, hopefully, have shown that his speeches on historical issues should be seen first of all as communicative political acts.

The events of 2022 drew a line under Vladimir Putin's attempts to preserve or assert by means of political and historical polemics a narrative about the European past that would suit Russia. Putin's extensive speech made on February 21, 2022, which became a foreword to the special military operation in Ukraine, heralded a transition from disputes about history to practical action to change its course. The consequences of this truly epoch-making decision for memory politics and the correlation between European history narratives can be fully assessed only upon the completion of the military-political drama. One thing is certain: the scale of this upheaval leaves very slim chances of getting back to some agreed version of the European past. If at all.

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