

SPOILS OF THE PAST: MEMORY DIPLOMACY IN THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract

In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, this article draws from the conceptual framework of memory diplomacy to explore how memory has been employed in Russian and Ukrainian diplomacy since 2022 and what international goals its use aims to achieve. Previous research has continuously shown how memory is instrumentalised in domestic politics, but its employment to achieve international goals has only recently become an object of study. Nevertheless, memory diplomacy offers a valuable addition for interpreting the diplomatic practices of both Ukraine and Russia when viewed through the constructivist framework of International Relations. This research is based on a content discourse analysis of speeches and official statements from both countries, with regard to interpretations of the past, since 2022. It concludes that conflicting memories are built and employed by both parties to serve their international goals.

Keywords

Russia, Ukraine, Memory Diplomacy, Memory Studies, Diplomacy, War.



Resumo

No contexto do conflito russo-ucraniano, este artigo baseia-se no quadro concetual da diplomacia da memória para explorar a forma como a memória tem sido utilizada na diplomacia russa e ucraniana desde 2022 e quais os objetivos internacionais que a sua utilização pretende alcançar. A investigação anterior tem mostrado continuamente como a memória é instrumentalizada na política interna, mas o seu emprego para atingir objetivos internacionais só recentemente se tornou um objeto de estudo. No entanto, a diplomacia da memória oferece um complemento valioso para a interpretação das práticas diplomáticas da Ucrânia e da Rússia, quando analisadas através do quadro construtivista das Relações Internacionais. Esta investigação baseia-se numa análise de conteúdo discursiva de discursos e declarações oficiais de ambos os países, no que respeita a interpretações do passado, desde 2022. Conclui-se que memórias conflituosas são construídas e utilizadas por ambas as partes para servir os seus objetivos internacionais.

Palavras-chave

Rússia, Ucrânia, Diplomacia da Memória, Estudos sobre a Memória, Diplomacia, Guerra.

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Introduction

2014 saw armed conflict re-entering the European continent through the Crimean Peninsula. Since 2022, the escalation of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has left politicians, scholars, and civil society concerned about the dimensions of the war and the seemingly irreconcilable views of the parties involved. Despite the media coverage of and academic attention received by the conflict, the employment of memory in the diplomatic discourse issued by each side has yet to be analysed. The role of memory is usually overlooked in International Relations scholarship (Wang, 2015). When considered, the use of memory is typically studied in domestic contexts – especially its role in upholding identity and political legitimacy (Hobsbawm & Terence, 1983). However, it has been shown that countries also employ constructed memories to achieve their foreign policy goals, which are reflected in official texts, speeches, and diplomatic documents (Bachleitner, 2018). Indeed, Singh (2023) argues that the state “needs constructing” (p.45) to legitimise its actions and its identity not only towards their domestic public, but also in relation to other countries. In turn, collective memories are crucial in the construction of the state’s self and collective identities (Bachleitner, 2021).

This paper aims to explore how memory has been employed in Russian and Ukrainian diplomatic practices and what international goals its use aims to achieve, through a content discourse analysis of speeches and official statements from both countries issued since 2022. Following analysis, these will be interpreted and discussed to draw conclusions using the framework of constructivism.

The research begins with an overview of existing literature on memory diplomacy, serving as a basis for the subsequent analysis and discussion. The next section reviews previous research on the history of both countries and the historical narratives present in their official national memories. The paper then proceeds to examine political statements and public speeches delivered by key political actors, firstly from Russia and then from



Ukraine. Finally, it will dissect and interpret these diplomatic acts and compare them. The role of the narratives found in the conflict's development will be discussed, as well as the possible international goals and outcomes for the parties involved, using the constructivist framework as a backdrop. The findings will be further summarised in the final section.

Memory Diplomacy

Scholars have recently begun to explore how memory influences and is actively employed in a state's foreign policy (Wang, 2015; Bachleitner, 2018; Clarke & Duber, 2018; McGlynn & Đureinović, 2022; Klymenko & Siddi, 2022).

States' use of collective memory is always selective because it "...manipulat[es] certain bits of the national past, suppressing others, elevating still others in an entirely functional way" (Said, 2000, p. 179). In the same way that states (re)construct an official national memory to pursue domestic goals, they also do so to achieve their foreign policy goals, often with a different memory from that which prevails at the domestic level (Bachleitner, 2018, p. 4). This constructed memory is then exported to the international stage by diplomatic actors (Bachleitner, 2018, p. 4) who, according to Kathrin Bachleitner (2018), aim to signal either innocence or guilt to an international audience. States can employ memory in their diplomatic relations to various audiences, depending on their international goals. They can, for instance, attempt to form memory alliances with allied states, with states with whom they want to ally, or even sympathetic audiences in external states with antagonistic governments (Clarke & Duber, 2018; McGlynn & Đureinović, 2022). Their target audience can also be states with opposing versions of the past, in order to legitimise their own (Klymenko & Siddi, 2022). Finally, to establish a monopoly of memory and marginalise different experiences, states can export their memory to a general global audience (Chang, 2022; Nguyen, 2017).

This strategic employment of memory for international goals, directed at an international public, has been called "diplomacy with memory" or "memory diplomacy". McGlynn and Đureinović (2022) have described memory diplomacy as aiming to identify and create commonalities between a state's memory and that of other states, to form memory alliances. However, other researchers have also explored how states have used memory in their diplomatic discourse which directly contrasts with other states' memory of the same event when this helps them advance their international aims (Bachleitner, 2018; Clarke & Duber, 2018; Chang, 2022; Nguyen, 2017). Nevertheless, to analyse the use of memory diplomacy, one must always consider why and for what international goals the past is constructed and reconstructed. According to Kathrin Bachleitner (2018), one must find evidence that a selected version of memory is forged into a diplomatic strategy through looking at a country's diplomatic practices.

Researchers have contributed to the increasing knowledge on the concept of memory diplomacy as well as to the understanding of countries' diplomatic practices by exploring specific cases and countries where memory diplomacy was employed. McGlynn and Đureinović (2022) have explored how Russia exports its memory of World War II in Serbia, culminating in the formation of a memory alliance between the two countries; Bachleitner (2018) has examined how Germany constructed and exported its official



memory of guilt for its participation in World War II to achieve Western integration, in contrast to how Austria forged an official memory of innocence to achieve independence, later reconstructing it to achieve European integration; Clarke and Duber (2018) have analysed how the current Polish government has used memory to validate its vision of European history and defy that of its European partners; Nguyen (2017) has demonstrated how the United States created a monopoly of memory by exporting its narrative of the Vietnam War; and Chang (2022) has shown how China's discourse regarding its role in World War II has changed from victimhood to victory through sacrifice, to highlight its important role in founding and constructing the current world order and its responsibility in defeating aggression in the Pacific and Europe.

In her book *Collective Memory in International Relations*, Bachleitner (2021) lays out that memory can be used as a strategy when it is forged internationally for a specific goal through memory diplomacy. Moreover, memory can also become part of a state's identity when it is stable, as it reaches and spreads through domestic audiences, and continues to do so over time (Bachleitner, 2021). Memory is first employed as strategy and then becomes identity and guides state behaviour in passive ways. Memory diplomacy, as the strategic employment of memory to achieve international goals is, according to Bachleitner (2021) and in line with constructivist scholarship, a discursive international interaction which in turn constitutes and reconstitutes state identity and state behaviour (Wendt, 1999). In international conflicts, such as the one between Russia and Ukraine, it is important to pay attention to "conflicts of identities manifested in political narratives" (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2017, p.583).

Contextualising Memory Politics in Russia and Ukraine

Researchers have also discussed how historical narratives are being constructed and reconstructed to fit into both Russia and Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy agendas (Fedor et al., 2017; Klymenko, 2022; Zhurzhenko, 2022; McGlynn & Đureinović, 2022). In both countries, the memory of World War II is a recurrent theme in their official national memories and narratives, given the trauma and suffering stemming from this event (Fedor et al., 2017). According to Fedor et al. (2017), these narratives are central in building these countries' post-Soviet identity. However, they have also served as an "ideological justification for Russian aggression against [...] Ukraine" (Fedor et al., 2017, p. 5) and as a justification for Ukraine's pursuit of a pro-EU foreign policy agenda (Klymenko, 2022).

Memory politics and historical narratives between Ukraine and Russia are rooted in the complex, interwoven history of the two countries. In 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic issued the Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine from the Soviet Union (Magocsi, 2010). This act came after centuries of repression of Ukrainian identity by Moscow, of which the most well-known is the 1932-1933 Holodomor, or Ukrainian famine, (Rozenas, Schutte & Zhukov, 2017; Shapoval & Olynyk, 2008), and resulting from an enduring struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty and self-determination (Magocsi, 2002). This declaration did not, however, end the shared history that, since the 9th century, has connected Kyiv and Russia.



Since their independence from the USSR in 1991, the new states of Ukraine and Russia have struggled to navigate the international system, especially when it comes to their relation with each other and the so-called West, seen at times as a strategic partner and at others as a threat (D'Anieri, 2019; Siddi, 2022). During this period, Ukraine has ventured into a process of integration into Europe, interpreted by many as an effort by Kyiv to exit the orbit of an increasingly aggressive, authoritarian, and unstable Moscow under Vladimir Putin (D'Anieri, 2019).

Later in 2014, in response to the Maidan Revolution, Russia annexed the peninsula of Crimea and supported an armed insurgency in the Ukrainian Donbas region, thus sparking the Russo-Ukrainian War. Peace negotiations started in the wake of this war, resulting in the Minsk Agreements, which were not successfully implemented (Åtland, 2020; Wittke, 2019), and were later discarded by Putin in 2022, at the time of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.

During World War II, the USSR played a key role in the allied victory in Europe. Fedor et al. (2017) mention that in Russia the memory of World War II and the country's role as a victor against fascism has been employed domestically to achieve post-Soviet-Russian national consolidation and identity. This narrative has also been exported to achieve Russia's goal of becoming a great power, and "weaponised" to provoke pro-Russian sentiments in Ukraine¹. This is in line with what Grigas (2016) suggests is the ultimate goal of Russia under Vladimir Putin: the reimperialization of the former Soviet space. This 'reimperialization', as Grigas (2016, p.10) puts it, follows a revisionist trajectory which encompasses a stage of "aggressive use of propaganda (...) to promote a political cause or point of view" (p. 44), more precisely the cause of the "urgent" need for "protection" of Russian compatriots (p. 27).

The author also shows that, in particular, the propagandistic historical view promoted by the Kremlin has steadily been converting fascism into a political tool to frame and antagonise the opposition, namely the Ukrainian government. Indeed, according to Grigas (2016), the defeat of fascism during the Second World War serves as one of the pillars of the Russian identity. Simultaneously, Fedor et al. (2017) describe how any attempts to depart from the Soviet narrative of the war are considered 'fascist' by Russia.

Zhurshenko (2015) discusses how Ukraine, nevertheless, deals with conflicting views of its past, where in some regions the memory of World War II has raised ideological conflicts and is subject to populist manipulations. This happens as Ukraine, like Russia, not only seeks a post-Soviet national identity, but also faces the "geopolitical choice between Russia and the West" (Fedor et al., 2017, p. 17). Klymenko (2022) argues that since 2014, with its deep changes in foreign policy agenda, Ukraine has also changed its official historical narratives, as it looks to distance itself from Russia and align itself with Europe and the West. Ukraine has thus distanced itself from several Soviet and Russian symbols and acts of remembrance (Fedor et al., 2017), while trying to portray similar historical experiences to Europeans (Klymenko, 2022). This distancing from Soviet and Russian history and memory is also in line with what Faizullaev and Cornut (2017) found by analysing the annexation of Crimea through a constructivist lens. Faizullaev & Cornut

¹ As pointed out by some scholars (Ferragamo, 2023; McGlynn, 2023), Russia has also been using memory diplomacy to pursue its interests in the African continent – championing Russia as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist power – with the aid of Wagner Group's influence in the region.



(2017) study the phenomenon through narrative practices, concluding that both Russian and Ukrainian political representatives acted as “narrative practitioners” (p.599) strategically employing “competing narratives” (p.598) to create their own conceptions of the past, present and future, and legitimise contentious political actions.

It is therefore interesting to explore how, while at war with each other, Russia and Ukraine seem to continuously export their own memories of past events to other nations, not only powering the “memory war” between each other, but also advancing their competing narratives internationally and constructing their own understanding of social reality.

Methodology

This research is based on a content discourse analysis of diplomatic acts, using an interpretative approach framed by the constructivist theory of International Relations. These are meant to facilitate a discussion about the employment of memory in Russia and Ukraine since 2022. The diplomatic acts considered for analysis were those delivered between 2022 and 2024. To find recurrent themes, opposing narratives and key ideas, ten documents – speeches and official statements – were analysed for each party. When collecting data for this purpose, certain key words were used to select the statements and speeches, primarily in the websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and governments of both countries. The key words used were “Nazi”, “World War II”, “Ukraine”, “Russia”, and “nationalism”, which were chosen based on the literature reviewed on the history and official national memories of the target countries. The speeches were also considered when delivered in contexts related to the remembrance of historical moments related to World War II and when deemed relevant due to their diplomatic importance to the countries’ foreign policy agenda.

Russia: Content Analysis

The historical narratives stressed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation have been consistent in the period of time considered in this paper. Russia presents itself as a “country-civilization” in a distinct position with “a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). This position is then justified by Russia’s efforts during World War II and, accordingly, by its contribution to the development of the current international system (MFARF, 2023).

Russian policymakers propagate the idea that Russia, as the successor of the Soviet Union, is largely responsible for the allied victory during World War II and for helping to build the new world order, by assisting the process of decolonisation in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Simultaneously, this narrative portrays Russia as a victim of the “falsification of history” carried out by the West (MFARF, 2023). Such ideas are clearly expressed in “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” (MFARF, 2023) but are also conveyed by the frequent stances of the Foreign Affairs Ministry on what it considers to be fake information in Western media aimed at demeaning the nation’s image and its part in the victory against Nazi Germany.



In a briefing in April 2022, the Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova addressed the “cancel culture” to which Russia was falling victim, as the West attempted to “cancel the Red Army’s contribution to defeating Nazism” (Zakharova, 2022). In this speech, Zakharova accuses Germany and later Ukraine of erasing Russian culture and history, especially during World War II, drawing a parallel between this erasure and the “Nazi campaign in Germany to destroy undesirable books”, describing the former as acts of “xenophobia, Nazism, and extremism” and “a new cultural genocide” (Zakharova, 2022).

Continuously portraying itself as responsible for resisting and defeating the Nazis after being a victim of their offensives, Russia condemns many Ukrainian expressions of patriotism linking them to a Nazi past (MFARF, 2022a). In June 2022, the Embassy of the Russian Federation addressed a letter to the Republic of Malta condemning the use of “the old notorious slogan of radical Ukrainian nationalists” – a reference to ‘Slava Ukraini’ (“Glory to Ukraine”), followed by ‘Herojam slava’ (“Glory to the heroes”). This slogan, as the Russian Embassy claims throughout the letter, is inherited from Stepan Bandera, “a leader and ideologist of a radical Ukrainian nationalists’ movement, which collaborated with Nazi Germany and carried out inhumane ethnic cleansing in Ukraine during World War 2” (MFARF, 2022a). The letter goes on to highlight that the spread of this slogan is not the fault of Maltese citizens, who “honorably preserve the memory of World War 2”, but that of a lack of education on the claimed values behind the expressions (MFARF, 2022a).

The topic of Ukrainian nationalism has received significant attention from the Kremlin, who convey narratives that directly oppose those of Kyiv. While being interviewed for the production of the film “Nazism on trial”, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2022b) alludes to close “family ties” between Russia and Ukraine, and to Russia’s wish to have peaceful relations with what it saw as a “good neighbour”. Yet, Lavrov (2022b) blames the USA for propagating anti-Russia sentiments in Ukrainian leaders, culminating in a situation in which, according to him, “neo-Nazi ideology is made part of Ukrainian life in every possible way”. The association of neo-Nazism and Russophobia with Ukrainian nationalism is therefore regarded as an external imposition, unnatural to the Ukrainians, seen as historical friends of the Russians.

Indeed, at the 2024 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, the Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman stresses the idea that the Ukrainian regime employs “radical nationalists” with the goal of erasing Russian language and culture (Zakharova, 2024). Zakharova (2024) expands on the Ukrainian bill on the English language, which made it an official language of international communication, contrasting it with the perceived prosecution of “Russian and other minority languages”, describing these linguistic policies as “typical of colonies” and comparing them to those of Nazi Germany.

Simultaneously, Russia seeks to summarise, expose, and condemn what it considers to be a growth in “the scale and frequency of neo-Nazi acts in Ukraine” in a document issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and shared by the official social media accounts of the Permanent Mission of Russia to the EU (MFARF, 2022b). In this document, titled “The Truth Behind Events in Ukraine and Donbass” (MFARF, 2022b), Russia accuses Ukraine of committing multiple Human Rights violations towards the people of Donbass, warning of a “genocide in Donbass”. This choice of words seems to fit coherently with



the many accusations of a supposed “glorification of Nazism” carried out by the government and the many neo-Nazi groups in schools, memorials, and statues (MFARF, 2022b). Moreover, this document claims that Ukrainian leaders, namely Volodymyr Zelenskyy, actively try to diminish the role of Soviet troops in defeating Nazism, “in order to destroy the historic memory of the Ukrainian people concerning the events of the Great Patriotic War”, by changing the names of villages, towns and cities that paid homage to war heroes, and by taking down “2,500 Soviet-era monuments” (MFARF, 2022b).

In important speeches and interviews, the narratives conveyed are the same: Russia liberated (or played a major part in liberating) Europe from Nazism and sees itself once again now confronted and threatened by the growth of neo-Nazi ideology in Ukraine, as well as by a common Western offense to Russia and Russian citizens (Lavrov, 2022a; Lavrov, 2023; Putin, 2022; Putin, 2023). In his famous speech on the Victory Day, Putin (2022) accuses the West of refusing to negotiate with Russia for a peace arrangement, blames Western countries for the “cynical falsifications of World War II history” and for the growing Russophobia, while also acknowledging that there are allies in the West, such as the “US veterans who wanted to come to the parade in Moscow” and “were actually forbidden to do so”. Similarly, in the Gala concert for 80th anniversary of defeating German Nazi forces in Battle of Stalingrad, Putin states that “again and again”, Russia must repel the aggressions of the West, that the security of his country is “once again” threatened, and “once again” by “German Leopard tanks with crosses on them” that prepare to fight Russia “at the hands of the followers of Hitler and Bandera” (Putin, 2023).

Portraying Russia as a cyclical victim of the West and as bearing the mission of fighting Nazism, Sergey Lavrov (2022a) states that “the West left us [Russia] no choice” but to conduct its special military operation in Ukraine, whose regime is always referenced as “neo-Nazi”. Lavrov (2022a) adds that the conflict is nothing but a strategy of the United States and its allies, which are “ready to sacrifice Ukraine for the sake of their geopolitical goals”. Further recalling the memory of World War II, Lavrov (2023) compares the collective Western offensive against Russia to Hitler’s effort to defeat the Soviet Union, going as far as naming the Western “war against Russia” a strategy to find the “Final Solution” for Russia, further comparing it to Hitler’s.

Ukraine: Content Analysis

Since 2022, Ukraine's foreign policy narratives have remained consistent. Upon examination, a clear trend emerges of speeches and statements delivered by Ukrainian political representatives; they are actively promoting historical narratives that reinforce Ukraine’s current shift toward Europe, while deliberately distancing itself from Russia.

Dmytro Kuleba (2024), the current Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, reinforces this narrative by contending that it is Russia’s goal to crush Ukraine’s identity and “dissolve the Ukrainian nation within the Russian imperial melting pot” - portraying Ukraine as a colonised nation falling victim to Russian imperialism. Despite this, the minister emphasises that Ukraine has “always belonged historically, politically, and culturally” to Europe, and that it fights even today to “break free from the Russian influence” (Kuleba,



2024). This struggle against Russia is depicted as a path to ultimately return to “the European cradle”, where Ukraine continues to belong as a “European nation” (Kuleba, 2024).

Based on the narratives of Ukrainian political leadership, Europe and Russia are perceived as distinct political, cultural, and religious entities. When deciding between the European and the Russian “civilisations”, Ukrainian political leaders frequently present Ukraine as sharing similarities with the former while diverging from the latter. In his speeches, Volodymyr Zelenskyy depicts Ukraine as sharing common values and principles, such as “freedom” and “equality”, with its European partners, arguing that the war is “not only against Ukrainians” but “against the values that unite us [Europe and Ukraine]” (President of Ukraine, 2022a). The President of Ukraine (2023) believes that the “crimes and injustices” resulting from Russian aggression are not only directed towards Ukraine, but also “against the civilised system of the world”. As such, the fight against Russia’s “aggression and terror” should be carried out with the collective power of the “common heritage of nations” (President of Ukraine, 2023).

The idea that Ukrainians share historical experiences similar to Europeans promoted by the Ukrainian political leadership is most evident in its references to events of World War II. President Zelenskyy frequently underlines the significant contribution made by Ukrainians in defeating Nazism, asserting, for instance, that “Ukrainians, along with other peoples of the anti-Hitler coalition, liberated European land from Nazi invaders” (President of Ukraine, 2022d).

Ukraine draws a comparison between Russian “armed aggression” and the ongoing war, and the atrocities committed during World War II, contending that “Russian racism is the reincarnation of German Nazism” since both ideologies employ “imperial chauvinism” and claim superiority over other nations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2022). Additionally, Ukraine points out that in Russia “pacifist slogans are banned, and the cult of armed forces and war is cultivated” (MFAU, 2022).

President Zelenskyy (2022f) highlights the repetition of History by stating that “Evil, which seemed to have been finally defeated and burned to the ground in 1945, is reborn from the ashes 80 years later”. Although the form of “evil” might have changed, “the essence has remained unchanged”, with “a new guise, with new slogans, but with the same goal” (President of Ukraine, 2022f).

Due to the repeated violations of international law by the Russian Federation (MFAU, 2022), “memories of a terrible war become a terrible reality” (President of Ukraine, 2022f). Therefore, the only viable solution to this conflict is to provide “maximum aid to Ukraine, which is fighting against the Russian Empire” (Podolyak, 2022). Mykhailo Podolyak, advisor to the head of the Office of the Ukrainian President and representative at Russian-Ukrainian peace negotiations, argues that only when Russia is defeated will there be a chance for “stable peace, peaceful life, and fewer criminal activities by Nazi and far-right groups financed by Russia in Europe” (Podolyak, 2022).

Zelenskyy has given numerous speeches around the globe since the onset of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, tailoring them to suit the national audience, drawing parallels with events that hold significance in the host country’s national memories and consistently reminding audiences of the risk of history repeating itself.



Presenting his speech in the Knesset in Israel, Zelenskyy mentioned that the Babyn Yar site, where “100,000 Holocaust victims are buried”, had recently been bombed by the Russian military forces. He also stresses the similarities between Russia’s rhetoric and that of the Nazis, specifically to the reference to the “final solution” to the Jewish and “Ukrainian issue”. Mentioning the establishment of the Nazi party on the 24th of February 1920, Zelenskyy points out that, 102 years later and on the same day, “a criminal order was issued to launch a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine”, resulting in the displacement of millions of exiles to “neighbouring countries” such as “Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Germany, Czech Republic, and the Baltic States” (President of Ukraine, 2022c).

When addressing the Bundestag, Zelenskyy reiterated that the Babyn Yar site had been targeted by Russian missiles. The President also argued that the ongoing war was creating a “new wall that divides Europe” between “freedom and slavery”, similar to the situation in Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall (President of Ukraine, 2022b).

Ukraine’s narrative is deeply connected to the broader struggles for independence in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern European countries in the early twentieth century. This is evident in Ukraine’s representatives’ speeches addressing nations that were previously in the Moscow orbit, highlighting the countries’ shared struggle against Russia, seen as the common enemy. For instance, President Zelenskyy emphasised Lithuania and Ukraine’s “common historical past”, noting that Lithuanians “like no other, understand how the occupiers can destroy freedom” (President of Ukraine, 2022e).

Interpreting Memory Discourses and their Outcomes

As previously mentioned, Russian history, as recalled (or revised) by the Russian state’s diplomatic apparatus and political elites, presents a number of elements fundamental to understanding its international efforts. Indeed, the narrative put forward by the Russian state and its representatives posits the certainty of a special role for this nation to play in history (MFARF, 2023). This becomes clear whenever Russia is portrayed as a civilisation in its own right (MFARF, 2023). Moreover, analogous to China (Chang, 2022), Russia declares itself, in the framework of Bachleitner’s (2018) analysis, not only as a victim of World War II, but as a victor and thus saviour of other nations (MFARF, 2023).

The constant recalling of Nazism, genetically linking Ukrainian nationalism to it (MFARF, 2022a), along with the accusations of “Russophobic” actions carried out by Ukrainian political or military apparatuses (MFARF, 2022a; Zakharova, 2022), can be interpreted in different manners. By pointing out this link, Russia could be aiming to weaken the legitimacy of Ukrainian nationalism, or the perception of Ukraine as a nation-state altogether. This strategy is complemented by the discourse regarding the common ancestry shared by Ukrainians and Russians (Lavrov, 2022b).

In an international context, this narrative seeks to establish a memory alliance between the Russian state and certain sectors of the population within other states. This would be the case especially if the possibility of growth of Russian nationalism among the territories formerly under the USSR were to be considered, namely in Ukraine, where remembrance of the war has been weaponised (Fedor et al., 2017). This is coherent with one of Russia’s main international goals, which is to maintain the Russian sphere of influence in Eurasia



– or, as Grigas (2016) puts it, to achieve the ‘reimperialization’ of the former Soviet space – said to be fundamental to the nation’s security and international projection (MFARF, 2023). Moreover, the link between Ukrainian nationalism and Nazism could be useful to gather support or avoid international condemnation for Russian military action in Ukraine among certain political ideologies, even in countries whose governments are antagonistic to Russia. If so, this strategy has been successful in threatening political stability within some countries, as well as in creating some opposition against the will to aid Ukraine in the war (Keeley, 2023).

There is also a clear effort by Russia to establish memory alliances with other states, as shown by McGlynn and Đureinović (2022) in the case of Belarus. Indeed, Belarus has continuously aligned with Russia’s view that Ukraine lodges neo-Nazis, supported by the West, who must be fought, while also celebrating and remembering the Soviet role in fighting Nazis in the past (The Belarussian Telegraph Agency, 2024; MFARB, 2024). These efforts are related to the Primakov Doctrine, which advocates the Russian state’s need to avoid following the USA and its allies, and to pursue its own interests as an independent centre of power (MFARF, 2023). To do so, it would be important for Russia to align itself with countries that also wish to oppose ‘Western dominance’, in order to resist its domination over Eurasia (MFARF, 2023)².

Indeed, by pointing out the belligerence of NATO and the threat it poses to the Russian people (Lavrov, 2022), and by comparing the Western military efforts to the Nazi advance over Eastern Europe (Lavrov, 2023), Russia is able to gather support (or, at least, avoid the active condemnation and disapproval) of countries not aligned with the Western powers, namely China and India (Tellis, 2022; Chestnut Greitens, 2022).

Ukraine constructs and puts forward a historical narrative contrary to that of Russia. It presents a nation struggling for freedom from the oppression of an empire (Kuleba 2024; Podolyak, 2022; Klymenko, 2022). This is clearly a narrative with which liberal ideology, predominant in the West, can sympathise, based on the principle of self-determination (White House, 2023). However, this is not all there is to understand from the Ukrainian conception of history. Indeed, it could be ascertained that the Ukrainian discourse is tied to the nation’s historical and strategical context. The elements particular to the Ukrainian narrative can be said to be constructed in such a way as to reinforce the legitimacy of Ukraine as a sovereign state, with a destiny and an identity disassociated from those of Russia (Klymenko, 2022), as well as to counter the Russian arguments supporting the military invasion of Ukraine.

To understand the narrative put forward by the Ukrainian diplomatic apparatus, it is convenient to place it in opposition to that of Russia. The emphasis given to the legitimisation of the Ukrainian state is clearly tied to the efforts by its enemies to delegitimise it. Indeed, Zelenskyy’s (2022a) remark regarding the similarities between Ukrainian and European values and principles of “freedom” and “equality” can be perceived as one of many efforts to link Ukraine historically and culturally to the European “civilisation”, rather than the Russian one. It is safe to say, therefore, that Ukraine could be trying to form memory alliances with the West, particularly European states, with the

² This doctrine, implicitly conveyed in the Russian discourse, is in line with narratives promoted by other countries, namely North Korea and China, on the role of NATO and the West in the conflict (MFADPRK, 2022, 2023; MFAPRC, 2024).



prospective of joining their institutions and organisations (Klymenko, 2022). When looking into speeches and diplomatic acts of remembrance by European and other Western countries, the alignment of narratives becomes evident³. For instance, on May 9, in 2023, Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Kyiv to celebrate Europe Day with Zelenskyy, where the President of the European Commission praised Ukraine for fighting for Europe's ideals (European Commission, 2023). This was the first time Ukraine celebrated Europe Day on May 9, instead of the previous commemoration of a holiday shared with Russia – Victory Day.

Nonetheless, the Ukrainian narrative is not solely focused on portraying the Ukrainians as like any other European people, but as one of a particular kind – as a people formerly under Soviet (albeit Russian) rule, struggling to exit the “Moscow orbit” (Klymenko, 2022). This condition is shared with many other Eastern European nations, not only those that were part of the USSR, but also those that used to be part of the Warsaw Pact, such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria (Klymenko, 2022). By strategically recalling the struggle of countries like Lithuania against Russia (President of Ukraine, 2022e), Ukraine can gather support for its cause in these countries.

When Kuleba (2024) defends that Ukraine has “always belonged historically, politically, and culturally” to Europe and has always struggled against Russian influence, it also signals that Russia is a source of suffering for Ukrainians, who are fighting for their statehood, in line with what Klymenko (2022) asserts. Essentially, Russia is viewed and portrayed by Ukraine as a colonial power, while Ukraine is the colonised nation, denied of its individual statehood and rightful place as an “European nation” (Kuleba 2024).

Even so, the element that most obviously shows just how much the Russian narrative, by opposition, determines the Ukrainian one is the inclusion of references to Nazism in Ukrainian discourse. By pointing out the contribution of Ukrainians in the war against Nazism (Zelenskyy, 2022d), Ukraine seeks to construct a counternarrative to Russia's, enabling Ukrainian nationhood to be legitimised internationally. On the other hand, Ukrainian officials often establish analogies between Hitler's Germany and Putin's Russia, mainly with regard to their racism and cult of war (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2022). This is most crucial considering that the trauma of World War II is still latent in Europe, and that the European Union was created to prevent such a tragedy ever befalling the continent again. As such, through this narrative, Ukraine pinpoints Europe's responsibility to help Ukraine in the war.

With this analysis, some light is shed on the possible international goals Russia and Ukraine might be looking to achieve with the strategic use of memory in their diplomatic acts. Additionally, from a constructivist point of view, one also realises that the narratives employed by both countries are mutually constructing their own (conflicting) identities.

Constructivist scholars emphasise the importance of narratives and discursive interaction – diplomacy – between states to explain the construction of state identity and changes in state behaviour (Faizullaev & Cornut, 2017; DeBardeleben, 2012; Taufik, 2017). As discussed previously, the use of World War II references in speeches by Russia's political

³ When looking at the speech by President Biden on the first anniversary of Russia's “brutal and unprovoked invasion” of Ukraine, one notices, for instance, how Ukraine is seen as a fighter for democracy, sovereignty, Europe and “America”.



representatives reinforces the country's identity as an exceptional great power – especially considering that the nation's role in this War is often mentioned in parallel with its current fight against a supposed Nazi Ukraine and West (MFARF, 2022a, 2023; Zakharova, 2022). This also serves the purpose of portraying Russia as an empire – by drawing parallels with the Soviet Union. In turn, Ukraine – just as it has since 2014 (Klymenko, 2022; Fedor et al., 2017) – constructs its identity as a sovereign European state by distancing itself from Russia and its acts of remembrance and by highlighting the values it shares with the West (President of Ukraine, 2022a; European Commission, 2023). Ukraine's narrative of its role in World War II – emphasised by Zelenskyy (2022d) – also supports this notion by stressing its contribution to fighting Nazism.

As observed, the social interactions between Russia and Ukraine, reflected in their discourses, are constructing their identities by opposition. Memory, here, while employed strategically in the countries' diplomatic acts, becomes a key determinant in the countries' self-image (Bachleitner, 2021) and therefore conditions the material course of the conflict by shaping state behaviour (Wendt, 1999). Like Faizullaev & Cornut (2017) have concluded for the case of the Russian invasion of Crimea, both Russian and Ukrainian political representatives are currently (since 2022) acting as 'narrative practitioners' strategically employing 'competing narratives.' Indeed, the accusations of Nazism by both parties, as well as each country's role in World War II are used to either legitimise their existence (in the case of Ukraine) or their actions (in the case of Russia). Both Russia's invasion of and persistent war in Ukraine and Ukraine's continued resistance, as well as its convergence with Western countries – shown, for instance, by the steps taken to join the EU and NATO –, are material consequences of the narratives constructed and the meanings given to them. As Faizullaev & Cornut (2017) argue, the "verbal oppositon" between Russia, Ukraine and the West appears to be a defining aspect of a conflict itself centred around the opposing meanings and interpretations given to specific events.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the use of memory in Russian and Ukrainian diplomacy since 2022, to ascertain how memory has been employed in the countries' diplomatic practices and what international goals its use aims to achieve. From the content discourse analysis conducted, it concludes that, by presenting itself as historically responsible for fighting Nazism and building a multipolar world, Russia may be seeking to legitimise its presence in Ukraine, portraying it as having a neo-Nazi regime, supported by a newly belligerent West. The signalling of these memories and the parallels drawn between World War II and the present war with Ukraine could be aimed at powers which are not aligned with the West – such as China and India –, other countries that were once in the Soviet space, and sympathetic groups within antagonistic Western states.

Ukraine's memory diplomacy focuses on its own link with Europe (and the West) to legitimise its nationhood and its struggle to free itself from the Russian sphere of influence. The Ukrainian discourse underlines Ukraine's own contribution to the allied victory and the similarities between the events of World War II and the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict, which could be a means to push the West (and especially Europe) to



aid Ukraine, appealing to liberal ideology and the values of self-determination, assumingly held by this target audience.

Therefore, the narratives put forward by these two states in their diplomatic practices are not only each other's opposite; they seem to be constructed in response to each other. Each country seeks to undermine the other's legitimacy and portrays its behaviour in the war as defensive by drawing parallels between the current war and its struggle in World War II. Moreover, the strategic employment of memory in their social interactions constructs their own identities by opposition and influences their behaviours in the international system, specifically the course of the present conflict.

This article contributes to the literature on Russian and Ukrainian use of memory within diplomacy, focusing on the period of conflict between the two, since 2022. Nonetheless, a more comprehensive analysis, including more documents and acts of remembrance, and an additional quantitative approach could provide further understanding of how significant memory diplomacy has been during the conflict. It is also useful to explore the outcomes of this diplomatic strategy and how it has affected the development of the conflict. Moreover, an analysis of speeches and diplomatic acts by other countries deemed relevant might unveil narratives similar to the ones advanced by Russia and Ukraine, as well as demonstrate the formation of memory alliances, hypothesised during the previous section. Further research on the concept of memory diplomacy as a diplomatic tool will allow for a better understanding of its dynamics and significance in International Relations.

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