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The Changed Paradigm of World War II Commemoration in Ukraine After Crimea’s Annexation

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ABSTRACT
This article outlines how the Ukrainian political leadership has promoted the commemoration of WWII anew following Russia’s annexation of Crimea. It argues that the new commemorative practices reflect changes in Ukraine’s foreign policy, aiming to come closer to the (Eastern European) EU member states and to move away from Russia. The efforts of the Ukrainian authorities remain contradictory, however, as to some extent they disregard the EU’s remembrance of WWII and are reminiscent of the Russian commemoration of the Great Patriotic War.

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, 27 January 2020, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky paid a visit to Poland. He had been personally invited by his Polish counterpart Andrzej Duda to participate in the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. During the commemorative ceremony, the Ukrainian president stated: ‘Poland and the Polish people first experienced the consequences of the complot of two totalitarian regimes. This led to the beginning of WWII and enabled the Nazis to start the deadly flywheel of the Holocaust’. With this statement, Zelensky underlined the totalitarian nature of the Stalinist Soviet Union and blamed it for signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that paved the way for the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Poland. In response to Zelensky’s speech, the Russian leadership pointed instead to the Soviet Union’s contribution to the fight against Nazi Germany. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson argued that, following in Poland’s footsteps, Ukraine was falsifying WWII history. He emphasized that Zelensky’s statement was offensive to tens of millions of Russian citizens and citizens of the post-Soviet countries whose parents and grandparents liberated Europe and Poland from the Nazi occupation.¹

This conflict between Ukraine and Russia over WWII commemoration reflects the change in Ukraine’s geopolitical orientation. Following the 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolution, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, and its ongoing support for the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, the Ukrainian political leadership proclaimed EU and NATO integration as

Ukraine’s foreign policy priorities. With the support of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and the Ukrainian Parliament, then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko made extensive use of WWII history to promote the understanding that Ukrainians share common war experiences with (Eastern) European EU member states and not with Russia. For the ‘old’ EU member states, the commemoration of the Holocaust victims and the condemnation of Nazi perpetrators and their collaborators in Eastern European countries has been central to their European identity.

Moreover, for the ‘new’ EU states, the commemoration of the victims of Communist crimes and the condemnation of the Communist regime became an extension of common European values. Since joining the EU, Poland and the Baltic countries have been active in pushing the EU community to recognize their experience of the Communist regime and in establishing 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance of Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. They point to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed in 1939 and that led to the Soviet Union’s occupation of Poland and the Baltic countries. Additionally, in these countries, the end of WWII is associated with the prolongation of the Soviet occupation. In contrast, in Russia, WWII is more commonly known as the Great Patriotic War, a name that emphasizes the unity of the Soviet people against Nazi Germany, which attacked the Soviet Union in 1941. The Russian political leadership blames the Western countries for the outbreak of WWII and refuses to accept the Soviet Union’s responsibility for the crimes committed by the Communist regime. Moreover, the advance of the Soviet Army into the Eastern European countries at the end of the war is seen in Russia as liberation and is celebrated as Victory Day on 9 May.

In Ukraine, in the aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the war became framed similarly to the (Eastern) European commemoration of WWII. Ukraine’s adoption of EU remembrance norms has been primarily outlined in the de-communization laws signed by President Poroshenko in 2015. One of these laws explicitly condemned the totalitarian nature of the Soviet Union (by equating it with Nazi Germany) and prohibited the use of Soviet and Nazi symbols. The other law explicitly attributed responsibility for

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the outbreak of WWII to the Soviet Union and condemned the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.\(^5\) In his 2015 decree, President Poroshenko further instructed that the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII should be commemorated by paying tribute to the war victims.\(^6\) The 2019 decree by President Poroshenko on the commemoration of the end of WWII and the 75th anniversary of the expulsion of the Nazis from Ukraine likewise aimed at perpetuating the memory of those Ukrainian soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in the war.\(^7\) For this purpose, the decrees introduced a new commemorative day — the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation — to be held on 8 May, similarly to the Baltic countries.

However, the new Ukrainian WWII commemoration practices turned out to be problematic for Ukraine’s integration with the EU and to some extent remained reminiscent of the Russian commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. The end of WWII in Europe has been defined contradictorily in Ukraine in terms of both ‘liberation’ and ‘occupation’. Similarly to the Russian tradition, the presidential decrees retained 9 May as a national holiday in Ukraine. The decrees honored the contribution of the Ukrainian people to the victory of the anti-Hitler coalition, and even if not explicitly mentioned, they signified a tribute to war veterans — to those former Red Army soldiers who participated in the Red Army’s advance into Eastern Europe at the end of WWII.

In contrast to the (Eastern European) EU member states, the Ukrainian political leadership disregarded the involvement of Ukrainians in the Holocaust and other mass atrocities. One de-communization law specifically honored the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)\(^8\) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).\(^8\) Although the EU emphasizes the OUN’s collaboration with Nazi Germany and the UPA’s involvement in the Holocaust and in crimes against Polish and Russian ethnic communities, in Ukraine the OUN and the UPA became viewed as fighters for Ukrainian statehood, having fought against both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.\(^9\)

The new commemorative practices reflect changes in Ukraine’s foreign policy, aiming to come closer to the historical interpretations of Eastern European EU member states and to move away from Russia. The efforts of the Ukrainian authorities remain contradictory, however, as they disregard the EU’s

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remembrance of W W II to some extent and are more reminiscent of the Russian commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. This political use of WWII history is not a particularly encouraging development but is an anticipated outcome of national identity building in a time of continued crisis. We can likely expect the approach to continue as long as Russia continues to occupy parts of Ukraine.

**Notes on contributor**

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