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A new Belarusian Partisan Republic? World War II Narratives between Myth, Revisionism and State Propaganda in Lukašenka's Speeches in the Post-2020 Presidential Election Era

Nowa Białoruska Republika Partyzancka? Dyskurs II wojny światowej pomiędzy mitem, rewizjonizmem i propagandą państwową w przemówieniach Łukaszenki po wyborach prezydenckich w 2020 r.

Новая Беларуская партызанская Рэспубліка? Наратывы Другой сусветнай вайны паміж міфам, рэвізіянізмам і дзяржаўнай прапагандай у прамовах Лукашэнкі пасля прэзідэнцкіх выбараў 2020 г.

ABSTRACT: The 2020 presidential elections in Belarus marked a watershed for the country's history. Since then, Alaksandr Lukašenka has been instrumentalising the memory of the Great Patriotic War to tackle the political imperatives of the present. Building on the instrumentalist school of thought within memory studies, this paper aims at providing a comprehensive overview of the uses and abuses of the memory of WWII in Belarus through the analysis of presidential speeches delivered after 2020. The narratives about the Great Patriotic War in Lukašenka's speeches are embedded with myth, state propaganda and revisionist processes to uphold a certain rhetoric. The WWII heritage has now been attributed new meanings in Belarus, which are useful both for domestic politics issues such as the 2020 protests and foreign policy ones, especially when analyzing the relationship between Belarus and the West or Minsk's involvement in the war in Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, Lukašenka, politics of memory, World War II, narratives.

The 2020 presidential elections have forever changed the face of Belarus. Well before the latest presidential round of voting, OSCE and other monitoring

missions had depicted elections in Belarus as being rigged. Still, the 2020 elections' results differed as they triggered an unprecedented popular uprising. The Belarusian authorities' repression of the protests has been massively criticized by the international community, which has resulted in progressive international isolation of Belarus. At a time of extreme polarization in world politics, the memory of World War II (WWII) permeates every aspect of life. History, or better to say memory, has become the lenses, through which the present is observed and analysed.

The rejection of the short-lived experience of the Belarusian Democratic Republic and the absence of a historical event in the pre-Soviet era, which is not divisive among Belarusians have led the political elites to look back at the Soviet heritage. According to Alaksandr Lukašenka, it is important not to forget "that as a nation we were finally formed during the Soviet era. It was then that the history of the Belarusian state began. For real" [*Совецание по вопросам...*, online].

Within those 'bloodlands' recalled by American historian Timothy Snyder, the territory where Belarus is located is the one that has paid the highest price in terms of human lives during the Second World War. Because of this reason and the fact that the relevance of this historical period has rarely been contested in the country, the Great Patriotic War has become the most politically usable period in Belarusian contemporary history.

The analogies between WWII and nowadays perform well because nearly all the families living in current Belarus have experienced the horrors of war and can thus feel a sense of continuity between past and present suffering. After 1994, eternal President A. Lukašenka has brought the Great Patriotic War back to the centre of the political discourse in the country. For instance, it is at the Brest Fortress that A. Lukašenka has met in the past years several foreign leaders such as former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev [Marples 2014: 233].

IR theory and politics of memory

The expression *politics of memory* can be used to refer to "a subjective experience of a social group that essentially sustains a relationship of power" and revolves around the questions "who wants whom to remember what, and why" [Confino 1997: 1393]. Three major approaches towards collective memory have been identified: historical determinism, instrumentalism, and culturalism. Historical determinism stresses the role of past events, instrumentalism focuses on how certain actors manipulate memory for their own purposes and culturalism emphasizes how cultural tools define the narratives adopted by some actors [Berger 2012: 12].

According to the instrumentalist approach to memory studies, agents like governments or elites can create a useful narrative about past events to legitimize their actions in the present. Instrumentalism has been shaped on Niccolò Machiavelli's works and the study of politics and the very word "instrumentalism" refers to the need to look for a "usable past" [Berger 2012: 19]. In fact, "to remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" [Schwartz 1982: 374]. As claimed by Peter Novick, memory is simplistic and sees events from a single committed perspective, while history is characterized by features such as variety or complexity of events [Novick 2000: 3-4].

Reese and Fivush argue that memory is not a static body of knowledge and is something intersubjectively constructed, which means that it can be manipulated and even erased by different actors or over time [Reese & Fivush 2008: 208]. Collective memory is indeed a site of active contestation and negotiation. This process usually takes place between local groups and the elites that try to control the official version of the past [Wertsch 2008: 319].

As Alison Landsberg argues, memory is not a transhistorical phenomenon, which remains intact over time [Landsberg 2004: 3]. It must be rather understood as a dynamic entity, which is subject to contestation, reinterpretation, and supplantation by other kinds of memories. The crafting and recrafting of memories are mainly linked to the political, social, and cultural imperatives of the present [Maurantonio 2014: 1].

Despite being a site of active negotiation, the memory of WWII in Belarus has been subject to a process of forced appropriation by the ruling elites. The decision to focus on presidential speeches lies in the fact that what we are witnessing in Belarus is a catechization of the population, which leaves no space for alternative views on WWII other than the ones provided through this top-down approach. Decision making within the Belarusian political system mostly lies in the hands of the president. By analysing political speeches and interviews, the major narratives of instrumentalization of the war can thus be highlighted.

The definition of "narrative" is a highly contested one in scholarly production. It particularly refers to the way, in which an agent makes sense of the reality and constructs facts [Patterson & Monroe 1998: 315]. Within this paper the definition used when talking about the "official historical narrative" is "a semantic scheme that describes the genealogy of the macro political community constituting <...> a state, which 'explains' how its past 'determines' its present and future", which "is articulated in texts and practices that are performed on behalf of the state" [Malinova 2018: 86].

Memory politics in post-Soviet Belarus is an object of growing academic interest, not least due to recent heated public battles over the interpretation

of the Soviet past and the memory wars in Eastern Europe. The political use of the memory of WWII in Belarus has already been investigated by several scholars such as Rudling [Rudling 2008: 43–62], Marples [Marples 2014: 1–403] or Goujon [Goujon 2010: 6–25]. The present study aims at enriching the existing literature. First, it restricts the research to a specific time frame bringing fresh material on memory politics in Belarus after 2020, since the above-mentioned works concern other periods of time. Second, this piece of research focuses on political uses of the war memory in presidential speeches since the major focus of scholarly attention on Belarusian memory politics has been paid to other agents of memory such as monuments or museums.

The analysis will proceed through a selection of official speeches delivered by President A. Lukašenka after the 2020 presidential elections in several different contexts, such as Victory Day or at the National Assembly, but also interviews for domestic and foreign media. The importance of choosing different contexts lies in the fact that the narrative proposed by Belarusian authorities encompasses the audiences it is facing, by providing a univocal approach regarding the Great Patriotic War.

The analysis is not conducted by discussing every single speech, not only due to space, but also because it would not have been functional to the purpose of this research. The speeches thus become just a means to recollect the use of such a memory in present times. The present analysis rather focuses on the similarities between the speeches and the common narrative, by providing clear examples of the major tropes and analysing the language and tone used. Moreover, this study aims at uncovering why such instrumentalization of the past is needed as a weapon by Belarusian authorities in the current domestic and international environment.

A never-ending war

The underlying idea in all the analysed presidential speeches is that the Second World War has never ended for Belarus. Rather than a new war, Belarus has been experiencing a never-ending conflict, which has just changed its face, turning into a modern one, in which soldiers are not at the forefront. “We have been at war for a long time. It’s just that the war has taken on other forms. There will be no more those kinds of wars, in which thousands of soldiers will trample at these gates”, this is what A. Lukašenka declared while laying flowers at the Brest Fortress [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе “Брестская крепость-герой”...*, online]. In fact, according to A. Lukašenka,

classic wars are no longer being waged today, hybrid wars are in vogue, when an attack is preceded by inciting internal conflict, we remember this, cyber-attacks are partly attempts to paralyze the system of state administration and disorient society [*Послание белорусскому народу...*, online].

When analyzing political communication focusing on the language and the tone used by political leaders remains imperative. In the case of A. Lukašenka, his speeches give us a sense of both fear coming from the various threats, but also reassurance, just like a father caring for his sons, i. e., the Belarusian population. It is thus interesting to notice the use of the word *blitzkrieg*, which is a specific term that immediately reminds us of one specific conflict, i. e., World War Two.

The use of specific terms such as *blitzkrieg* raises the moral level of the present threats, equating them to a world conflict. Therefore, the same people who experienced the Great Patriotic War are mobilized to counter this existential threat. According to his view, in fact, “this is a modern war: remember, the *blitzkrieg*, pressure through the media, and then the economic and financial war, which is expressed in sanctions” [*Торжественное собрание...*, online], “the *blitzkrieg* of the opponents of the government failed, and many have already appreciated it, they themselves are calling for order” [*Лукашенко: что касается фашизма...*, online] and “OMON saved us from the *blitzkrieg*” [*Интервью Лукашенко российским...*, online]. In this last sentence, A. Lukašenka has used the term *blitzkrieg* to justify the use of the riot police OMON, which has been harshly criticized for the repression of Belarusian people and civil society.

Since the war has only been subject to a process of transformation, there are several ways, in which the war is manifesting itself. “Unceremonious interference in our internal affairs, militant rhetoric and sanctions demarches, border provocations have become the norm of their aggressive policy”, these are A. Lukašenka’s words from the 2022 Day of the Defenders of the Fatherland and the Armed Forces [*Торжественное собрание...*, online]. Another noteworthy aspect is the use of the word *front*, referring to the place where fighting takes place in a war. This term is in fact used when describing the perceived new warfare methods employed by the West. “Another front of attack on Belarus is the one of sanctions” [*Послание белорусскому народу...*, online].

The issue of sanctions fits particularly well in this kind of WWII narratives, since in June 2021 German chief diplomat Heiko Maas announced that the European Union had decided on the adoption of restrictive economic measures against Belarus. This episode has become central to Lukašenka’s narrative. First, the date of adoption of those sanctions is symbolic since June 22 marks the anniversary of the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. “It’s been 80 years, so what? A new hot war. Look: what is this? Symbolism?”

Yesterday, economic sanctions were imposed against our people and businesses. On June 22, at night. Indeed, history has not taught them anything” [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 76-й годовщины...*, online].

Second, the emergence of Germany as being one of the major supporters of the EU packages of sanctions has indirectly helped Belarusian state propaganda, since Germans are now uniquely seen as “the heirs of Nazis” in opposition to “the heir of the winners”, namely Belarusians. A. Lukašenka has exploited this heritage to draw a line between “us” and “them”.

Referring to Maas’s announcement, A. Lukašenka declared: “I would like to ask the author of these lines, a certain Maas, the German Foreign Minister: Mr. Maas, who are you? A repentant German or an heir of the Nazis? Who are you? Answer publicly” [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 76-й годовщины...*, online]. This comparison first came out when German lawyers in May 2021 filed a suit against A. Lukašenka’s Belarus over alleged torture. At that moment, the ruling Belarusian President answered by saying that “Not the heirs of fascism. <...> Who are you to judge me? For protecting you and my country?!” [*Лукашенко после жалобы ...*, online]. Third, sanctions are used to legitimize the idea of continuously being under attack or at war. “Now we are holding an economic blow. I would like to know what’s next. Intervention?” [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе «Брестская крепость-герой»...*, online].

In this regard, the war in Ukraine has been framed by Belarusian authorities within the schemes of the memory of the Second World War.

Nazi followers⁶ are obsessed with the idea of revenge. But they are not ready to fight openly with the heirs of the Soviet people. They have learnt their lessons well, which is probably why they are pumping Ukraine with weapons, fighting with memorials, symbols, veterans, concentration camp prisoners and even their families [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 77-й годовщины...*, online].

Indeed, according to Lukašenka,

the new Nazism is no longer just raising its head, it has risen to its full height. We see it in the geopolitical appetites of our Western neighbors, who eagerly look at the border Belarusian and Ukrainian territories. And they don’t even hesitate to openly talk about a possible annexation [*Лукашенко: новый нацизм...*, online].

⁶ Editor’s note: “the West”.

In fact, according to Lukašenka's speeches, Nazism is incredibly rising again in Ukraine, which is a country that survived under the boots of the Nazi occupiers. In his view, the West should bear accountability since it "nurtured this monster, overthrew the legitimate government, armed the newly minions of Bandera and Šuhevich to the teeth, made Nazism a state ideology, pushed the brothers Ukrainians and Russians against each other" [*Lukašenko rasskazal, kakim..., online*].

The new Western *Drang nach Osten* and self-victimhood

Nowadays according to the official speeches "the war will begin and always begins in modern conditions from within the state" [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе "Брестская крепость-герой"..., online*]. The idea of a war orchestrated from the outside is the formal explanation given for the unravelling of the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space. A. Lukašenka sees liberal norms such as human rights or democracy as threatening for its regime. Even though the Belarusian President has always refrained from using the expression "colour revolution" to depict the 2020–2021 protests in Belarus, it is clear from his speeches that he regards those protests as a foreign intervention on Belarusian soil.

Colour revolutions are in fact seen by A. Lukašenka as threats coming from the democracy and human rights promotion agenda. As argued by Cooley and Nexon, "this <...> convinced many authoritarian powers that the United States was itself a revisionist power when it came to sovereignty norms" [Cooley & Nexon 2020: 113]. This explains the comparison between World War Two and the current situation.

Following this comparison, according to the Belarusian establishment the fact that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been expanding eastward and has been moving its infrastructure near the Western Belarusian borders must be seen as a throwback to the Great Patriotic War.

And do not lull us to sleep with stories about defensive exercises and NATO's peacefulness. We have had enough of this since 1941, when we believed you, and did not learn lessons from history after the victory giving you Eastern Europe (the so-called Warsaw Pact countries) in exchange for your promises that you will never take a step in our direction and will not, as it is fashionable to say now, expand NATO to the East. You are at least liars; at most you are scoundrels. You've been lying all the time, you've been deceiving us, and today it won't work [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе "Брестская крепость-герой"..., online*],

this is what Lukašenka declared at the Brest Fortress in June 2021.

“The collective West continues to dream of a new ‘throw to the East’, world domination and the seizure of rich resources east of Belarus, we see it perfectly” [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе “Брестская крепость-герой”...*, online]. Here again the use of the expression ‘throw to the East’ clearly refers to the Nazi policy of *Drang nach Osten* to point to their intent to expand Germany into Slavic territories of Central and Eastern Europe. Within this trope of the comparison between NATO’s expansion eastward and the Nazi advance on the Eastern Front, there is another interesting aspect that concerns today’s relationship between NATO (and broadly speaking the West) and Belarus.

In fact, A. Lukašenka’s addresses employ the idea that the West has been disrespectful towards Belarusians and Russians since it has not recognized the role and the suffering of those people in liberating Europe from Nazi-Fascism. This represents a strategy that has long been exploited by the Russian President too, since Belarusian memory politics is moving toward assimilation together with the Russian one [Ioffe 2022, online].

Look at how the history of our nearest neighbors is distorted. On the streets of European capitals liberated by the Red Army, there are marches of young men with fascist swastikas, Nazis are revered as heroes, torchlight processions are held in their honor, monuments to Soviet soldiers-liberators are demolished. Could we have imagined this literally a dozen years ago? [*Послание белорусскому народу...*, online].

Instead, according to A. Lukašenka, the West should just be thankful to Belarus and kneel down in front of such a people that freed Europe.

You should not just repent. You must kneel before the Belarusian people for another 100 years and pray that you could have been born after that war. You must do everything to heal the wounds of this war in our hearts and souls. You don’t have to strangle us. You must carry us on your hands – Germans, Poles, the so-called European Union. Because we saved you from the brown plague. And you would have walked with us, the whole Soviet people, slaves, if they had taken over [*Выступление Александра Лукашенко на церемонии возложения венков в мемориальном комплексе “Брестская крепость-герой”...*, online].

This common motive in A. Lukašenka’s speeches is crucial in the current domestic and foreign atmosphere because it elevates the sanctions or other restrictive measures to the crimes carried out by *Einsatzgruppen* and Nazi troops and raises the level of the moral threat that the West is posing to Belarus, leading also to a victimization of the Eastern European country.

Some scholars have theorized memory’s relationship with foreign policy making. This is the case of Italian scholar Matteo Dian, who provides us with five ideal-type narratives: glorification, self-victimhood, amnesia, acknowledgement,

and contrition [Dian 2017: 24]. Self-victimhood consists in depicting oneself as the victim of an appalling event. This is the case of those national memories that revere national defeats as much as they do with victories. Usually, these defeats or victories can become a tool for blaming the others [Khazanov 2000: 40].

According to this kind of narrative, the Belarusian people is portrayed as a pacific people, while foreigners are the root cause of all interferences and wars that have been waged against Belarus.

Here is their face – a vile, fascist, Nazi face. They have always been like this, look at history. Not even every century, but every half century, they threw up problems – one war, then another. Do I really need to convince you that Belarusians are holy people? They have never imposed problems on their neighbors or even non-neighbors. If we fought, it was only when they came to us with a sword. [“*Что же вы...*”, online].

Within the current context of the war in Ukraine, according to the official Belarusian discourse, the collective West condemns Minsk and Moscow for being aggressors, but “there, abroad, no one cares that the Belarusian army is not fighting. What we did for the speedy cessation of hostilities at our time⁷, and even now we are trying to behave in this way is ignored” [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венка в мемориальном комплексе “Курган Славы”* (2022), online].

Moreover, this kind of perspective also highlights the exceptionality of the Belarusian people, which thanks to its historical experience is now able to bear hard times, such as the ones they are now living under sanctions. This is a skilled move from the Belarusian ruling elites, which by linking past and present suffering, are morally relieving their people, and pushing them to resist to what is perceived as a new storm. “We are a nation capable of surviving in this turbulent world only when we are united, when we are together. Our support is a rich historical experience. We are the heirs of great generations of Belarusians”, this is how Lukašenka sent his best wishes to its people on New Year’s Eve in 2021 [*Новогоднее обращение ...*, online].

The forgotten “Holocaust of Belarusian people” and mnemonic constitutionalism

In this respect, the use of the Belarusian experience of the Holocaust in Lukašenka’s speeches is worthy of mention.

I have already said that we started doing this by investigating the crimes of Nazism on Belarusian soil. This is akin to the Belarusian Holocaust, or

⁷ Author’s note: “at the time of World War Two”.

the Holocaust of the Belarusian people. The Jews were able to prove it. The whole world worships them today, they are even afraid to point a finger at them, and we are so tolerant, so kind, we did not want to offend anyone. They jumped to the point that they offended us. That's why we started this process,

the ruling President declared in July 2021 [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венка в мемориальном комплексе «Курган Славы»* (2021), online]. A. Lukašenka in fact has frequently been using the expression “one out of three” (*kazhdyj tretij*) to refer to the number of Belarusians who perished during the Nazi occupation [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венка в мемориальном комплексе “Курган Славы”* (2021), online].

Nazis considered the nations living in the East, especially the Slavs, to be *Untermenschen* ('subhuman') and believed that the conquest of a *Lebensraum* ('living space') and its Germanization would primarily serve the scope of reinvigorating the German economy and fuelling of their war machine, as it would provide space for German colonization. Belarusians were depicted as a primitive and peasant people (*Bauernvolk*) and as inappropriate for Germanization [Rein 2011: 88-89].

Even though Hitler's campaign against Jewish Bolshevism did not clearly represent a liberation campaign for the Soviet minorities, there is no international recognition of the killing of the Belarusian people during the Nazi occupation as a genocide. The reasons behind this does not lie in the scale of the killings, which was indeed considerable, but on the very definition that is given to the term “genocide”. According to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, “genocide” refers to any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, such as killing members of the group or deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part [International Criminal Court 2002: 3]. What is missing in the case of Belarus in opposition to the Holocaust (a term, which together with *Shoah* has been specifically coined for the genocide of European Jews during WWII) is the planned organization of the massacre with the intent to annihilate a specific ethnic group.

From the Belarusian authorities' point of view, there cannot be a distinction between the genocide of Jews and the killing of thousands of Belarusians, as these deaths fall under the same category, i.e., the Holocaust of the Belarusian people. In such oppressive environment the decree on the Belarusian genocide adopted in January 2022, which envisages up to eight years of imprisonment for alternative interpretations of this historical event, could be used to tackle domestic dissent.

As the law entered into force, according to Lukašenka the Prosecutor General's Office has been "opening more and more new places of mass graves of people – shot, hanged, burned alive" [*Обращение к соотечественникам...*, online]. One of the features of war memory in Belarus has been the search for mass graves and specific missing bodies both by the bereaved families and by students especially under the Belarusian Republican Youth Union. This committed search for the dead has had an "immediate impact of making the war seem a recent event. <...> In an instant seventy years of time are removed" [Marples 2014: 261].

The appropriation of the term Holocaust emphasizes suffering to mobilize the people, keep this historical memory alive and oppose the West in this field too. "Today, the historical policy is for us a strategy of self-preservation in the context of the global redistribution of spheres of influence in the world" [*Совещание по вопросам...*, online]. In line with this argument 2022 has been declared the "Year of historical memory" by decree [*On declaring 2022...*, online] and memory has been inserted into the constitution after the constitutional referendum that was held in February 2022.

Mnemonic constitutionalism positions the authority and legitimacy of a state into the boundaries of a certain historical paradigm, whereas current and future attitudes and behaviours of state actors derive from and are limited by moral lessons of the past" [Belavusau 2022, online]. This is clear from sentences such as "the national feat is an integral part of the national idea [*Приветствие участникам...*, online], in which the national feat refers to the victory of the Great Patriotic War.

The new Partisan Republic and the passing of the baton

According to the view of its current ruling elites, Belarus finds itself encircled by foreign troops and manipulated from the inside. What is noteworthy from this perspective is that Belarusian authorities usually link this domestic and foreign environment to the myth of Belarus being a partisan republic. Continuously exploiting the fact of being under attack makes the use of harsh repressive measures more acceptable, such as the ones that have been applied to protesters or to non-governmental organizations. Instrumentalising such a myth also means providing a reason to legitimize the elections' results and the credibility of who is in power.

One of the motives in A. Lukašenka's speeches is in fact the link between Belarusian partisans, who undoubtedly played a crucial role in repelling the Nazi invasion, and future generations. On Victory Day a tradition has been established, in which the President meets the veterans and former partisans from WWII. In this way veterans and partisans become the archetype of pat-

riotism that needs to be followed. Usually in fact, when meeting the direct witnesses of WWII, A. Lukašenka addresses to young generations, as if Belarus was still a partisan republic and as if a passing of the torch was happening today in a country, which still needs its partisans and defenders. In 2021, at a meeting at Kurgan Slavy, A. Lukašenka turned to the young and declared:

You are the future of our country. [...] I would very much like you not to lose this country, it is up to you, so that you come to the leadership of our country and preserve everything that we have created over a quarter of a century ago [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венка в мемориальном комплексе “Курган Славы”* (2021), online].

Furthermore, in June 2022 A. Lukašenka talked about his initiative of creating a people’s militia and declared that “in the event of military action, the people’s militia units can transform into a partisan movement” [*Лукашенко рассказал...*, online].

In this sense, it appears imperative to make ‘them’ (i. e., the West) know that “we did not forget, that Belarus remembers” [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 77-й годовщины Великой Победы*, online]. One of the central narratives developed by the authorities lies on the idea that Belarus should let the “others” know that it has learnt from this memory and is thus ready to counter-attack if history was to repeat itself. “Belarus still stands as an indestructible Brest fortress in the way of any enemy” [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 77-й годовщины Великой Победы*, online].

In fact, it is crucial to highlight how this idea helps legitimizing the massive military build-up that we are witnessing in the post-2020 election period and in the context of the war in Ukraine. “After the last tragic lesson, since the middle of the last century, we have continuously strengthened our defense potential. Today, the modern Belarusian army is mobile, compact, and equipped with the most modern weapons and military equipment”, declared A. Lukašenka on the Day of the defenders of the Fatherland [*Торжественное собрание...*, online].

Moreover, the idea of remembering sometimes takes on the meaning of a sort of wake-up call for the West, which in his view is sliding into a fearful climate, by claiming: “Let the mournful bells of Khatyn be heard today by those who sow the seeds of evil and hatred, trying to split the country, destroy peace and tranquillity in our society” [*Обращение по случаю...*, online]. Indeed, even during the 80th anniversary of the Khatyn massacre in March 2023, Lukashenko declared that it is nowadays imperative not to forget what happened in Khatyn by highlighting that “this is our pain. This is our memory <...> Everything is forgotten and erased from memory, but this is

how we deal with these times in Belarus, while in other places something is not just forgotten and Nazis are walking down the streets” [Лукашенко: Хатынь..., online].

The myth of the unity of Belarusian people during World War Two

Another important aspect of the instrumentalisation of the Second World War in A. Lukašenka’s discourses is the fact that Belarus should remain united like a monolith to resist the current “war” that has been waged against it.

To preserve Belarus, its sovereignty and independence, we need the simplest thing – to be close, to unite <...> It is necessary to strengthen the unity of the people by all means, so that our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, sacredly preserve the heroic heritage of their ancestors [Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 76-й годовщины Великой Победы, online].

According to the ruling elites, Belarus must look at its veterans and partisans and follow their example of unity to fight back the enemies. Still, this perspective shows how the political elite of Belarus is engaging in what can be called “historical revisionism”. While it is undoubtedly true that the Belarusian people wholeheartedly resisted the Nazi invasion, it is nevertheless true that then Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was by no means a compact entity during the war. Firstly, it must be noted that the partisan movement was never united. The first partisan units were in fact constituted by Red Army soldiers who had escaped German pockets and had lost contact with their military units. While the Soviets were eager to control this movement, not every partisan unit active on Belarusian soil was a Soviet one. There were Jewish detachments such as the one headed by the famous Bielski brothers or Polish ones [Rein 2011: 278–279].

Secondly, there were episodes of both civilian and military-police collaboration. The most complex entity of civilian collaboration is represented by the Belarusian Central Council. Collaborationists were active in the politics of repression and the Holocaust, even though the local attitude changed when the process of extermination of Jews became clear. No less important was the role played by the local auxiliary police and the Belarusian Home Defence.

An evergreen *reductio ad Hitlerum*

Given the above-mentioned context, Second World War has become a means of comparison used for every crisis that directly concerned Belarus

in the post-2020 period. This for instance happened during the 2020–2021 protests, the creation of opposition mechanisms, the migrant crisis, and the current war in Ukraine. The definition of “fascists” or “Nazis” has been juxtaposed to all of those who have criticized or have antagonized the Belarusian ruling elites.

The wide-spread use of the white-red-white flags by the Belarusian opposition has triggered a turn in A. Lukašenka’s memory politics, since in his speeches he has associated that symbol to the collaborationist body of the Belarusian Central Council to delegitimize the domestic opposition. “I don’t walk under fascist white-red-white flags. And I openly say that this is fascist symbolism” [*Лукашенко: что касается фашизма...*, online]. In his view,

under that symbolism is the blood of our people, the crying and moaning of our children, the children of Khatyn, women and the elderly! There are the screams of the people of the Minsk ghetto, the crying and groaning of people tortured in concentration camps. There is a shame of betrayal and collaboration. I emphasize once again: no flag and coat of arms are to blame for this (we know who is to blame). But we can’t worship it [*Почему не бчб-флаг...*, online].

Furthermore, the Coordination Council for the Transfer of Power created by presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to facilitate a democratic transfer of power was depicted as a group consisting of “openly untethered Nazis” [*Лукашенко о координационном...*, online]. The Coordination Council established in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential elections is in fact depicted by the Belarusian authorities as an illegal attempt to seize power.

Women have been at the forefront of the protests in 2020–2021 in Belarus. Some of them gathered for weekly marches on Sundays with flowers and flags around the streets, others risked and faced harassment and long-term prison sentences. As all the other ‘enemies of the state’ they were not spared from the use of WWII narratives. “Our men began to hide behind women and children. It’s like it was 75–80 years ago, like the fascists who let women go ahead”, Lukašenka stated to the microphones of *Govorit Moskva* [*Лукашенко сравнил протестующих...*, online].

Later, while Belarusian authorities were flooding their neighbouring countries with migrants mainly coming using them as a weapon, the definitions of Nazism and Fascism has been associated with the authorities of Lithuania and Poland, which were implementing harsh policies to repel these waves of migrants. Referring to the Polish military, A. Lukašenka declared that “these bastards organized a hunt for people. Hunting! They ran and shot in the woods! Hundreds of people who were looking for happiness in Europe, where they were invited, were shot in the woods, and buried in graves! Isn’t this fascism?!” [*Послание белорусскому народу...*, online].

Another example can be found in a meeting on foreign policy priorities in 2021, when the de-facto Belarusian President focused on the attitude of the Lithuanian side towards migrants who were detained when crossing the border and compared the conditions of detention of refugees with concentration camps. Within that speech he declared that: “They took away their documents, tore their passports in front of their eyes and trampled them. Armed. They took them to the Belarusian-Lithuanian border, put them in front, like fascists” [*Что же вы...*, online].

The same narrative was used by A. Lukašenka in July 2021, when speaking at a meeting with the heads of Belarus’ diplomatic missions abroad he blamed the European Union’s policy for the recent increase in illegal immigration.

They got rid of Muammar Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. I have been to their countries. They were rich states that were normally developing. <...> They caused havoc to the Middle East, there is still a war in Libya and Syria. They destroyed Iraq, the richest country. For what? Did they bring democracy under the wing of jet fighters? No democracy. They devastated Afghanistan and then withdrew their troops. <...> And people are fleeing the war, rescuing their kids to get a piece of bread somewhere and feed them. You invited them, why are you, like the Nazis, pushing them away now? [Nosava 2021, online].

Even the Roman Catholic Church of Belarus was accused of popularizing the work of Nazi collaborators. In July 2021, police officers arrived at the Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral, voicing accusations over the singing of a religious anthem criticized by A. Lukašenka. Speaking at a gathering of top government officials on Independence Day, he linked the anthem *Mahutny Boža* sung within the Catholic Church to Nazi collaborators, describing his political opponents as their descendants who sought to “exonerate their grandfathers and great-grandfathers and finish what they started” [Šklovskij 2021, online]. Besides, Roman Catholic priest Viačaslaŭ Barok, the head of the St. Josaphat Kuntsevych Church in Rasony, was charged with violating regulations governing mass gatherings, because of “promoting or publicly displaying Nazi symbols” for posting online an anti-Lukašenka poster depicting a red-and-green swastika with Belarus’ state emblem at the center [Ščarbakov 2021, online].

During the war in Ukraine, the exploitation of the memory of the Great Patriotic War has served the scope of legitimizing the support for the Russian aggression. During the latest Victory Day, A. Lukašenka in fact declared that:

Belarusians are not aggressors but remaining an ally and strategic partner of fraternal Russia, we will support it in every possible way. We are united and inspired by the examples of heroes of the past, responsibility to our

children and a Great Victory that we will never give to anyone" [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 77-й годовщины Великой Победы*, online].

Furthermore, this instrumental use of memory lies on the idea that the West has started a new "Nazi crusade" against the Slavic brotherhood between Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венков по случаю 77-й годовщины Великой Победы...*, online]. Moreover, A. Lukašenka has used this rhetoric artefact to explain the Belarusian role in the "special operation" carried out by Russia in Ukraine.

I have already explained our participation in the special operation a long time ago. <...> we will not allow anyone to shoot a Russian man in the back. And we took up the defense from the Brest fortress along the southern borders to prevent this blow in the back of the Russians from the NATO troops [*Выступление Президента Беларуси на церемонии возложения венка в мемориальном комплексе "Курган Славы (2022)*, online].

Conclusion

Building on the instrumentalist approach to memory studies, the core argument of this paper is that A. Lukašenka's speeches provide a wealth of empirical evidence of the use of the memory of World War Two, having it become the most politically usable historical period in Belarusian history. Thanks to an in-depth analysis of more than 50 speeches and interviews in the post-2020 presidential period, it is possible to argue that the Great Patriotic War is being exploited in an opportunistic way, which is functional both in Belarusian domestic and foreign policy.

Analysing the speeches delivered by Lukašenka in a country, in which the President detains most of the powers gives us the possibility to extract the official narrative upheld by Belarusian authorities and to understand which are the major strategies of instrumentalization of the Second World War. First, the authorities have managed to create a sense of continuity between WWII and today's idiosyncrasy between Belarus and the West. This creates a polarization and a situation of "us" versus "them", in which Belarusians become the "heirs of the winners", while Germans and the collective West are depicted as the "heir of the Nazis".

Second, Operation Barbarossa and the concept of *Drang Nach Osten* are now being exploited to condemn NATO's expansion eastwards. Belarusians thus become the focus of a renewed attack, which lies in contraposition to its peaceful attitude to international relations. This narrative of self-victimhood particularly highlights the exceptionality of Belarusians as a people.

Third, the Belarusian authorities have started a process of appropriation of the concept of Holocaust to emphasize Belarusian suffering both in the past and in present days. Belarus thus becomes the new “Partisan Republic”, which still needs its defenders and is entitled to make use of mnemonic constitutionalism so much so that current and future attitudes and behaviour of state actors derive from the moral lessons of the past. In this sense, the ruling President finds it useful to cultivate a myth on the unity of Belarus to resist the current “war” that has been waged against Belarus, to keep the Belarusian “camp” compact and avoid any kind of resistance or opposition.

Last, a continuous *reductio ad Hitlerum* is tangible in almost every address delivered by A. Lukašenka. As Nazism and Fascism nowadays represent the evils of the twentieth century, they become effective terms to identify all the “enemies of the state”, starting from domestic opposition and expanding to the West and the Ukrainian elites.

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STRESZCZENIE: Wybory prezydenckie na Białorusi w 2020 r. były przełomem w historii kraju. Od tego czasu Alaksandr Łukaszenka instrumentalizuje pamięć o Wielkiej Wojnie Ojczyźnianej, aby stawić czoła politycznym imperatywom współczesności. Artykuł, bazując na instrumentalistycznej szkole myślenia w zakresie studiów nad pamięcią, ma na celu kompleksowy przegląd zastosowań i nadużyć pamięci o II wojnie światowej na Białorusi poprzez analizę przemówień prezydenckich wygłoszonych po r. 2020. Dyskurs o Wielkiej Wojnie Ojczyźnianej w przemówieniach Łukaszenki jest osadzony w mitach, propagandzie państwowej i procesach rewizjonistycznych z celem podtrzymania pewnej retoryki. Dziedzictwu II wojny światowej nadano obecnie na Białorusi nowe znaczenia, przydatne zarówno w kwestiach polityki wewnętrznej, takich jak protesty 2020, jak i polityki zagranicznej, zwłaszcza przy analizie relacji Białorusi z Zachodem czy zaangażowania Mińska w wojnę na Ukrainie.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Białoruś, Łukaszenka, polityka pamięci, II wojna światowa, narracje.

АНАТАЦЫЯ: Прэзідэнцкія выбары 2020 г. у Беларусі сталі пераломным момантам у гісторыі краіны. З таго часу Аляксандр Лукашэнка інструменталізуе памяць пра Вялікую Айчынную вайну для барацьбы з палітычнымі імператывамі сучаснасці. Гэты артыкул абапіраецца на інструменталістычную школу мыслення ў галіне даследаванняў памяці. Ён мае на мэце даць поўны агляд выкарыстання і злоўжывання памяццю аб Другой сусветнай вайне ў Беларусі праз аналіз прэзідэнцкіх выступаў, прамоўленых пасля 2020 г. Наратывы прасякнуты міфамі,

дзяржаўнай прапагандай і рэвізіянісцкімі працэсамі для падтрыманьня пэўнай рыторыкі. Спадчыне Вялікай Айчыннай вайны ў Беларусі нададзены новы сэнс, які выгадны як для ўнутранай палітыкі, напрыклад, датычна пратэстаў 2020 г., так і для знешняй палітыкі, асабліва пры аналізе дачыненняў паміж Беларуссю і Захадам або ўдзелу Мінска ў вайне ва Украіне.

КЛЮЧАВЫЯ СЛОВЫ: Беларусь, Лукашэнка, палітыка памяці, Другая сусветная вайна, наратывы.

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Selected publications (2022–2023):

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