

Aliaksei Lastouski PhD

European Humanities University, Vilnius, Lithuania

ORCID 0000-0002-5034-7454

DOI: 10.48261/INRR210308

"DEATH PARADE" ON VICTORY DAY (Minsk, 2020)

Abstract

Being borrowed from the Soviet historical narrative and successfully adapted to the needs of the Belarusian state, the memory of Victory in the Great Patriotic War has become the ideological basis for the authoritarian regime in Belarus. This article is aimed at addressing the celebration of the Victory Day in Minsk in 2020 and, through the analysis of this particular case, identify the main frames for the ideological image of Victory in the Belarusian authorities' politics of history as well as the mechanisms for population involvement and ideological mobilisation. The year 2020 has become critical for Belarusian politics as for the first time since 1994, mass democratic protests challenged Aliaksandr Lukashenka's complete control over Belarusian society.

Keywords: Great Patriotic War, Belarus, politics of history, celebration of Victory Day, COVID-19

Financial disclosure: This study was supported by The Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (Östersjöstiftelsen), Research project "Religion in post-Soviet nation-building: Official mediations and grassroots' accounts in Belarus" (61/2017).

Introduction

Save for Ashgabat, Minsk became the only place in the post-Soviet space where the anniversary Victory Day's parade took place on May 9, 2020, despite the explosive spread of COVID-19 in Belarus. Why was the parade still held? And was it able to demonstrate the toughness of the Belarusian president and his readiness to defend the memory of the Great Patriotic War to the whole world? To answer this question, we first need to consider why the Great Patriotic War narrative acquired such great importance for Belarus.

Belarusian Image of the Great Patriotic War

A specific Belarusian image of the Great Patriotic War started being formed back in the Soviet period. For a long time, the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) was led by representatives of the so-called "partisan clan" (Urban 1989) who worked hard to shape the image of a "partisan republic" (Lewis 2017). In the 1960s, the most important memorials, "places of memory" of the war for subsequent generations were created and included the Brest Fortress, the Khatyn memorial – the Mound of Glory. Under Piotr Masherau, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the idea of Belarus as the country that suffered the greatest human losses during the war losing every fourth inhabitant became firmly established; such a symbolic sacrifice on the altar of victory was monumentally fixed in the symbolic landscape of the Khatyn complex (Marples 2014).

In the independent Republic of Belarus, this specific image has become even more consolidated and closely merged with the state ideology promoted by Aliaksandr Lukashenka. He came to power using, among other things, slogans for restoring historical memory and appealing to simple and entrenched symbols of Victory. Under Lukashenka, the Great Patriotic War not only became the centre of historical memory, but also forced out all other events of the past (including such significant ones for the historical politics of the BSSR as the Great October Revolution) to the periphery. The memory of the war continues to be a powerful tool for legitimising the

authority which can no longer directly appeal to the partisan leaders' experience but presents itself as a grateful heir to the heroic deeds and a keeper of the true historical memory (Goujon 2010; Leshchenko 2008; Rudling 2017).

Victory in the Great Patriotic War increasingly acquires a “national content” for the Republic of Belarus. Firstly, emphasis is placed on the huge number of victims among the Belarusian people which gains the status of both hero and martyr nation whose victory in the war was paid for at a tragic price. Since 2000, the rhetorical figure of every fourth Belarusian who died during the war gradually transforms into every third (Litskevich 2009), and Aliaksandr Lukashenka tirelessly reminds of this price for the victory:

Belarus is a living monument to that terrible war. No country suffered more than Belarus. This is true. Our country was wiped off the face of the earth, every third person died here and many people returned from the war crippled (Lukashenka, March 27, 2020).

Secondly, the exclusive role of the Belarusian people in the victory over fascism is highlighted, whereat a special significance is attributed to the image of a “partisan republic” formed in the BSSR. “The Soviet people as the victor over fascism” is gradually shifted into the shadows and this place of honour is taken by the Belarusian people.

Occupied but unconquered Belarus presented a phenomenon of nationwide resistance to the aggressor, unprecedented in the world. Everyone rose up to fight the enemy, young and old, regardless of gender, nationality and religion. According to trustworthy foreign military sources, Belarusian partisans and underground fighters inflicted more damage on the Nazis during World War II than allied troops in Europe. There was no such powerful patriotic impulse in any of the states occupied by the Nazis (Lukashenka, July 2, 2009).

An important feature of Aliaksandr Lukashenka's rhetoric is the absence of division between the past and the present. War heroes and modern Belarusian people are one symbolic body. As a result, current political motives are constantly included



in rhetoric and interspersed with references to the military past. The image of external aggression is switched from the Nazis to the hostile West with particular criticism towards NATO which—according to the perception of the President of Belarus—poses a constant military threat to the country. Respectively, Lukashenka's opponents are identified with Nazi collaborators who are ready to betray the country's interests for the sake of momentary gain. And, naturally, Lukashenka himself protects the interests of the civilian population and gives a fitting rebuff to all aggressors.

The themes of independence and sovereignty of the Belarusian state are constantly implicated in the discourse of Victory, and an outside observer may well get the feeling that the main goal of the Great Patriotic War was in fact the defence of the independent Belarusian state.

Victory Day though has acquired a significant competitor for the main role in the symbolic politics of the Republic of Belarus, the Independence Day. Since 1991, Independence Day was celebrated on July 27, the day Belarus was declared independent. In 1996 however, on Lukashenka's initiative, a nationwide referendum was held. One of the referendum's decisions was to transfer the celebration date to July 3 which refers to the day of Minsk's liberation from the Nazi invaders in 1944. Notably, in the BSSR this holiday celebrated the liberation of the entire country.

One way or another, Independence Day on July 3 became the main public holiday in the country, pushing Victory Day to the second place (which is undoubtedly an honourable one too). One of the obvious signs of the shift in priorities is the very scale of the festive events, and above all the inclusion of a military parade—the most spectacular and expensive action—in the program (Rohava 2020, 9). The shift in priorities is obvious: the Victory Day parade is held only once every five years in Belarus, in anniversary years (2020, 2015, 2010, and so on), while in all other years the military parade is held on Independence Day. Naturally, this influences both the interest of the public and the overall importance given to the celebrations. In non-anniversary years, the central event of the Victory Day celebration is a solemn procession along Independence Avenue to Victory Square where wreaths are laid to the Eternal Flame, and a small rally is held with a speech by Aliaksandr Lukashenka (Lastouski 2020).



Independence Day has several serious advantages. Firstly, there is no competition with Moscow for “owning” the celebration, and, secondly, two main values of the Belarusian state ideology are directly merged on Independence Day in their pure form: Victory in the Great Patriotic War and the Belarusian state’s independence. Public opinion polls indicate that for the country’s population, Independence Day has become the main holiday while Victory Day is becoming in many ways a duplicate and supportive event. Yet this correlation may change contextually: in 2020, Victory Day undoubtedly occupied a dominant place in the public space for a number of reasons set out below.

The events in Ukraine in 2014 did affect the politics of history in Belarus as even before that, Victory Day in the post-Soviet space was in many ways associated with the symbolic policy of the Russian Federation for strengthening its geopolitical influence in the region. In Belarus, the trend for building an autonomous Victory Day celebration independent of Russian practices increased and intensified. In fact, a ban was imposed on the use of St. George’s ribbons by state structures; it is indicative that at the 2015 parade in Moscow, the Belarusian military were the only invited participants who did not use the symbolism of St. George’s ribbons. However, Lukashenka is well

Members of the group re-enacting Belarusian partisans marching during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020. © Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock

aware that tough prohibition will further exacerbate relations with Russia, which are in enough of a troubled state already.

He evidently felt that he had ended up between the hammer and the anvil: on the one hand, he did not want to antagonize his powerful Russian partner in their common Union State on the other hand, his nation-building strategy increasingly focused on Belarusian national themes and symbols (Kolsto, 2016, 698).

Therefore, public initiatives to ban St. George's ribbons as a "symbol of lawlessness, chaos, instability and separatism" that were proposed by opposition activists were not supported by Belarusian authorities.

Instead, in 2015, the Belarusian Republican Youth Union developed a new symbol, "apple blossom," which is a boutonniere consisting of red and green ribbons coloured as the state flag of Belarus, and an apple blossom. Lukashenka approved this innovation ("youth and peace is what it symbolises") and secured it as the official symbol of the Victory Day celebration. Despite the alarmist messages in the Russian media and optimistic coverage by Belarusian analytics (Smok 2014), this does not mean that the St. George's Ribbon is under a ban in Belarus. In practice, it is government agencies who are advised to use "apple blossoms" and not St. George's ribbons, but due to the governmentalisation of the Victory Day celebration, this means that St. George's ribbons are lost in the visual space being prevailed by the Belarusian symbols.

A struggle also began against attempts to spread the "Immortal Regiment" initiative to the Belarusian ground, likely being backed by the expansion of Russian cultural and political space. Despite the fact that the initial impulse of this initiative was in creating an alternative to the estranged official celebration and in personal participation based on family history, it acquired different connotations when transferred to Belarus. Publicly, Alexander Lukashenka opposed the "Immortal Regiment" transfer to Belarus, arguing that it was a "Russian campaign" and even by the fact that it essentially copies war heroes commemorating practices developed in Belarus: "Why should we abandon our 'Belarus remembers' and grab the 'Immortal Regiment'?" (Lukashenka, March 1, 2019).

Another fact leading to a cautious attitude of the Belarusian authorities to this initiative is that the main actors who support this innovation are various pro-Russian and communist

organisations. Due to the complexity of Belarusian-Russian relations in recent years, these organisations have been largely critical of Lukashenka's political course, including historical politics:

Look at the well-conditioned monuments, look at the care for veterans—this is the memory of Belarusian citizens about the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. However, using this template one can state that Belarus also remembers the Radziwills or wartime collaborators (Avseyushkin 2020).

Authorities, in turn, perceive these activists as agents of Russian political and cultural influence in Belarus. This case also demonstrates the tactics of bureaucratic restrictions rather than direct confrontation. Thus, in 2018, the Minsk city authorities did not permit an “Immortal Regiment” march initially, though at the last moment they issued an approval. In 2019, permission was given to hold the march, but only along a shortened route. Several attempts to register this initiative officially in Belarus in 2018–2020 ended up in refusals by government agencies.

The memory of Victory has become a powerful tool for legitimising Lukashenka's power; it is not surprising that for the political opposition, criticism of the Victory cult becomes at the same time a way of criticising the authorities. There is also a contraposition of ordinary soldiers' personal heroism to the criminal leadership (especially to Stalin) in the Belarusian public space, which began to manifest itself during the thaw, but rethinking the image of the “partisan republic” is much more popular. According to Sergey Ushakin (2011, p. 221), rethinking of the partisan movement in intellectual discussions, which relies on the collective memory of the rural population, demonstrates a paradigmatic shift of the memory of the war in Belarus—from “resistance” as a key trope of the post-war history to a new trope of “occupation:”

As a result, the partisan movement in Soviet Belarus is interpreted as a foreign and alien practice of self-destruction, as a form of activity and capability which was forced from above and which contradicted any rational arguments and interests of the local population.

Discussions on the nature of the Great Patriotic War are traditionally escalated by May 9 and particular importance is attributed to the way of celebrating this day. For political opposition, Victory Day is a “fake event” monopolised by the state during which huge resources are spent on the costly parades while the financial state of war veterans excites but pity. Alternatively, following the pattern of neighbouring countries, it is proposed to reformat this holiday into the Day of Remembrance and Sorrow. However, as sociological studies show, the traditional format of the Victory Day celebration enjoys support among the population (SATIO, 2020) and until this year, criticism of the opposition has been rather marginal in the public space, “the defence of an alternative interpretation of the war is extremely problematic” (Zadora 2016, 4).

Belarusian servicewomen marching during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020. © Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock



Thus, Victory Day is an important element of the politics of memory in the Republic of Belarus, built into the system of Lukashenka's state ideology. Its symbolic content largely depends on the current political agenda wherein Belarusian-Russian relations are of particular importance.

External Context: Coronavirus and Russia

In 2020, Victory Day's celebrations in Minsk were undoubtedly influenced by two major factors: the COVID-19 pandemic and the state of relations with Russia. To some extent, these two factors have merged together as will be discussed below.

The first known case of coronavirus in Belarus was detected on February 27 when a student from Iran was diagnosed with



Belarusian soldiers marching during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020.
© Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock



COVID-19. Until the end of March, the spread of the disease was restrained by means of the selective exclusion of contacts, but this measure could suspend the advance of the pandemic only for a short while. By March 27 only 94 cases of coronavirus were confirmed, then by April 27 this number increased to 11,289 and on May 8 (on the eve of the parade), 21,101 positive coronavirus tests were reported in Belarus. It is easy to notice that the period of the explosive spread of the coronavirus took place right during the preparation period for the parade, when isolation measures virtually stopped working. Moreover, there are certain reasons not to trust the Belarusian official statistics, since the authorities deliberately underestimated the extent of the spread of the disease (Kilani, 2021).

However Lukashenka took personal responsibility for the special course chosen by the country during the pandemic. Unlike almost all countries in the world, authorities did not officially introduce any lockdown, neither did they impose a ban on mass gatherings, “Belarus has not undertaken any measures to combat the pandemic” (Åslund, 2020, 2). Moreover, the country’s president publicly called the reaction of other countries to the pandemic a “psychosis:” “I call this coronavirus nothing but a psychosis and I will never change my mind on this” (March 19, 2020), and also criticised the effectiveness of quarantine measures as well as the expediency of their introduction:

I made a decision—to act in accordance with the situation. Shall there be a need to isolate—we will isolate. Shall there be a need for a lockdown—we will introduce a lockdown. Shall there be a need for a curfew—we will introduce a curfew. But do our people need it? We don’t need it now. Someone is pushing us in the back: go ahead with the lockdown! Lukashenka this, Lukashenka that! There is no such need (April 26, 2020).

Later, on the eve of the parade on May 8, he again emphasised the artificiality of the problem: “That’s a real frenzy, a real psychosis. People just became afraid.” The virtual absence of quarantine measures on the part of the authorities led to an increase in the level of self-organisation among the population: people started practicing self-isolation and wearing masks in public spaces; sanitisers appeared everywhere. At local levels, especially in the areas where outbreaks of coronavirus

were experienced, certain restrictions began to be introduced. Almost all universities switched to distance learning (despite the resistance from the Ministry of Education); theatres closed, concerts and festivals were cancelled.

At that time, the majority of the population advocated the introduction of a “soft lockdown,” as evidenced by the results of the representative urban population online survey “How the Pandemic Changes the Lives of Belarusians” conducted on April 17–22 by the SATIO research company and the BEROE Economic Research Center. Among those surveyed, 74% and 71% of respondents respectively supported the introduction of measures such as a ban on all public events and better provision of information about the spread of coronavirus for the population (SATIO, BEROE 2020). In June, data from a monitoring conducted in April by the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Sociology was published; the monitoring recorded the lowest ever level of trust in President Aliaksandr Lukashenka of 24% (Koktysh 2020). The population’s disapproval of the lack of measures to combat coronavirus can probably be considered one of the most important reasons for this fall in Lukashenka’s rating.

Naturally, in this complicated epidemiological situation, the question of holding the Victory Day’s parade arose sharply. An important signal for Lukashenka was the postponement of the parade’s date in Russia to June 24. In addition to criticism from the public (which will be discussed further), representatives of the World Health Organisation also recommended that the parade be cancelled. Thus, on May 4, WHO official representative in Belarus Batyr Berdyklychev voiced warnings about the parade’s epidemiological consequences:

We are very concerned about the possible negative consequences of such a mass event during the epidemic. Of particular concern is the fact of possible participation of elderly people in this event, who are prone to difficult disease progression and high mortality rate from COVID-19. (Turchina 2020).

At the same time, throughout this whole period, Lukashenka consistently defended the need for the parade. On March 27, he gave assurances that no planned events would be canceled; moreover, he was considering the possibility of simultaneously



Belarusian military during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020. © Svet foto / Shutterstock

attending the May 9 parades in Minsk and Moscow. To technically combine these events, it was planned to move the Minsk parade to the evening, but in the end, the parade's date postponement in Russia removed this issue from the agenda.

On April 20, the Ministry of Defense (apparently with the approval of the president) gave an official response to a public petition demanding parade's cancellation:

The epidemiological situation that is currently taking shape in the Republic of Belarus allows the Armed Forces to conduct planned combat training activities. The parade preparation and conduct is an integral part of troops' combat training (*Minoborony* 2020).

At a special meeting dedicated to the epidemiological situation in the country, Aliaksandr Lukashenka once again stressed that the parade would be held:

I must say that we cannot cancel the parade. We just cannot. I thought about it for a long time. Of course, this is an emotional, deeply ideological thing. We must remember that those people [war veterans] died, possibly from viruses or other diseases too. But at times they did not feel it and did not think about it. And they died for us—no matter how pretentious this may sound. And think about what people are going to say on this. Maybe not immediately, but a day or two after—they will say that we got scared (March 5, 2020).

This persistence of the Belarusian president should as well be perceived in line with the general rhetoric aimed at downplaying the problems associated with the coronavirus. Lukashenka personally opposed the introduction of a lockdown, and canceling the main ideological event from this perspective would be a recognition of the seriousness of the situation with the coronavirus in the country, which was denied by the authorities in every possible way.

In the opposition, the parade's criticism was predictably focused on the lack of safeguards for participants and spectators. The enduring "*death parade*" meme spread widely on social media, predicting dire consequences. The popular writer Hanna Sevyarynets wrote about the parade in a widely distributed publication:

“It is also called a death parade now. But this is a victory parade too. The parade of victory over common sense. The parade of victory over WHO recommendations. The parade of victory over weak-willed students and over the whole country” (Sevyarynets 2020).

This meme proved to be so successful that it was picked up by Russian media. The small number of spectators at the parade demonstrates that for the population of Belarus, the warnings during the pandemic turned out to be more valid than Lukashenka’s assurances.

Another contextual field is relations with Russia, the main “rival” for the Victory Day celebration. It has already been noted that initially Lukashenka accepted the invitation to attend the parade in Moscow, which could be perceived as a symbolic act of rapprochement, but the coronavirus pandemic disrupted these plans. Russian authorities embarked on the course of strict quarantine measures, and naturally, Russian part became sensitive to Lukashenka’s skepticism about the danger of the disease and the effectiveness of generally accepted preventive measures. As early as on March 16, Russia unilaterally closed the border with Belarus for travel, which caused a predictable discontent of Belarusian authorities. Lukashenka further fuelled the flames by opposing the calm situation in Belarus to “fires in Russia” and making a statement that the Russian authorities “are more concerned about how to fence off Moscow and think: God forbid that the Government of the Russian Federation becomes infected.” (March 16, 2020). Lukashenka called Russia’s policy on the fight against the coronavirus “recklessness,” and throughout April, swordplay over the correct strategy to combat the epidemic took place. This small information war culminated in the deportation (on May 6) of two Russian journalists of Channel One (ORT TV channel) after they made a report on the pandemic in Belarus.

Going ahead with the May 9 parade in Minsk was thus supposed to demonstrate the to the Russian partners both the priority of Belarus in celebrating Victory Day (mind the rhetoric about Belarus being the most affected and most heroic country) and the correctness of the chosen strategy to combat the coronavirus. The conflict over the fight against the pandemic has only exacerbated tensions between Moscow and

Minsk, caused by numerous disagreements over integration cards and energy prices. In this situation, it was extremely important for Lukashenka to demonstrate strong political will. The stakes were extremely high.

Despite the closed border with Russia, Lukashenka offered Russian politicians to visit the parade:

Let them come. Shall there be a need to provide means of communication to make it happen, we will provide them. Our airport is open. I believe we will agree with the Russian leadership on arranging the flight for those who wish to visit us. We do not close the door for our friends and brothers (May 3, 2020).

Realising that this is virtually the only Victory parade in the post-Soviet space, Lukashenka tried to bring this event to an international dimension by inviting other states' leaders: "I publicly invite all heads of state, at least of the former Soviet Union, to come to Minsk and attend this parade. Let's hope that someone will come" (May 5, 2020). Predictably, Putin did not seem to notice this invitation while Russian politicians who had held affection for Lukashenka harshly refused the invitation condemning the neglect of safety precautions during the pandemic in their public statements. Moreover, the parade was not attended by Russian and Chinese military who had previously participated in the ceremonies.

Holding the Victory Day parade in 2020 hence became a matter of honour for Lukashenka; this event was supposed to demonstrate not only loyalty to commemorating the victors, but also the correctness of the course chosen to combat the pandemic.



Around the Parade: Initiatives for Memory Reinforcement

The Victory Day's anniversary years are associated with a number of events accompanying the parade and designed to involve various population groups in the memorialisation. The number and scale of these activities sharply decreased due to the pandemic, but several important events still took

place. One of the main challenges for state politics of history is the “post-memory” situation when direct participants of war events, primarily war veterans, gradually pass away, and so the direct evidence with a powerful experience of emotional empathy is no longer available (Hirsh 2012). There occurs a respective need for technologisation and reorganisation of such memorial practices with the involvement of key social groups, primarily youth, in them.

A large-scale patriotic project “Youth Marathon 75” had ended by Victory Day. Its main facilitator, Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRSM), is a large youth organisation uniting over 480 thousand young men and women (Silvan 2020). In fact, BRSM is one of the main agents of state politics of history whose immediate task is to transmit the memory of the war. The stake is placed on huge projects with maximum geographical and individual coverage, which naturally turn into long-term marathons. The implementation of the marathon for the 75th Victory anniversary began back in May 2019. Youth activists traveled to various places in the country and presented the results of exploration and research work initiated by BRSM to the public. The *bottom-top* paradigm, on which this project was built, should be specifically highlighted. The first step was the collection of personal information about war veterans. Then, information about liberation participants in certain areas was gathered up, and subsequently the participants of the marathon accumulated the collected information into symbolic regional “liberation canvases.” The final chord of this complex event was the creation of a 6 by 12 meters large cloth in the form of the Belarusian flag with the names of the heroes of the Soviet Union and full chevaliers of the Order of Glory, veterans of the Great Patriotic War from Belarus embroidered on it.

It was originally planned that the final banner would be solemnly presented to the public on Independence Day on July 3. But the pandemic broke those plans as holding the parade on Victory Day became a matter of life and death; its symbolic significance grew enormously, and the banner presentation was accordingly moved to May 9. In this case we also see an attempt to involve the maximum number of people in one common initiative which comes from the experience of family history, which brings it closer to the “Immortal Regiment” action, though the outcome is not

a merger of acts of individual commemoration but a general unified result in the form of a huge banner where personal stories no longer matter.

BRSM also seeks to maximise the mobilisation of young people through extensive use of new forms of social activity that employs the values and practices of the “Internet generation.” However to a greater extent it concerns rhetoric rather than the actual transformation of organisational forms: ordinary concerts are called “open-air,” congratulations to veterans organised by youth activists are named “flash mobs,” and so on. The state bureaucratic structure has many resources for the mass mobilisation of young people, but the effectiveness of the methods applied in this case raises certain doubts.

Another important large-scale and long-term memorial event timed to coincide with Victory Day in 2020 was the completion of capsules lying in the crypt of the Minsk Church of All Saints. The prior of this church is Archpriest Fiodar Pouny, a key figure in the Belarusian Orthodox Church and Lukashenka’s personal confessor. On his initiative, the Church of All Saints turned into a real memorial centre closely associated with the state politics of history. Back in 2010, remains of three unknown soldiers who died in the battles of three wars, the War of 1812, World War I and the Great Patriotic War, were buried in this temple (it should be noted that this reburial was symbolically tied to Independence Day). On May 9, 2019, the next stage of memorialisation took place as capsules containing soil from various “places of memory” of the Great Patriotic War (from graves of heroes and places of battles) were solemnly reburied. On the same day, President Aliaksandr Lukashenka announced the start of a large-scale patriotic project “For the Glory of the Common Victory!”; 126 capsules containing soil from war graves and places of military glory were placed in the temple’s crypt. Another 11 hero cities and more than 10 foreign countries joined this project. The formula for combining Soviet and Orthodox commemoration practices invented in 2019 had acquired an unprecedented scale by the Victory Anniversary:

We do not keep count of the capsules, we keep count of the events behind each capsule, as this is a whole layer of historical past. This is a new formula of memory that is needed today to

give fair answers to the questions of future generations about how and what happened in our history, considering that war veterans pass away (Lukashenka, May 8, 2020).

Naturally, the implementation of such a complex and expensive event would have been impossible without support from the government—the capsules were delivered by helicopter; they were brought into the church accompanied by the honour guard, and the ceremony was attended by President Aliaksandr Lukashenka.

It is important to note that there is no instance of a full-fledged alliance of the Orthodox Church and the state in terms of politics of history, as it may seem at first glance. Archpriest Fiodar Pouny was in quite chilly relations with Exarch Paul, and the alliance with the state strengthened his position in the struggle for power among the BOC hierarchy. As for the Orthodox Church itself, it is very difficult to bring its politics of memory into the framework of the straightforward heroic narrative triumphant in Belarus. The cult of new martyrs who became victims of the Soviet authorities' repressive policy is also widely spread here. The situation is further complicated by the fact that during the Nazi occupation, many Orthodox churches were opened and operated, which became an additional reason for the post-war repression against priests; but for Archpriest Pouny and his adherents, these inconvenient nuances are “forgotten,” and the image of the Great Patriotic War merges entirely with the state narrative.

These two major marathons started well before May 9. In general, the program of festive events still suffered from the pandemic, and in the regions of Belarus it was reduced to a minimum, a symbolic laying of wreaths at the memorials of the Great Patriotic War. Many of the events supporting the parade in Minsk that had been advertised in the program did not actually take place, despite the announcement. The Great Patriotic War Museum was closed to visitors after the parade; festivities with concerts in the city's parks did not take place either. Despite the exterior image of well-being, only such events as the parade, wreath laying at the Victory Monument, the evening concert on the square and fireworks remained.

Victory Square has become the only informal venue for the celebration where the laying of wreaths at the Victory

Monument takes place. According to the established ritual, on this day wreaths are laid by representatives of all major government agencies and public organisations. Though if in non-anniversary years this event becomes Victory Day's central act, then the parade during anniversaries, of course, leaves it with just secondary importance. However, it is important that it is exactly this place where it is possible for those movements and forces that do not fit into the fully formalised Victory Day structure to reveal their position. This site usually brings together representatives of pro-Russian and communist organisations that have found themselves on the sidelines of Belarusian public space. It was here that on May 9 a few adherents of the "Immortal Regiment" initiative (about twenty people) gathered among various, mostly elderly, activists walking around the square in an attempt to attract the attention of journalists. Symbols ousted from the official Victory Day celebration—St. George's ribbons, Soviet flags—were presented here in abundance. In the evening, a concert took place on this square which neither caused any public stir.



Fulfilment of Sacred Duty or Tyranny?

The centre for all of the celebrations was the parade which caused so much controversy on its eve. The event was attended by about three thousand military personnel, border guards, rescuers, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Military equipment passed through the centre of Minsk; 36 airplanes and helicopters were involved. No special safety measures related to the pandemic were taken. On the eve of the parade, Belarusian president voiced the idea of inviting those who had recovered from coronavirus to the parade, but later this intention was abandoned. There were no special health checks of the spectators, moreover, it was unofficially recommended not to wear protective masks during the event. During the parade's telecast, the camera, apparently deliberately, focused exclusively on faces without masks, although some of the audience decided to wear them.

The speech of President Aliaksandr Lukashenka, in which the most important accents in assessing the current situation are highlighted, generally bears the greatest semantic load during the parade. The speech usually contains a set of stable

components that traditionally shape the narrative of the Great Patriotic War in Belarus, but of the greatest interest are new elements that link memory with the actual dimension.

Similarly, in this speech we can easily find the previously highlighted features of the Belarusian image of the Great Patriotic War. Certainly, Victory Day cannot do without emphasising the heroism of the Belarusian people:

Belarus stood in the way of the aggressor with a human shield. Here, on our land, having passed half of Europe, the Nazis met such fierce resistance for the first time. The heroic defence of Brest Fortress and the city of Mogilev lasted much longer than it took for the seizure of certain European states. It was in the fierce battles of 1941, including those on the Belarusian land, that the enemy's confidence in their own superiority was shaken; the foundations of the future Great Victory were laid. The contribution of the Belarusian people to the defeat of fascism is beyond doubt.

It is no doubt that an important part of the Victory narrative is the emphasis on the tragic element of war events, the huge sacrifices suffered by the Belarusian people: "modern Belarus is a monument to that terrible war, to the ones that were killed, tortured and burned. A living memory and a living monument." On top of that, Lukashenka predictably mentions "death of every third Belarusian resident who blocked the Nazis' way further to the East, to the capital of our Union."

The people of Belarus appear as a victorious nation maintaining a direct and immediate connection between the heroes of the war and the peaceful workers of modern Belarus. Though this connection exists only by virtue of the constant and continuous act of memory, and that is why the proposed parade's cancellation was viewed by Lukashenka as a destruction of this sacred obligation: "Even a thought of breaking the traditions that have been glorifying the history of victors' Great Feat for 75 years is unacceptable for us."

As per established tradition, external aggression hanging over the peace-loving Belarus is also mentioned. Lukashenka stubbornly repeats the rhetoric of the Soviet era, when Western capitalists were portrayed as direct successors of the aggressive aspirations of fascist forces:

But the world ignores the tragic lessons of the past... The planet is heated up by new hotbeds of armed conflicts. Peaceful people are dying again. And against this background the ideas of Nazism are being revived.

A continuous external threat forces Belarus to constantly maintain its army's combat potential (otherwise, why would a peace-loving country need it?), and therefore an important function of the parade and its demonstration of the latest military equipment is a manifestation of combat readiness not only to the residents of the country, but also to potential aggressors. Lukashenka admittedly draws attention to the fact that "the revival of the ideas of Nazism" also takes the form of "memory wars" mentioning "destroyed monuments to liberating soldiers, glorification of Nazi criminals, falsification of World War II historical facts." This is a clear reference to the conflicts over the interpretation of World War II, which have intensified in recent years between Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe, but in general they have little effect on Belarus itself. These words reveal both the dependence on the Russian discourse of memory and their aiming at the public beyond the country's borders.

References to the current situation, which in this speech are in greater abundance than normally, also worth noting. At the very beginning, Lukashenka turned to the topic of justifying the parade amid the pandemic: of course, this is a "sacred holiday for us," and "the difficulties of the modern day" (that primarily point to the peak of the coronavirus pandemic) are incomparable with the hardships overcome by the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. It is extremely important to note here that the criticism for holding the parade comes from "the maddened world that lost its bearings" (compare to Lukashenka's statement on March 16, 2020: "You see the world going mad from the coronavirus, or, maybe, from all these arguments about the coronavirus. But for us this is not the most important and terrifying thing."); these words can only be understood in the context of Lukashenka's tough attitude to the extension of quarantine measures ("frenzy," "psychosis"). Thus, a clear dichotomy of the forces of good and evil is being created between the "keepers of memory" performing their duty despite all of the difficulties, and the "distraught world" that was unable to cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

This 2020 speech of the Belarusian president deserves a special status due to its specific focus on the audience outside the country. In some of his Victory Day speeches, Aliaksandr Lukashenka concentrated exclusively on the heroism and sufferings of Belarusians, without even mentioning other Soviet peoples (Lastouski 2020). This time, however, the focus of the speech was on the common Soviet Motherland, “our common Union;” all the former USSR peoples have been listed, and the allied countries have not been forgotten:

We bow before the feat of Russians and Belarusians, Ukrainians and Jews, Tatars and Kazakhs, Tajiks and Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Turkmens, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Moldovans, Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, all residents of the Soviet Union, fighters of the European Resistance movement, our allies—the USA, England and China.

This extraordinary multiplicity of speech addressees where even Estonians are not forgotten stems from the very special status of this Victory Day in Minsk: “And may this year’s military parade in Minsk be the only one in the post-Soviet space, it will be held in honour of all of the Soviet soldiers who liberated the world from Nazism.” At this point Lukashenka was a little mistaken since in 2020, the Victory Day parade was also held in Ashgabat (for the first time, by the way), but due to Turkmenistan’s general isolation, few people attributed importance to this. It should be noted that at the beginning of parade’s broadcast on Belarusian television, special attention was paid to the increased number of countries covered by the broadcast. Thus, Lukashenka’s speech had been largely based on the sensation that this was the only parade in the post-Soviet space, and, accordingly, the event was supposed to prove the courage and wisdom of the Belarusian president in the fight against coronavirus as well as his firm readiness to defend the memory of the victors. Consequently, the focus was not only on the Belarusian audience, but almost primarily on all residents of the former Soviet Union.

Such a claim for the position of the main custodian of the sacred memory, however, could not but invoke a negative reaction from the Russian leadership. Russian politicians reacted to the parade in Minsk in a rather harsh manner.



Belarusian soldiers marching during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020.

© Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock

As was already mentioned, the invitation to this event was ignored. More importantly, on May 9 Russian TV news did not even mention the parade in Minsk. The video of the Minsk parade posted on YouTube has been watched by 37 thousand people, which is significantly less than the number of views of the parade in Moscow that was held later (947 thousand). It turns out that holding a solemn event on Victory Day only worsened Belarusian-Russian relations and hardly added to Lukashenka's popularity in the post-Soviet space despite certain ambitions that apparently existed in this regard.

It is difficult to say that the decision of holding the parade strengthened the position of the president in the Belarusian society too. According to the calculations of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the parade was attended by 15 thousand people. This number is next to nothing for such an event—for example, in 2015, the number of spectators exceeded 600 thousand. According to my observations, the evening concert was attended only by guests with invitation cards; few people were by the security perimeter, no traditional mass festivities during the fireworks took place. The response of the Belarusian society to this event can be defined as cautious.

Unfortunately, there is no sufficient body of sociological data to assess the reaction of the public opinion in Belarus to the parade. On August 9, 2020, the presidential elections in the country were to be held, and the authorities traditionally took sociological services in an iron grip. However, the protracted political crisis, numerous mass protests after the presidential elections show that Aliaksandr Lukashenka has significantly undermined the confidence of the country's citizens by his actions during the pandemic. The UN data on mortality in Belarus published in early September demonstrated that the mortality rate for the period of April–July 2020 exceeded the average figures for the last five years by 5,500 people, which was carefully hidden behind the official statistics. The “psychosis” has gathered its bloody harvest in Belarus, despite all the optimistic assurances of the Belarusian president.

Victory Day has not raised Aliaksandr Lukashenka to the desired position of the political leader in the post-Soviet space; it rather revealed the numerous problems in the Belarusian society, which would emerge sharply in a couple of months' time. After the presidential elections on August 9, 2020, mass protests

unfolded against election fraud and the use of extreme (by Belarusian standards) violence by the law enforcement agencies. The imagery and rhetoric of the Great Patriotic War as a support for the historical memory of Belarusian citizens once again rose to the surface of public space: the authorities began to identify the protesters with Nazi collaborators, and the employment of the white-red-white flag which was used by various Belarusian nationalist organisations during the war became the most powerful argument. On the part of the protesters, representatives of law enforcement who willingly resorted to violence were instantly labeled as “fascists.” Minsk Hero-City Obelisk with the Great Patriotic War Museum located nearby became the central points for the protests. During the first mass march on August 16 the square was filled with protesters, and the statue of the Motherland was decorated with a giant white-red-white flag. The Minister of Defense rushed to defend the “desecrated” memorial, and during the next marches it became usual to cordon off the memorial complex with barbed wire and armed soldiers. Military equipment is no longer demonstrated only during solemn parades, but patrols the streets of Minsk every Sunday. “Fascists”—such emotionally charged accusations are heard from each side; the war has not left the consciousness of people and the split in society is only increasing.

References

- Åslund, Anders. 2020. “Responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*. DOI: 10.1080/15387216.2020.1778499.
- Avseyushkin, Yan [Авсейюшкин, Ян]. 2020. “«Бессмертному полку» в третий раз отказали в регистрации” [“immortal Regiment was refused registration for the third time”]. *Naviny.by*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://naviny.media/article/20200312/1584012871-bessmertnomu-polku-v-tretyy-raz-otkazali-v-registracii>.
- Goujon, Alexandra. 2010. “Memorial Narratives of WWII Partisans and Genocide in Belarus.” *East European Politics and Societies* 24 (1): 6–25.

- Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kilani, Ahmad. 2021. “An interpretation of reported COVID-19 cases in post-Soviet states”. *Journal of Public Health* 43 (2): 409–41.
- Koktysh, Marina [Коктыш, Марина]. 2020. “Центризбирком надо разгонять. Народная воля”. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/марина-коктыш/центризбирком-надо-разгонять/3082482335169821/>.
- Kolstø, Pål. 2016. “Symbol of the War—But Which One? The St George Ribbon in Russian Nation-Building”. *The Slavonic and East European Review* 94 (4) (October): 660–701.
- Lastouski, Aliaksey [Ластовский, Алексей]. 2020. “Идеологическая архитектура Дня Победы: Минск-2013 [Ideological Architecture of the Victory Day: Minsk–2013]”. *Уроки истории*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://urokiistorii.ru/article/56879>.
- Leshchenko, Natalia. 2008. “The National Ideology and the Basis of the Lukashenka Regime in Belarus”. *Europe-Asia Studies* 60 (8) (Oct.): 1419–33.
- Lewis, Simon. 2017. “The “Partisan Republic”: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus”. In *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, M. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko. Palgrave MacMillan: 371–96.
- Litskevich, Oleg [Лицкевич, Олег]. 2009. “Людские потери Беларуси в войне [Belarusian Human Losses in the War]”. *Беларуская думка* 5: 92–97.
- Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. March 1, 2019. “Лукашенко: Беларусь нуждается в национальной идее, которую поддержит весь народ” [Lukashenka: Belarus needs the national idea which will be supported by all people]. *BELTA*. Accessed December 7, 2020.

<https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-nuzhdaetsja-v-natsionalnoj-idee-kotoruju-podderzhit-ves-narod-338501-2019/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. March 16, 2020. “Лукашенко отреагировал на закрытие Россией границы с Беларусью и пояснил, почему не принимает подобных мер” [“Lukashenka reacted to the closure of the border with Belarus by Russia and explained why he does not take such measures”]. *BELTA*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-otreagiroval-na-zakrytie-rossiej-granitsy-s-belarusju-i-pojasn timer-pochemu-ne-prinimaet-383463-2020/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. March 19, 2020. “Лукашенко: люди могут больше пострадать от паники, чем от самого коронавируса” [“Lukashenka: people may suffer more from panic than from coronavirus itself”]. *BELTA*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-ljudi-mogut-bolshe-postradat-ot-paniki-chem-ot-samogo-koronavirusa-383885-2020/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. July 2, 2009. “Глава государства принял участие в торжественном собрании по случаю Дня Независимости” [Head of the State took part in the ceremonial meeting on the occasion of the Independence Day]. *TVR.BY*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.tvr.by/events/sobytiya/glava-gosudarstva-prinyal-uchastie-v-torzhestvennom-sobranii-po-sluchayu-dnya-nezavisimosti/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. April 26, 2020. “Лукашенко заверил, что Беларусь не нуждается в карантине [Lukashenka gives assurances that Belarus does not need to quarantine]”. *Naviny.by*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://naviny.by/new/20200426/1587895333-lukashenko-zaveril-chto-belarus-ne-nuzhdaetsya-v-karantine>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. March 27, 2020. “Посещение ОАО Белгипс” [Visit to ОАО Belgips]”.

Official Internet-portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Accessed December 7, 2020. http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/poseschenie-oao-belgips-23306/.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. May 3, 2020. “Они умирали ради нас” - Лукашенко о важности проведения парада в День Победы [“They died for us’—Lukashenka on the importance of holding a parade on Victory Day”]. *BELTA*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/oni-umirali-radi-nas-lukashenka-o-vazhnosti-provedeniya-para-da-v-den-pobedy-389373-2020/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. May 5, 2020. “Лукашенко приглашает глав других государств приехать в Минск на парад Победы” [“Lukashenka invites heads of other states to come to Minsk for the Victory Parade”]. *BELTA*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-priglashaet-glav-drugih-gosudarstv-priehat-v-minsk-na-parad-pobedy-389621-2020/>.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. May 8, 2020. “Участие в торжественной церемонии закладки капсул с землей с мест воинской славы в рамках акции «Во славу общей Победы»” [“Participation in the solemn ceremony of laying capsules with earth from places of military glory within the framework of the action «For the Glory of the Common Victory»”]. *Official Internet-portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus*. Accessed December 7, 2020. http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/torzhestvennaja-tseremonija-zakladki-kapsul-s-zemlej-sobrannoj-v-mestax-voinskoj-slavy-i-gibeli-mirnogo-23566/.

Lukashenka, Aleksandr [Лукашенко, Александр]. 9 May 2020. “Выступление Президента Беларуси на военном параде в ознаменование 75-й годовщины Великой Победы [Speech by the President of Belarus at the military parade to mark the 75th anniversary of the Great Victory”]. *BELTA*. Accessed 7 December 2020. <https://www.belta.by/president/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-belarusi-na-voennom-para-de-v-oznamenovanie-75-letiya-velikoj-pobedy-389621-2020/>.

by/president/view/vystuplenie-prezidenta-belarusi-na-voennom-parade-v-oznamenovanie-75-j-godovschiny-velikoj-pobedy-390276-2020/.

Marples, David. 2014. *Our Glorious Past: Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.

Minoborony. “Минобороны: эпидобстановка в стране позволяет провести парад на 9 мая” [“Ministry of Defense: the epidemic situation in the country allows a parade on 9 May”]. April 20, 2020. *Interfax*. Accessed December 7, 2020. https://interfax.by/news/policy/vnutrennyaya_politika/1274869/.

Rohava, Maryia. 2020. “The Politics of State Celebrations in Belarus”. *Nations and Nationalism*. 1–19. DOI: 10.1111/nana.12653.

Rudling, Per Anders. 2017. “Unhappy Is the Person Who Has No Motherland”: National Ideology and History Writing in Lukashenka's Belarus”. In *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, edited by J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, M. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko. Palgrave McMillan: 71–105.

SATIO, BEROС. 2020. “Как жители Беларуси реагируют на коронавирус?” [“How do Belarusians react to the coronavirus?”]. *SATIO*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Gi3fAlchglWggtPNnvY YXfN5M81nUmnT/view>.

SATIO. 2020. “Нацыянальная ідэнтычнасць беларусаў. Першая частка даследавання” [“Belarusian National Identity. First Part of the Research”]. *Budzma.by*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://budzma.by/upload/medialibrary/f6a/f6aaee2efac71f1d5bfb88a806451410.pdf>.

Sevyarynets, Ganna [Севярынец, Ганна]. 2020. “Назваюць »парадам сьмерці«, але ён і цяпер парад перамогі... над здаровым сэнсам” [“It called the »parade of death«, but it is still a parade of victory... over common sense”]. *Радыё Свабода*. Accessed

- December 7, 2020. <https://www.svaboda.org/a/30593689.html?fbclid=IwAR0OQANhptBA-zlRcYW3wV77C47PA2AQNvJsgD4cimVxL4wAijAPspYuDGM>.
- Silvan, Kristiina. 2020. "From Komsomol to the Republican Youth Union: Building a Pro-presidential Mass Youth Organisation in Post-Soviet Belarus". *Europe-Asia Studies*. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2020.1761296.
- Smok, Vadzim. 2014. "Belarus Bans St. George's Ribbons at V-Day Celebrations". *Belarus Digest*. Accessed December 7, 2020. <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-bans-st-georges-ribbons-at-v-day-celebrations/>.
- Turchina, Irana [Турчина, Ирана]. 2020. "ВОЗ обеспокоена возможными негативными последствиями военного парада в Минске" ["WHO worries about the possible negative consequences of military parade in Minsk"]. *Belapan*. Accessed December 7, 2020. http://belapan.com/archive/2020/05/04/ru_1041575/.
- Urban, Michael. 1989. *An Algebra of Soviet Power: Elite Circulation in the Belorussian Republic 1966–86*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ushakin, Sergey [Ушакин, Сергей]. 2011. "В поисках места между Сталиным и Гитлером: О постколониальных историях социализма [Postcolonial Estrangements: Claiming a Space between Stalin and Hitler]". *Ab Imperio*. 1: 209–33.
- Zadora, Anna. 2016. "History of the War and Wars of History: Teaching the Second World War and the Holocaust in Post-Soviet Belarus". *Journal of War & Culture Studies*: 1–16.

Members of the group re-enacting Belarusian partisans marching during the May 9 parade. Minsk, Belarus, 2020. © Ruslan Kalnitsky / Shutterstock

