# The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and European Memory Wars

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## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a historic event that has changed social and political relations throughout Europe. It also impacted the politics of history, as it strengthened the impact of various historical events from the turbulent twentieth-century European history. We argue that the politics and visions of history by leading political actors play a significant role in both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and European reactions to it.

In the summer of 2021, Vladimir Putin published his essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", parallel to the build-up of Russian Armed Forces on the border with Ukraine. This was a clear indication that interpretations of history play a significant role in the ongoing

This work was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under Grant UIP-2019-04-2979.

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K. Pettersson et al. (eds.), *Revived Futures*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-40355-1_3

conflict between Russia and Ukraine. However, Putin's preoccupation with history and his desire to share his views with the world in a more comprehensive form could be traced to his 2020 essay. The essay was a reaction to the 2019 European Parliament resolution that condemned the Russian leadership for whitewashing Soviet crimes and declaring that World War II (WWII) "started as an immediate result of the notorious Nazi-Soviet Treaty on Non-Aggression of 23 August 1939, also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact" (European Parliament, 2019). Putin (2020) saw the resolution as historical revisionism and accused the West of being responsible for WWII, mentioning the Munich betrayal of Czechoslovakia. Thus, the debate between the West and Russia revolved around the question of who betrayed Central and Eastern Europe.

Although the Russian invasion, in general, did bring EU member states closer and even brought the former member state, the UK, back into the fold, there were also dissenting voices that revealed ongoing tensions across the European continent. We argue that these tensions can be partly traced to historical grievances and the politics of history of leading political actors. Particular focus should be placed on the notion of Western betrayal and the West's reactions to it, as they are a crucial part of transnational memory wars.

The notion of Western betrayal is crucial to understanding the attitudes of Central and Eastern Europe, but also Russia and Ukraine, towards the West and Western Europe. As the winner of the Cold War, the West crystallised itself as a significant Other to Central and Eastern Europe. This process brought both veneration and resentment (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). This was accentuated by the process of EU enlargement, which was led by Western European countries, and which became a cherished goal for CEE countries and a threat to Russia. In Central and Eastern European countries, the notion of Western betrayal revolves around the twentieth-century events where the West is seen as the culprit: the abandonment of CEE to their aggressors (Nazi Germany in the case of the Munich Agreement or the Soviet Union in the case of the Yalta Conference) or the outright dismemberment of Hungary in the Treaty of Trianon. The notion of Western betrayal is also present in more recent events, such as the 1990s Yugoslav wars. In these wars, the West is seen either as failing to react (in the case of Croatia) or as acting against a long-time ally (in the case of Serbia). In the case of Ukraine, the notion of Western betrayal also has a more recent origin. It centred on the fact that the West provided security assurances in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in exchange for

Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal. These assurances proved ineffective as Ukraine was dismembered by Russia in 2014 and invaded in 2022. In Russia, the notion of Western betrayal refers to the Russian sentiment against NATO expansion, which they see as a "broken promise" of the post-Cold War era (Westra, 2025). Also, as Putin's 2020 essay shows, Russian mnemonic warriors want to emphasise Western betrayal before WWII to justify Soviet actions of that period.

## Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The impact of the Russian invasion on memory politics in various European countries was analysed in a recent special issue. Fetzer and Nikolovski (2025) concluded that it is an event "that reconfigures mnemonic relations across national and transnational contexts" (p. 1). Comparisons between countries from different European regions have also been conducted (Kalhousová et al., 2024). This chapter analyses Europe as an entity that shares common historical experiences of the two world wars and division into capitalist and communist blocs. Due to having shared history, it is possible to speak of a rudimentary European public sphere regarding historical memory and its use. This common public sphere is considered rudimentary because, in addition to national mnemonic communities, there are also at least "four major mnemonic communities in the European memory landscape in relation to WWII: Atlantic-Western European, German, East-Central European and Russian" (Jarausch & Lindenberger, 2007, p. 4). These mnemonic communities view different events of the twentieth century as crucial. The most important difference is that in Western Europe, the end of WWII was perceived as the transformational event, while in CEE, it was the end of communism in 1989 (Verovšek, 2025). Nevertheless, the fact that these discussions have been led even at the official EU level (particularly since the 2004 Eastern Enlargement) points to an emerging European public sphere on history. The debate has often revolved around Russia's biggest public holiday, Victory Day, which celebrates the defeat of Nazi Germany on 9 May 1945.

The 60th anniversary in 2005 brought tensions regarding Russia's role in European history, with two Baltic leaders refusing to attend the ceremony (Mälksoo, 2009). The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine further contributed to the emergence of the European public sphere, as it brought both WWII and the Cold War and its aftermath back into the public spotlight. Both

historical periods were major issues for warring sides and for the rest of Europe. Central and Eastern European states' relations with Russia, as well as with the West, were re-examined. In Western European states, their historical actions towards Central and Eastern Europe and Russia were being questioned. We examine which historical events were emphasised and whether this has led to divergences or convergences within Europe. A note on our classification of European regions is warranted here. The classification is based on political, not geographical, criteria. Western European states are those that were liberal capitalist democracies after WWII. Germany is also treated here as belonging to Western Europe although it is geographically also part of Central Europe, and East Germany is a post-communist society. Under Central and Eastern Europe, we include former communist states that joined the EU or are candidate countries (Western Balkan countries). Ukraine joined this group only in 2022 when, after the invasion, it became a candidate for accession to the EU, marking a clear break from its Soviet heritage. However, due to this late break, Ukraine was more preoccupied with its relations with Russia than with the rest of Europe. Russia was their significant Other (Blokker & Delanty, 2009) against which they developed their identity, while for CEE EU member states, their significant other was the West.

We use Bernhard and Kubik's (2014) seminal typology of mnemonic actors in Central and Eastern European (CEE) politics to understand prominent political actors and their historical narratives employed before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The authors differentiate between four types of mnemonic actors: *mnemonic warriors*, *mnemonic abnegators*, *mnemonic pluralists*, and *mnemonic prospectives*. *Mnemonic warriors* "espouse a single, unidirectional, mythologized vision of time" and believe that the "wrongs of the past are part of the tissues of present politics" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 13). *Mnemonic abnegators*, on the other hand, "avoid memory politics. They are either uninterested or see no advantage in engaging in them" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 14). *Mnemonic pluralists* accept the presence of different visions of history. Finally, *mnemonic prospectives* "assume that, on the basis of the correct understanding of what is wrong with both past and present, people led by them can transcend the woes of the world by building a desirable post-historical end-state" (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014, p. 14). We treat Bernhard and Kubik's categories as relational and context-sensitive mnemonic roles rather than as fixed political identities.

We focus on some of the main political actors who shaped the debate on the Russian invasion of Ukraine in Europe. We analyse how they use

history, particularly in framing relations between the West, Central and Eastern Europe, and Russia. First, we present the main actors from the warring sides: Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Next, we discuss Central and Eastern European mnemonic warriors: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Polish PiS party; and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. We briefly discuss Croatian President Zoran Milanović, who also led memory wars against the West, but was not originally a mnemonic warrior. In the last part, we focus on the most visible Western European leaders at the start of the invasion: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. We examine their historical narratives regarding the war in Ukraine and other entities: the West (in the case of Putin, Zelenskyy, and CEE leaders) and CEE (in the case of Western European leaders). We analyse their most pronounced statements (in speeches, interviews, or written texts) in which they used historical references regarding these issues and provide brief descriptions of the personal and political backgrounds of the analysed actors. It is not our aim to present full accounts of these actors' politics of history but rather to identify certain tendencies that could help discern relations between them and other European actors.

## Putin as a Mnemonic Warrior and Zelenskyy's Transformation to a Global Mnemonic Entrepreneur

Since the late eighteenth century, Russian identity has oscillated between the West and the East. The liberal camp has criticised autocracy and has wanted to model Russia along the lines of England or France, which attempted to limit the powers of the monarchs. On the other hand, a strong conservative current accused Western powers of trying to exploit Russia (Tolz, 2001, pp. 49–61). In particular, the Ukrainian striving for independence has been seen "as the result of intrigues by European powers and/or the United States (i.e., the West)" (Tolz, 2001, p. 232).

Throughout his patrimonial rule (Hanson & Kopstein, 2022), Russian President Vladimir Putin acted as a mnemonic warrior trying to rectify past injustices done to Russia. One of Putin's most infamous statements was his lamenting of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which in 2005 he depicted as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (NBC News, 2005). This grievance could be traced to his background as a KGB officer witnessing the collapse of the Soviet empire while serving in East

Germany. Putin's vision of history plays an important role in his politics (Edele, 2017; Düben, 2023). Also, his worldview is said to be "more shaped by his personal resentment toward the West than by any ideological influence" (Laruelle, 2022, para 21). With the 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", he engaged deeply in constructing historical narratives, trying to connect the early history of Eastern Europe with the present situation. This was evident in the following quote from the essay:

> Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory—from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov—were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today. (Putin, 2021, para 4)

Putin presented a primordial historical narrative rooted in the cult of Saint Vladimir, the ruler of Kyiv in the tenth century, whose statue he unveiled in 2016 in Moscow (Plokhy, 2017). Putin (2021) accused the West of curtailing Ukrainian cooperation with Russia, thus dragging Ukraine "into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning Ukraine into a barrier between Europe and Russia, a springboard against Russia" (para 62). Putin (2021, para 63), then, depicted the history of the interference from Ukraine's western neighbours (the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austria-Hungary, Poland, Nazi Germany), who, he claimed, did not care for Ukraine but used it to weaken or conquer Russia.

Regardless of Putin's foray into early medieval history, the main myth of Russian history remains the victory over Nazism, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, cleansed of its controversial parts, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the 1939 attack on Poland (Mälksoo, 2009). Thus, Putin and his "memory makers" presented the situation in Ukraine since the Euromaidan protests, which in 2014 brought down pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, as the continuation of the Great Patriotic War. They depicted Ukrainian protesters as followers of Stepan Bandera[1] and neo-Nazis (McGlynn, 2023). Putin (2021, para 72)

[1] Bandera was the leader of the radical wing of the Ukrainian nationalist organisation OUN-B, which was involved in the mass murder of Poles and Jews, and cooperated with

compared the 2014 clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian protesters in Odesa with the Khatyn massacre, in which Ukrainian Nazi collaborators killed inhabitants of a village near Minsk in 1943. Putin exploited the memories of the violent history of Eastern Europe to portray Russia as an actor who strived for peace and unity with Ukraine but was sabotaged by the West and Ukrainian radicals.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on the other hand, entered the political scene as a mnemonic abnegator, ignoring memory wars within Ukraine and with Russia. During the 2019 presidential campaign, Zelenskyy said in a TV interview that "Stepan Bandera is a hero for a certain part of Ukrainians, and this is a normal and cool thing. He was one of those who defended the freedom of Ukraine. But I think that when we name so many streets, bridges by the same name, this is not quite right" (Unian, 2019, para 2). In line with his "'anti-polarization' populism" (Ash & Shapovalov, 2022), Zelenskyy proposed naming streets after contemporary figures such as the Ukrainian football star Andriy Shevchenko to avoid further social divisions (Unian, 2019). Zelenskyy's vision of history was similar to that of other CEE centrist populists, who were mostly mnemonic abnegators not particularly interested in historical issues (Petrović et al., 2023). As in Putin's case, Zelenskyy's vision of history could be traced to his background. He rose to prominence as a comedian on the popular TV show *Servant of the People*, making fun of corrupt Ukrainian politics, as well as Putin and the indifferent West.

In his presidential address, Zelenskyy continued in the role of mnemonic abnegator, ignoring historical references. Zelenskyy (2019, para 13) did emphasise the role of soldiers "who are now defending Ukraine, our heroes, some of whom are Ukrainian-speakers, while others — Russian-speakers". Instead of searching for Ukrainian historical heroes, he looked for role models in the Icelandic soccer team who defied odds at the European Championship, the Israelis who defend their land, the Japanese with their technology, and the Swiss who are able "to live with each other in harmony, despite all the differences" (Zelenskyy, 2019, para 13).

However, as the Russian invasion was approaching, Zelenskyy transformed himself into a global mnemonic entrepreneur, using historical

Nazis during WWII. He became a main figure in the memory wars between Russia and Ukraine, as he was hailed as a hero by more nationalist parts of Ukrainian society.

memory to argue for the Ukrainian cause. Just a couple of days before the Russian invasion, Zelenskyy gave a speech at the Munich Security Conference. He warned the West that politics of appeasement led to WWII as "the question 'Why die for Danzig?'[2] turned into the need to die for Dunkirk and dozens of other cities in Europe and the world" (Zelenskyy, 2022a, para 4). After referencing the historical notion of Western betrayal, Zelenskyy turned to an ongoing one. Zelenskyy said that "(s)ince 2014, Ukraine has tried three times to convene consultations with the guarantor states of the Budapest Memorandum" and was going to do it one last time (2022a, para 29). Following the start of the Russian invasion, Zelensky addressed parliaments and peoples of various states and invoked their historical national traumas in his quest for support for Ukraine. In the UK Parliament, he referenced the Battle of Britain and reiterated Churchill's phrase of never surrendering (Kuenssberg, 2022). On the anniversary of Denmark's liberation from Nazi occupation, he called on the people of Denmark to realise that a similar brutal war is happening in Ukraine (Zelenskyy, 2022c, para 5). In his address to the German Parliament, he mentioned the atrocities committed by the Nazi forces in WWII in Ukraine and implied that despite German politicians' rhetoric of "Never again", they do not act on these words (Zelenskyy, 2022b, para22). Zelenskyy widened his use of history when he virtually addressed Japan's parliament, stating that he is "receiving reports that Russia is preparing attacks using chemical weapons such as sarin" (Impelli, 2022, para 2). He invoked the memory of a recent national trauma: the 1995 terrorist attack in Tokyo in which sarin was used.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been embroiled in an ongoing memory war with Russia, which has escalated since 2014. However, the notion of Western betrayal is also simmering beneath the surface and could resurface if the West's support for Ukraine dwindles. In response to Trump's appeasement of Putin, the origin of Western betrayal has been traced to the West's failure to react to the Holodomor, the Ukrainian famine engineered by Stalin in the early 1930s (Nahaylo, 2025).

[2] This question was the title of an article written by Marcel Déat, a French socialist later turned fascist, who in the lead-up to the 1939 German invasion of Poland argued against France fighting for Poland.

## Central and Eastern European Illiberal Leaders and the Strengthening of Anti-Western Attitudes

Given the historical legacy of Soviet hegemony in the post-WWII period, CEE states should have been the most concerned about the Russian invasion and the most supportive of Ukraine. While this was certainly the case with the Baltic states and Poland, reflecting their historical concerns about Russian imperialism, some prominent actors in other CEE states were far less supportive of Ukraine. Orbán, Fico, and Milanović criticised the West and its policies towards Ukraine. Also, it was expected that a common threat of Russian imperialism would bring Western and Central and Eastern Europe closer together. However, even the Polish illiberal PiS, fervent in its support for Ukraine, has doubled down on its anti-Western narratives. This could be partly attributed to one common factor, which played out in different ways. Central and Eastern Europe is the birthplace and the main hotbed of the notion of Western betrayal, as it has experienced fragile statehoods and subjugation by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. In CEE countries, there were also high hopes for belonging to the West. However, illiberal actors viewed the West as imposing its cosmopolitan ideology and values while disregarding CEE national traditions.

In 2014, when pro-Russian separatists were organising independence referendums in eastern Ukraine, Orbán proclaimed that Hungarians in Ukraine "must be granted the opportunity for autonomy" (cited in Gardner, 2014, para 2). The case of the Hungarian minority in the Zakarpattia region of Ukraine, which used to belong to the Kingdom of Hungary, is part of the trauma of the Treaty of Trianon. The Treaty was imposed on Hungary by the Allied powers in 1920, led by France and the UK. Orbán has emphasised the historical injustices of Trianon and made them part of contemporary politics for various purposes, mostly his anti-Western attitudes (Petrović, 2019). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Orbán used the Trianon trauma to explain his stance towards the war in Ukraine. Commemorating the signing of the Treaty of Trianon in 2024, Orbán compared the present situation to the events before World War I (WWI). Hungary was then "chained to an empire that kept the question of war and peace to itself", which eventually led to Hungary being on the losing side in WWI and the signing of a humiliating peace treaty (cited in Scheffer, 2024, para 8). While Vienna dragged Hungary into WWI, Orbán urged the Hungarian people to support him so he could stop Brussels from dragging Hungary into another war, which could damage Hungarian

national interests. Thus, Orbán's stance towards Ukraine could be partly explained by his role as one of the most prominent mnemonic warriors of European politics. Also, due to the ongoing trauma of Trianon, Orbán may not have seen the post-WWII international order, which was being jeopardised by the Russian invasion, as a just order serving Hungarian national interests. Perhaps for this reason, Orbán was not eager to protect it.

Hungary has historically been presented as a bridge between the East and the West. Orbán's foreign policy has also balanced between the West and the East, but his main enemy has been the Western liberal order (Lamour, 2024). Orbán even used the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which was crushed by the Soviet army, to attack the West as an inactive entity that never understood Hungarian resilience and now wants to impose its values on Hungarians (Petrović, 2019, p. 376). During the 2024 commemoration of the Hungarian Revolution, Orbán used the occasion to alert the Hungarian public that the expansion of the conflict could result in Slavic soldiers, this time Ukrainian, being "once again stationed on Hungarian soil" (cited in Bráder, 2024, para 7).

Poland's historical relations with both Russia and Ukraine have often been marred by violence and border changes. However, Poland has been able to more or less mend fences with Ukraine. On the other hand, Poland was engaged in intense memory wars with Russia, with the 1940 Katyń massacre of Polish elites by Soviet forces being, arguably, the most traumatic event.[3]

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poland, led by the Eurosceptic PiS government, was among the staunchest supporters of Ukraine. At first sight, this brought rapprochement with Western European governments, as they now had a joint task of supporting Ukraine. However, PiS also felt vindicated in its long history of warning of Russian expansionism, epitomised in the late Polish President Lech Kaczyński's speech during his visit to Georgia in 2008. Thus, PiS doubled down on its criticism of the West equating the dangers coming from the liberal West and Russia (Petrović & Bilić, 2025). In August 2022, Jarosław Kaczyński presented the Russian invasion as a direct threat to Poland but also warned that German Chancellor Scholz "wants to implement…an alliance with

[3] On the memory wars between Poland and Ukraine regarding the Volhynia Massacre and why they are different than memory wars with the more powerful and threatening Russia, see Soroka (2022) and Koposov (2022).

Russia in order to rule Europe" (cited in Tilles, 2022, para 13). This stemmed from Kaczyński's anti-Germanism and his stance that Germany's historically aggressive politics towards Poland are being repeated in the German-led EU.

PiS lost power in 2023, but their presidential candidate Karol Nawrocki, a director of the Institute for National Remembrance, became the President in 2025. With his background at an organisation that strongly promoted a victimising narrative of Polish history, it came as no surprise that he engaged in a memory war with Ukraine in 2026. After Zelenskyy named an elite Ukrainian military unit after the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which carried out the massacres of Poles during WWII, Nawrocki stripped Zelenskyy of the award he had received in 2023.

The post-1989 nationalist and populist camp in Slovakia appropriated both communist and clerical conservative anti-Western narratives and blended them into an interpretation of national history as a series of injustices done by Western Europe against Slovak national and popular sovereignty. Simultaneously, the Slovak nationalists and populists advanced the positive image of Russia by appropriating the nineteenth-century notions of Slavic mutuality and of the Slovaks as the bridge between the East and the West, as well as the legacies of the 1944 anti-fascist national uprising and the post-1968 federal reconstitution of Socialist Czechoslovakia. The legacies of 1944 and 1968 were interpreted as precursors to full independence, which came in the 1990s (Đurašković, 2015, 2016).

The earliest mnemonic warrior who extensively used the outlined Russophile memory regime was Vladimír Mečiar, the head of the national-populist Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and Slovak prime minister from 1992 to 1998. Mečiar used it to legitimise the politics of Slovakia's eastern orientation, which he advanced as an alternative to NATO and EU accession, after Slovakia's initial exclusion from the first round of EU accession negotiations in 1995 due to his authoritarianism. Mečiar even drew parallels between the injustices inflicted on Slovakia by the 1938 Munich Agreement and the 1995 exclusion from the EU accession process (Đurašković, 2015, 2016; Marušiak, 2022).

The Russophile politics of history was further deployed by the left-populist Smer-SD party and its leader, Robert Fico. Smer emerged in 2002 as an ideological successor to HZDS (Đurašković, 2023; Marušiak, 2021). From the very beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Fico opposed the EU's policy of sanctions on Russia by claiming they would have harmful economic consequences for ordinary Slovaks

(Haughton et al., 2025). Fico initially espoused a politics that sought to mediate between the two countries by calling upon a Slavic mutuality, while simultaneously claiming that he "would never allow any animosity in Slovak-Russian relations", due to remembrance of the support the Red Army provided to the 1944 Slovak uprising (Vražda, 2016, para 13).

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Fico moved closer to the Russian memory regime. Speaking at the 2025 celebration of Victory Day in Bratislava, Fico stated that:

> Either we stand on the side of the winners of World War II, and we know who the winners were on the territory of Slovakia, or we stand on the side of the fascists. There is no other alternative because we know where the historical truth is. There is a wise saying that reminds us that whoever forgets history, or does not want to know it, is doomed to have it repeat itself. (Fico, 2025a, para 6)

Accusing the EU of reconstructing the "iron curtain" in Europe (2025b, para 3), Fico was the only EU leader who regularly attended the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow. At the 2026 celebration, Fico accused the EU countries of "distorting history" and of not paying enough respect to Russia's role in WWII (Times Now World, 2026, p. 10:38). In criticism of Western politics, he used the same historical parallels as Mečiar did, comparing the situation in Ukraine to the 1938 Munich Agreement by seeing Ukraine as a victim of Western ambitions to weaken Russia, as Czechoslovakia was a victim of Western intentions to appease Nazi Germany in 1938 (Index vijesti, 2024; Uias, 2024).

In the former Yugoslav states affected by the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought back memories of recent wars. This opened up an opportunity for nationalists to use and reinterpret their national histories for different purposes. In Serbia, it has reinforced the revisionist narrative that Serbia was the victim of the West during the 1990s wars, just as Russia is today. When mentioning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Serbian nationalist and revisionist president Aleksandar Vučić was most critical towards the West (Němec & Zorić, 2025).

Croatian president Milanović, a liberal Social Democrat turned Eurosceptic, often compared the lack of Western support, and even obstruction, of Croatia during the War of Independence with strong Western support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia (Milanović, 2022). This was accompanied by his attacks on the EU and criticism of Western

politics towards Ukraine. In a recent speech, he used historical references to WWII to criticise the West. During the commemoration of the Anti-Fascist Struggle Day in 2026, Milanović emphasised that Croatia has a history of anti-fascism. He claimed that, on the other hand, the EU is comprised of countries "that actively collaborated with Hitler" (Jutarnji list, 2026, 6:40). Milanović aimed to confront what he saw as the EU's hypocrisy. The EU often lectures others, including Croatia, yet today calmly observes "celebrating and naming military troops by the name of SS commanders and formations" (Jutarnji list, 2026, 7:31). This was a criticism of the EU's inaction regarding Ukraine's politics of history. Although the Social Democratic Party he used to lead has communist roots, like Fico's Smer, Milanović's understanding of the Russian position is not rooted in anti-fascist or communist legacies. Contrary to other CEE leaders depicted here, Milanović is not a mnemonic warrior but a mnemonic pluralist who relativises various historical experiences and ideologies, including anti-fascism.

## Western European Convergence to Central and Eastern European Visions of History

France and Germany's initial attempts to resolve the Ukraine crisis in 2014 held strong historical symbolism. This could have further upset Central and Eastern Europeans, as it reinforced their perception of being excluded from the post-1945 global order. The so-called Normandy Format emerged from a meeting on the sidelines of the 70th anniversary of D-Day celebrations in 2014. It comprised leaders of France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine, leaving Poland disgruntled as it was excluded from the group (Haughton, 2017). The Minsk agreements, which were thereafter initiated by the French president François Hollande and German chancellor Angela Merkel to stop the fighting in Donbas, were interpreted after February 2022 as a Western betrayal similar to Yalta (Darasz, 2026). Russia also deemed the Minsk agreements a Western betrayal after Hollande and Merkel stated that the Minsk agreements bought time for Ukraine to prepare for war (TASS, 2022).

Three Western European leaders had the most pronounced role in the beginning of the Russian invasion. Johnson was a strong supporter of Ukraine from the start. Macron changed his initial stance of trying to negotiate with Putin and also became a strong supporter of Ukraine.

Scholz promised to transform German politics after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We also present Ursula von der Leyen's stance towards Ukraine, who, as the president of the European Commission, represented the entire EU. However, she was previously a minister in multiple governments of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. They all used historical references when explaining their attitudes and actions towards the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In May 2022, Boris Johnson compared Ukraine to Britain resisting Nazi Germany, as he described this moment in history as "Ukraine's finest hour" (The Independent, 2022, 0:28). This was a reference to Churchill's 1940 speech, in which he rallied the British Empire against the Nazi invasion of Europe. Johnson, a socially liberal Tory, has been an admirer of Churchill and even wrote a book about him. Johnson (2015) presented Churchill as fighting alone against Hitler, while others "wanted Hitler to be given a free hand in eastern Europe", and as the only person who realised the danger that Stalin presented for Eastern Europe (p. 17). Johnson's use of Churchill's phrase was therefore a sign of his strong support for and admiration of Ukraine and Zelenskyy. In his memoirs, Johnson described the reaction of the West to the 2014 occupation of Crimea as channelling "the spirit of Neville Chamberlain" (2024, p. 293). He was particularly critical that the UK "subcontracted" the management of the Ukrainian crisis to the French and Germans (Johnson, 2024, p. 293). This testifies to the enduring importance of the memory of the British Prime Minister Chamberlain in the lead-up to WWII, who became the symbol of appeasement of imperialist dictators and the Western betrayal of CEE. In his memoirs, Johnson (2024) juxtaposed his support for Ukraine in an inevitable war with the indecisive Macron and Scholz trying to negotiate with Putin. Johnson could be described as a mnemonic emulator, trying to emulate his role model, Churchill, by presenting himself as confronting dangerous aggressors alone.

Macron changed the historical references regarding the war as he was revising his policy towards Russia. In May 2022, while contemplating the end of the war in Ukraine, Macron stated that "when peace returns to European soil … we must never give in to the temptation of humiliation or a desire for revenge, because we know how much that has ravaged the road to peace in the past" (2022). This was a reference to the post-WWI humiliation of Germany, which led to WWII just 20 years later. Macron saw this as a mistake that should not be repeated with Russia. By March 2024, Macron was considering sending troops to Ukraine. In his speech

in Prague, his historical reference was now the Munich Agreement to show his opposition to those who wanted to appease Russia (Wieder & Gautheret, 2024).

Macron, a former banker and liberal Minister of Finance, began his political ascent as a mnemonic prospective. During his 2017 presidential campaign, he confronted France's dark past, such as colonisation and its complicity in the Holocaust in France. In an interview with the French historical magazine *L'Histoire*, Macron explained his vision of history:

> It is necessary to move from a history marked by a structuring identification—Gaullism, socialism, communism—to a true universal history, summoning all models and all phenomena. This is why I believe it is necessary to return to Joan of Arc as to the roots of colonization, to Antiquity as to the Enlightenment, to Valmy as to the Glières Plateau: it is in this historical whole that we find the answers to our contemporary questions, more so than in a history reduced to ideological veins. (Macron, 2017, para 4)

Macron combined the positions of a mnemonic pluralist, acknowledging various parts of French history, and of a mnemonic prospective, as he tried to overcome ideological divides and aimed at creating a universal history. This ideological and mnemonic flexibility allowed him to combine different historical references and positions. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as a mnemonic pluralist, he was able to use two completely opposing visions of European history, one promoting reconciliation and one opposing appeasement, in a rather short time span. As a mnemonic prospective, he presented himself as an avant-garde overcoming historical wrongs and paving the way for a new future by offering new solutions to the crisis, whether negotiation with Putin or sending troops to Ukraine.

Five days after the start of the Russian invasion, Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz, a moderate Social Democrat, made a speech that became known as the *Zeitenwende* (watershed) speech. In it, he announced Germany's support for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, diverging from his party's long-held policy of rapprochement with Russia (*Ostpolitik*). German politics of history has been strongly influenced by the post-WWII atonement. Thus, German elites tread carefully with nations that suffered the most from Nazi crimes. Due to Nazi crimes on the Eastern front, the Russian nation was among them. This was also present in Scholz's speech as he differentiated between Putin and the Russian people, declaring that this was Putin's war: "It is important to me to specify this. Because

reconciliation between Germans and Russians after the Second World War is – and remains – an important chapter of our shared history" (Scholz, 2022a, para 63).

In his August 2022 speech in Prague, Scholz acknowledged Western ignorance and presented the CEE vision of history in its purest form:

> (W)e often forget that the lack of freedom, suffering and dictatorship did not end for many citizens in Central Europe with the German occupation and the destruction of the Second World War. (…) This legacy is part of European history and therefore our common history as Europeans, but also because the experience of citizens of Central and Eastern Europe—their feeling of being forgotten and abandoned behind an iron curtain—continues to cast a shadow to this day, incidentally, also in the debates about our future, about Europe. (Scholz, 2022b, para 5–6)

Scholz tried to move closer to the worldview of CEE, particularly as Germany was criticised for its appeasement policy towards Russia. In an essay published in Foreign Affairs, Scholz explained that his positions stemmed from confronting German history, but also from experiencing the consequences of a world divided into opposing blocs:

> My country's history gives it a special responsibility to fight the forces of fascism, authoritarianism, and imperialism. At the same time, our experience of being split in half during an ideological and geopolitical contest gives us a particular appreciation of the risks of a new cold war. (Scholz, 2022c, para 4)

Similar to Macron, Scholz presented himself not only as a mnemonic prospective but also as a mnemonic pluralist, trying to understand different perspectives, particularly the CEE vision of history, while not completely disregarding the Russian perspective.

Ursula von der Leyen also attempted to promote the CEE vision of history. Von der Leyen, who used to belong to the liberal wing of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, presented the support for Ukraine as a fight for European values (Camisão & Peixinho, 2025). In May 2025, in a speech to the European Parliament at a plenary debate on Ukraine, von der Leyen celebrated the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII. Von der Leyen (2025) warned that for "half of our continent, it marked the beginning of the process of reconstruction and reconciliation. But for the other half, the liberation from Nazism did not bring freedom. It was followed by occupation and oppression" (para 1).

The Russian invasion prompted the most prominent Western European leaders to acknowledge historical wrongs that the West did to Central and Eastern Europe, whether through inaction or, in the case of Germany, through crimes committed during WWII. This suggests that they took the role of mnemonic prospectives in an attempt to get closer to CEE and build a future Europe by acknowledging past mistakes of the West and their own countries. This was not an immediate or straightforward process, as Macron's initial attempts to negotiate with Putin and Scholz's cautios approach demonstrate.

Eventually, the Russian invasion brought the analysed Western European leaders closer to Ukrainian and pro-Ukrainian CEE elites. There were certainly considerable variations in their support for Ukraine and rapprochement with CEE, which also stem from their different visions of history. It is important to note that they all had centrist or liberal backgrounds, making them more likely to protect the liberal international order.[4] However, there are plenty of mnemonic warriors in their societies who are less interested in this. Radical right parties such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), *Rassemblement National* in France, and Reform in the UK are currently leading in polls. These parties are more focused on post-empire grievances of their countries than on sustaining the post-WWII liberal international order or on aligning with Central and Eastern European visions of history.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that significant events have a strong impact on the politics of history. However, it also suggests that leading politicians' visions of history can have a considerable impact on significant events. In the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the latter can be seen in Putin's politics, which were influenced by his belief in a mythical past of Ancient Rus and the Great Patriotic War and his aim to correct the wrongs of the past by regaining control of the Russian neighbourhood. The former is evident in Zelenskyy's transformation from mnemonic abnegator to a global mnemonic entrepreneur. At the beginning of his political career, he tried to avoid historical issues and prevent further polarisation of Ukrainian

[4] Johnson seems an odd fit here due to his fervent Euroscepticism. However, particularly during his time as London mayor, but even during his campaigning for Brexit, Johnson tried to present himself as a "liberal cosmopolitan" (2016, p. 1).

society. Following the Russian invasion, Zelenskyy engaged in dialogue with different national audiences throughout the world, translating the Ukrainian cause into mnemonic repertoires of those audiences.

In the case of the analysed illiberal CEE leaders, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought heightened emotions and feelings of historical insecurity and they doubled down on their anti-Westernism and mnemonic militancy. Following the Russian invasion, Western European leaders analysed here adopted the CEE vision of history and atoned for the past Western mistakes. In the case of Johnson, who we categorised as a mnemonic emulator, following in the footsteps of Churchill, also proved conducive to strong support for Ukraine. Seismic events such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine can transform mnemonic roles, generate hybrid positions, and bring new performative repertoires to the fore. Our findings suggest that Bernhard and Kubik's (2014) typology may benefit from the inclusion of specific types of mnemonic actors that result from such events. Zelenskyy's emergence as a global mnemonic entrepreneur arguing for the Ukrainian cause and Johnson's role as a mnemonic emulator trying to repeat Churchill's historical role illustrate this contextual mobility.

As Fetzer and Nikolovski (2025) argue, the invasion reconfigured mnemonic relations not only on a national but also on a transnational level. The Russian invasion of Ukraine heightened the significance of historical memories across Europe. It led to a convergence of European memories but also to further tensions. The invasion created a clear demarcation line between those who were wary of the long history of appeasement and those who wanted to further engage with Russia. For leading Western European politicians, further engaging with Russia now meant that they faced the risk of being remembered as the new Chamberlains. Consequently, they moved closer to CEE positions by acknowledging their traumatic post-WWII history. However, illiberal politicians in CEE were strongly influenced by the notion of Western betrayal, which prompted them to double down on their anti-Western rhetoric. PiS combined strong criticism of Russia and the West, particularly Germany. PiS's intensified criticism of the West stemmed from feeling vindicated by its strong support for Ukraine and enduring warnings about dangers coming from Putin's regime. On the other hand, Orbán, Fico, and Milanović accused the West of warmongering and presented themselves as protectors of peace and national interests while referencing historical betrayals of their countries. The West, with Trump's second presidency now mostly represented by Western Europe, found itself in a peculiar position which testifies to its

enduring role as the most important significant Other in Europe. Regardless of the actions taken by the West (whether providing stronger support for Ukraine or attempting to engage with Russia), different camps in CEE could accuse the West of another betrayal. The same applies to Ukraine and Russia, where one of the parties in the conflict could reference the notion of Western betrayal depending on which route the West takes.

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