Victory Day: Between Remembrance and Militant Memory

9 May 2016 in Minsk started with a procession “Belarus Remembers,” which marched through the heart of the city, carrying pictures of the veterans.

Too frail to walk over longer distances, they joined the procession at the Victory Square for the official part. Festivities continued with president Lukashenka laying wreaths at the Monument of the Victory.

Belarusian Victory Day looked more modest and appropriate in contrast to the lavish Russian military parade, which took place in the same morning in Moscow. On the other hand, celebrations of the victory over the Nazi Germany in Minsk differ from the European commemorative practices. Belarusian authorities still pay tribute to the military aspect and focus on the Great Patriotic War, instead of the entire WWII.

The actual commemoration of the victims and coming to terms with the war remains in the background of the patriotic state-sponsored celebrations, although in 2016, quite symbolically, the Victory Day fell on the eve of Radaunica. It is the ancient Ancestors Remembrance Day, the ninth day after the Orthodox Easter, when people traditionally travel across country to visit the cemeteries and remember their loved ones.

Victory Day: connecting past
Along with the Victory Square, major festivities on 9 May take place near the war monument of the Minsk Hero City, by the museum of the Great Patriotic War, which re-opened in the new location in 2014. In many ways this museum reflects official memory of the war and approaches to the Victory Day in Belarus. Its 22-meter glass dome reminds of the German Reichstag. Lukashenka pointed out this reference specifically, emphasising Belarusian contributions to the victory in the war.

On 9 May 2016, president addressed the crucial role of the Belarusian people in the Great Patriotic War in the same vein. He noted that “we will not allow to distort the truth about this victory, falsify it or take it away from our children and grandchildren.”

Such rhetoric along with the traditions of grand celebrations of the Victory Day date back to Soviet times. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, its successor states reinvented commemoration of the victory in different ways, yet glorification of the victory remains the universally positive reference point.

Drawing on the images of the partisan republic, the Great Patriotic War, and heroism, current Belarusian regime benefits from the Soviet-inspired approach with minimal adjustments. Modern memory culture still centers around the Great Patriotic War during 1941 – 1945. By contrast, legacies of the WWII and fates of Belarusian veterans, who fought on its fronts since 1939, remain in the background.
Patterns of remembrance

Family histories of almost every Belarusian feature tragic stories of fighting, self-sacrifice, and privations during the war. The number of WWII Belarusian casualties makes up about 2.2 million people: soldiers, civilians, and victims of the Holocaust.

More than 1.3 million Belarusians fought in WWII, yet the time takes its toll on the veterans. On the eve of the 71th anniversary of the victory over the Nazi Germany, only 13,700 former soldiers and partisans were the major protagonists in the celebrations of the Victory Day. Its unequivocally positive message will likely define collective memory patterns for years to come.

Recognising this immense mobilising potential, Belarusian authorities use the memory of the war to legitimise current political regime. Yet the side-effect is that the actual history moves to the background, while the commemorative practises encourage the cult of the war.

The Great Patriotic War is an undisputed part of the school curriculum in Belarus, while some schools diligently enforce the “military-patriotic” theme for their students in a more straightforward manner.

Along with humanities or sciences, high-school students have an option to choose this specialisation for their last two years in school. If they do, they get to wear military-style uniforms and can study military-related subjects.
Militarised memory: war myths and cults

The theme of Belarusian contributions to the victory and crucial role of partisan movement create a certain counter-narrative to the memory politics in contemporary Russia. The latter is actively developing its own version of the sacred Great Patriotic War, prioritising exclusively Soviet/Russian role in the defeat of the Nazi Germany.

Appropriation of the victory in the war became especially important with the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, as Russia started to assert its dominance in the post-Soviet region. One of the recent images of Russian war cult are the black-orange striped St. George's ribbons, which replaced the red flags as major war-related symbols.

The ribbons appeared in 2005 in reaction to the Orange revolution in Ukraine and firmly took hold in the public sphere during the recent Russian-Ukrainian confrontation. Along with the portraits of Stalin, military posters, and anti-German car stickers these ribbons became more prominent in public and virtual space as tools of aggressive memory construction.

This merchandise gradually appears to find its way to Belarus, yet the state attempts to counteract the trend. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan developed their own versions of a special ribbon for the Victory Day. Babrujsk municipality recently prohibited to use St. George's ribbons and Russian flags during the Victory Day themed car rally.
In contrast to Belarus, the war cult in Russia assumes more assertive forms. In one of the recent incidents, people wearing WWII uniforms and St. George's ribbons threw raw eggs and disinfectant at the high school participants of the annual research contest “The Individual in History. Russia in the 20th Century,” organised by the human rights group Memorial. Protesters accused it of falsifying history, labelling students as “fascists” and “traitors.” Among the victims of this attack was the Russian writer Liudmila Ulitskaia.

By comparison, Belarusian version of war memory is less aggressive, as the state is not actively involved in any ongoing military conflicts. Yet Victory Day commemorations in Belarus show how war cults in essence prevent coming to terms with the war trauma, especially when the state deliberately upholds military-oriented patriotic education, inspired by Soviet approaches.

In this respect, Victory Day celebrations might better fulfil their purpose, if they genuinely focus on the message of peace and encourage historical reflection, rather than military grandeur. The main challenge is to shape collective memory in a less artificial way, avoiding trivialisation of the immense human sacrifice, that Belarusians paid during the war.