



# HISTORY UNDONE.

Russia's Historical Disinformation,  
Bulgaria's Memory Politics and Lessons for  
Dealing with the Past from Central and Eastern Europe







# **HISTORY UNDONE.**

Russia's Historical Disinformation,  
Bulgaria's Memory Politics and Lessons for  
Dealing with the Past from Central and Eastern Europe

---

Dr. Rumena Filipova

This report was authored by:

**Dr. Rumena Filipova**, Chairperson, Institute for Global Analytics

The author would like to thank Ms. Barbara Bačová, Analyst, Institute for Global Analytics, for her research assistance.

Published by the Institute for Global Analytics.



**INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ANALYTICS**  
**ИНСТИТУТ ЗА ГЛОБАЛНИ АНАЛИЗИ**



*This report was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.*

**ISBN: 978-619-92569-3-0**

© 2023 Institute for Global Analytics.  
All rights reserved.

# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction: Authoritarian History at War</b> . . . . .	5
History and media research: A novel field . . . . .	7
<b>Russia: History at the Behest of Power</b> . . . . .	9
<b>Bulgaria: The Untold Story of Russia Breeds Malign Fiction.</b> . . . .	15
Education and history textbooks: The Russian tale persists unexplored. . . . .	16
Statues and museums: Russia’s immovable presence . . . . .	28
Pro-Russian historical disinformation: Virtual capture . . . . .	33
<b>Central and Eastern Europe Looks Back to the Past: Approaches to Memory</b> . .	43
Baltic memory policies: Leading the way . . . . .	44
Central Europe: From a decisive break from the past to memory clashes . . . . .	47
Romania: Catching up . . . . .	50
Ukraine: Historical memory galvanized by wars . . . . .	51
<b>The Way Forward for Bulgaria’s Past Amid Social Division</b> . . . . .	55
Can deliberation ameliorate social division?. . . . .	55
Fostering a Russia-critical historical memory and education . . . . .	57
Insulating the media environment from foreign influence . . . . .	59

# LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Table 1:</b> Comparative characteristics of the portrayal of Russia in history textbooks . . . . .	.24
<b>Box 1:</b> Monument to the Soviet army in Sofia . . . . .	.32
<b>Box 2:</b> Pro-Russian historical disinformation on Bulgarian social media. . . . .	.41
<b>Box 3:</b> The removal of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn . . . . .	.46
<b>Box 4:</b> The removal of Ivan Konev’s statue in Prague . . . . .	.49
<b>Box 5:</b> Short of removal: Artistic recontextualization and intervention . . . . .	.52



# INTRODUCTION: Authoritarian History at War

Russia's war against Ukraine has shaken the established foundations of European security, unleashing military activities of a scale unseen in Europe after World War II. The root causes of the stark developments on the battlefield can however be located in the ideational realm. The Russian leadership's decision to wage war rested on distorted and falsified understandings of history,<sup>1</sup> which have also informed visions of Russian and Ukrainian identity and the relationship between the two. The attempt to restore a neo-imperial, great-power identity for Russia has gone hand in hand with the aim to erase and obliterate Ukraine's own nationhood and statehood as based on erroneous interpretations of supposed historically conditioned unity between Russians and Ukrainians and perception of Ukrainian separateness as a threat to Russian self-conceptions. To disseminate this misrepresentation of history and identity as a justification for launching and continuing the invasion, the Kremlin has employed disinformation as the informational complement to its military activities.

The current report thus examines the **weaponization of history and concomitant militarization of identity through historical disinformation** as a foundational dimension of Moscow's exercise of authoritarian sharp power. The phenomenon of the deployment of history for malign influence activities springs from Russia's own preoccupation with its unresolved identity conundrums. In turn, historical disinformation is uniquely effective when externalized as a matter of interference in the debates of third countries as conversations about the past are inextricably linked to conceptions of personal and national identity – what happened in times past shapes understandings of who one is now.

The findings of the study show that distorted and false claims about history have become a ubiquitous aspect in Russian political and cultural-educational developments, as evident in the process of legal-institutional codification, centralization of education, cinema and film production as well as in the conduct of commemorative events and practices. The Kremlin's 2022 war against Ukraine catalyzed significantly the already ongoing trend of misusing history for the regime's political purposes.

The report further focuses on **Bulgaria as a case study of the scope, targets and actors promoting Russia's historical interference**. As part of the economically and geopolitically vulnerable southeast flank of Europe, Bulgaria has been beset by a problem-fraught media environment defined

---

<sup>1</sup> Putin, V., 2021, *Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,"* Official Website of the President of Russia  
Portnov, A., 2022, *Ukraine Insider Paper 1: Why Russia Started the War, and How Putin Misunderstood Ukraine,* Institute for Global Analytics, pp. 1-20

by declining journalistic standards, non-transparent media ownership concentration, incomplete, inadequately enforced and misused legislative provisions, (legal) attacks on journalists.<sup>2</sup> These media deficiencies have provided an entry point to foreign authoritarian actors, particularly Russia, whereby local pro-Kremlin political, journalistic and business networks advance Russian disinformation narratives through a broad range of media sources. The latter include online and print news outlets, party-affiliated social media accounts, pro-Russian public group pages, conspiratorial YouTubers, and various individual journalists.<sup>3</sup>

Most fundamentally, the overall receptivity to Russian propagandist messaging in Bulgaria is shaped by Russia's historical grip over the Bulgarian public's perceptions. The almost century and a half-old narratives about the ostensibly eternal quality of Russian benevolence to Bulgaria's political, societal and economic fortunes, 'brotherhood' and mutually beneficial bilateral interactions – stemming from the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the Russian Empire's military activities, represent a crucial ideational foundation. It has enabled a positive perception of all other types of Kremlin-originating disinformation messages.

The report thus sets out to understand and identify the scope, channels and actors promoting Russia-friendly distortions of Bulgarian-Russian ties by examining the portrayal and interpretation of Russia's role in Bulgarian history in the totality of the 'carriers of historical memory' in Bulgaria. These carriers encompass representations of memory in three main ideational, discursive and material areas that are constitutive for passing down historical understandings in a society, including (1) education, (2) monumental heritage, and (3) the media space.

A number of key conclusions stand out from the analysis. First, history textbooks for school education maintain relative silence on Russia's typically negative role in critical episodes of Bulgarian history since regaining independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878. **Muffling the adverse consequences of Russian interference goes hand in hand with generally positive depictions of Russia coupled with the outsourcing of interpretive responsibility to students** (as they are frequently asked to find out on their own facts about Moscow's involvement in Bulgarian political, economic and societal processes). Admittedly, however, the communist period in Bulgarian history is presented via a more critical lens. Teaching and research at the university level is similarly characterized by a limited focus on the Russian role in Bulgarian history and an absence of a well-developed academic field in Bulgarian-Russian historical relations.

Second, **the status of communist/Soviet-era monuments continues to be unresolved as mutually opposing political and civic initiatives – mounted respectively by Russia-critical and pro-Kremlin groups, produces deadlock.** The absence of a remembrance institute and museums that research, educate and critically assess the communist past speaks to and perpetuates Bulgaria's insufficient reckoning with and ambivalence about dealing with the past.

Third, the incomplete process of critical evaluation of Russia's role in Bulgarian history in the sphere of education, culture and statues politics provides a fertile ground for Kremlin propaganda as societal resilience is diminished. The lack of prominence – and frequent suppression, of

<sup>2</sup> Filipova, R., et.al., 2021, *Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe. Patterns of Anti-Democratic Messaging, Disinformation Response, and Resilience Assets*, CSD, pp. 73-76

<sup>3</sup> Filipova, R., Shopov, V., 2022, *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War. The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, pp. 29-32

historically objective information, hence makes the Bulgarian public liable to Russian interference and preferred framing of domestic debates. Indeed, the conduct of media content analysis reveals **the consistent activation of historical disinformation on the part of Russian official institutions and their local proxies, particularly in relation to the commemoration of crucial historical milestones** marking, for example, Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire, subsequent unification, Soviet occupation and others.

Furthermore, the report presents **prominent instances of memory initiatives, including legislation, memory institutes, museums, truth commissions, commemorative practices, established in the Baltic states, Central Europe, Romania and Ukraine**, which grapple with these countries' communist-Soviet past. They can serve as an example of how Bulgaria can proceed with the still incomplete assessment of its past, while also representing a cautionary tale regarding the pitfalls of memory initiatives, such as politicization, whitewashing unpalatable episodes in a nation's history and the potential limiting of academic freedom. Particular emphasis is additionally laid on how controversies between Russia-friendly and Russia-critical groups in different CEE states as to how to deal with monuments have been resolved. The case of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn highlights the primacy of decisive state action for removing the monument, while the case of Ivan Konev's statue in Prague showcases the activeness of local authorities in settling the dispute. In circumstances where no agreement is found, artistic recontextualization and intervention can mediate a compromise between a wholesale dismantlement of a monument or its preservation in an unaltered form.

Finally, the report proposes a **three-tiered approach to tackling disinformation**. It starts from a conceptual assessment of the possibilities for achieving reconciliation in divided societies, arguing that deliberation (in citizen discussion groups or as part of media debates) is likely to strengthen already existing polarization. Instead, leadership decisions can foster a more unified direction. Subsequently, recommendations are put forward for promoting Russia-critical initiatives in Bulgaria's historical memory policy and the education system. An objective understanding of Bulgarian-Russian relations underwrites the ability to correctly appreciate and become resilient to malign Kremlin operations. In the end, proposals for insulating the media environment from foreign influence are singled out.

The present research is informed by a qualitative analytical perspective. It draws on primary sources, including policy documents and statements as well as legislation in order to identify the major trends in Russian policy processes. A comprehensive review is further conducted of all history textbook versions for the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade (when Bulgarian history is taught in the school curriculum) with the aim to examine the portrayal of Russian policies. Media content analysis of Russian disinformation narratives in the Bulgarian media scene was carried out in a continuous manner over the course of a year (August 2022-July 2023), specifically exploring prevalent pro-Kremlin messaging that frames the commemoration of critical milestones in Bulgarian history.

## **History and media research: A novel field**

The report is situated within the novel research framework pioneered by the Global Engagement Center, which has called analytical attention to the crucial importance of the Kremlin's appropriation and exploitation of history in order to further Russian geopolitical aims. Russia's President Vladimir Putin, along with his disinformation and propaganda ecosystem, invokes World War II imagery

to justify expanding his autocratic powers at home and Russia's aggression toward neighboring countries' democratic and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Equating 'Russophobia' and neo-Nazism and accusing others of promoting fascism have become the lynchpins of Russian disinformation spearheading a fabricated pretext for the Kremlin's unprovoked brutal war against Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

The report's contribution thus lies in its specific focus on Russian historical disinformation in Bulgaria and how the plethora of 'carriers of memory' within politics and society – including educational materials, university teaching, monumental heritage, shape susceptibility to Russia's propagandist narratives. Indeed, there has been very limited academic and think research on the drivers, messaging and patterns of historical disinformation as applied to and manifested in particular countries and regions of the world and its relationship to memory policies.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Jason Steinhauer's cutting-edge study has demonstrated, social media and technology have exponentially elevated the prominence of historical (dis)information in the public space, changing what we know about history. He points out how Facebook was purposefully designed to privilege nostalgia through various mechanisms, be it via visually arresting images (particularly war photography), boosting currently resonating newsworthy events from the past; evocative storytelling or AI-powered history.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, history and media have become inextricably intertwined, prompting the need for examinations of how the past shapes our everyday understandings of and relation to the present.

---

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2022, *Vladimir Putin's Historical Disinformation*, Global Engagement Center  
U.S. Department of State, 2023, *Disinformation Roulette: The Kremlin's Year of Lies to Justify an Unjustifiable War*; Global Engagement Center  
U.S. Department of State, 2022, *To Vilify Ukraine, The Kremlin Resorts to Antisemitism*, Global Engagement Center

<sup>5</sup> The following examples stand out. On the use of nostalgia in Russian public diplomacy: Manor, I., Pamment, J., 2022, 'From Gagarin to Sputnik: The role of nostalgia in Russian public diplomacy', *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 18, pp. 44–48  
On Russia's use of identity-based discourses to bolster its claims on the war against Ukraine: Tolz, V., Hutchings, S., 2023, 'Truth with a Z: disinformation, war in Ukraine, and Russia's contradictory discourse of imperial identity', *Post-Soviet Affairs*  
On historical framing analysis and how it is used to in three case studies of Russian political discourse – the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the application of Western sanctions on Russia in 2014, and the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015: McGlynn, J., 2022, 'Beyond Analogy: Historical Framing Analysis of Russian Political Discourse', *Researching Memory and Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe: Interdisciplinary Methodologies*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 141-159

<sup>6</sup> Steinhauer, J., 2022, *History, Disrupted: How Social Media and the World Wide Web Have Changed the Past*, Palgrave Macmillan Cham



# RUSSIA: History at the Behest of Power

Russia's aggressive military and ideational-informational activities have represented the culmination of the country's uncertain post-1991 identity and its ultimate instrumentalization towards territorial expansionism as self-aggrandizement.

The conundrum about Russian belongingness to Europe and the West more generally has for centuries preoccupied Russians and foreigners alike and the question gained an added impetus following the collapse of the USSR. The dissolution of the Soviet Union meant an abrupt decline in Russia's great-power status in European and world affairs, reviving the Westerniser-Slavophile debate about Russia's European-ness in the search for a redefined international-civilizational place and introducing a nation-building challenge after the end of the multinational Soviet 'empire'.<sup>7</sup> Although a pro-Western, liberal vision of Russia at peace with its neighbors received political momentum especially in the early 1990s and early 2000s, Moscow gradually drifted away from Europeanization. The change of the identity discourses in the country in the direction of nationalist conservatism and the evolution of the material basis of Vladimir Putin's regime towards consolidated authoritarianism led to the contestation of key tenets of European values. Standards of liberal democratic governance were increasingly substituted with authoritarian leadership justified by the (alleged) collectivist-traditional dispositions of Russian society. Principles of good neighborliness gave way to regional aggression and the recreation of empire in Eurasia, while support for a liberal international order based on cooperation with the West yielded ground to competition with Europe and America and the attempt to construct multipolar global politics in cooperation with the East (above all China).<sup>8</sup>

As a constitutive element of the identification process, interpretations of history began to be misused at the service of the promotion of the national identity stances sanctioned by Putin. Historical claims have thus become an integral part of Russia's policy discourse, legislation, culture and education as well as commemorative practices.

- In the sphere of **public rhetoric, policy statements and legislation**, primordialist-essentialist argumentation about the supposedly timeless Russian historical tradition and rights of rule over Ukraine has been prevalent. It has also been accompanied by the elevation of conservative values and historical memory (particularly the regime's understandings of 'anti-fascism') to the status of state ideology.

<sup>7</sup> Filipova, R., 2022, *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 287-288

<sup>8</sup> Filipova, R., 2022, *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 301

Regime-affiliated experts have attempted to demonstrate a **seemingly unchangeable, historically continuous trend**, whereby the pre-imperial period of Russian history determined the core characteristics of Russian statehood as independently developed from the West and oblivious to its neighbors. In distinction to a predominant scholarship consensus that emphasizes the centrality of Russia's interactions with the West as formative of the key dynamics of both imitation of Western political, social and economic models and reaction to them, Russian intellectuals attempt to anchor Russia's distinctiveness in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is claimed that at that time 'Russia neither experienced a significant impact of Western European international politics, nor exerted any influence on it'. 'Russia's political organization emerged on its own' and 'until the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian state had no neighbors whose right to preserve independence would be reinforced by clear ethnic and religious distinctions'.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, Putin's increasing self-comparisons and references to Peter the Great are part of the strategy to justify the supposed Russian-ness of Ukraine (and others) through dubious essentialist claims that go back many centuries and assert that since Russians ostensibly populated certain lands, then contemporary Moscow has a right to retake them. In Putin's historical analogy and interpretation, Peter the Great was not fighting Sweden in the Northern Wars of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to seize but to *reclaim lands* that were supposedly always inhabited by Slavs.<sup>10</sup> In a further instance, a study funded by the Russian Science Foundation attempted to 'prove' that Kyiv is supposedly Russian by citing a census from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, whereby declaring oneself as speaking and being Ukrainian was a matter of fashion depending on the fortunes of the Ukrainian nationalist project.<sup>11</sup> Media outlet Izvestiya also launched a project providing historical 'justifications' as to why and how eastern Ukraine has always been supposedly Russian.<sup>12</sup>

The Russian President has additionally **doubled down on his opposition to what he defines as the aggressive attempts of certain states to rewrite history** inspired by the ostensible goal to diminish Russia's sovereignty.<sup>13</sup> In the Presidential Decree on the affirmation of the foundations of state policy for the preservation and reinforcement of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values of November 2022, historical memory is listed as part of traditional values. In contrast, 'destructive ideologies' are said to, among others, deny Russia's 'positive' contribution to world history and culture, entailing the risk of the distortion of historical truth. The defense of traditional values is enshrined in state policy and is securitized so that state interference in culture, education, academia, media represents a way to impose the regime's preferred values as supposed protection against outside threats.<sup>14</sup>

**A prime component in the Russian state's weaponization of historical policy is the memory of the 'Great Patriotic War'.** Its goal is focused on unifying Russian society around symbols of patriotism and sacrifice in the name of the preservation of the state as well as justifying Russia's European and global power ambitions – through the Kremlin's (self-ascribed) role as a sole savior

<sup>9</sup> Bordachev, T.V., 2022, 'On Early History and Geography of Russian Foreign Policy', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 20(3), pp. 71-93

<sup>10</sup> Rainsford, S., 2022, 'Putin and Peter the Great: Russian leader likens himself to 18th Century tsar', *BBC*, 10 June 2022

<sup>11</sup> Chemakin, A. A., 2023, 'Ethnic Composition of Kiev Population in Early 20th Century: A Snapshot of Actualized History', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(1), pp. 32-48

<sup>12</sup> Izvestiya, *Новороссия: Наследие Императоров (Novorossiya: The Legacy of the Emperors)*

<sup>13</sup> Egorova, V., 2022, 'Путин: С мифов об истории начинается раскочка государства и суверенитета', *Российская газета*, 15 ноября 2022 г. ('Putin: The dismantlement of the state and sovereignty begins with myths about history', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 15 November 2022)

<sup>14</sup> President of Russia, 2022, 'Указ Президента Российской Федерации Об утверждении Основ государственной политики по сохранению и укреплению традиционных российских духовно-нравственных ценностей', стр. 3, 5, 6, 8 ('Order of the President of the Russian Federation on the reaffirmation of the principles of state policy on safeguarding and reinforcing traditional Russian spiritual-moral values', pp. 3, 5, 6, 8)

of Europe motivated by the adherence to statist and patriotic principles. Conversely, accusations of 'fascism' are levelled at Moscow's self-designated enemies and a propagandist binary opposition is constructed between an ostensibly neo-Nazi Europe and Ukraine and fascist-resistant Russia.<sup>15</sup>

Such rhetorical positioning is manifested in foreign policy documents, legislation and state-led events. In a stark attribution of the Kremlin's own practice of falsifying history to the West, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' 2022 report on the heroization of Nazism and the dissemination of neo-Nazism claims that 'campaigns have increased to distort history and falsify the USSR's role in securing the Victory over Nazism and building the modern system of international relations. The current phase witnesses an increased level of historical revisionism and revenge-seeking, a total substitution of concepts, with the aggressors who unleashed the war and inspired the ideology of racial purity being cynically put into the place of the state that opposed them, for political convenience'.<sup>16</sup> In 2022, Russia also organized the first international anti-fascist congress, promoting its own version of contemporary manifestation of Nazism and combating the alleged distortion of the history of World War II.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, in line with the securitization and state appropriation of the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the Russian President signed into law the criminalization of all activities that can be deemed as libel or desecration of the ribbon of St. George (commemorating the veterans of the eastern front of World War II). The goal of the law is said to be the eradication of any use of the symbolism of the ribbon, which is not connected to historical memory.<sup>18</sup>

The legal-institutional codification of the Kremlin's preferred vision of historical memory and the legacy of World War II has however had its antecedents already in the late 2000s, thus representing a gradual development catalyzed further by the 2022 invasion. For instance, 2009 marked the establishment of the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. In 2014, Russia amended its Criminal Code, adding Article 354-1 'Rehabilitation of Nazism', which punishes 'falsification of history' based on the dissemination of false information on the activities of the USSR during World War II. In particular, equating Nazi Germany and the USSR as states governed by similar totalitarian regimes was reframed as the 'rehabilitation of Nazism' and began to be deemed a crime under Russian law. The constitutional reform of 2020 additionally enshrined those postulates. The newly inserted Article 67-1 declared the Russian Federation as the legal successor of the USSR, which protects historical truth and respects the memory of the 'defenders of the Fatherland'.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's weaponization of the history of World War II and fabrication of the neo-Nazi contemporary threat, particularly as a pretext of invading Ukraine, has been called out throughout the years and exposed internationally. For example, more than 140 international

<sup>15</sup> Filipova, R., et.al., 2021, *Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe. Patterns of Anti-Democratic Messaging, Disinformation Response, and Resilience Assets*, CSD, p.33

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022, 'О ситуации с героизацией нацизма, распространении неонацизма и других видов практики, которые способствуют эскалации современных форм расизма, расовой дискриминации, ксенофобии и связанной с ними нетерпимости (Доклад Министерства иностранных дел Российской Федерации 2022 г. стр. 8)' ('On the situation of the glorification of Nazism, the dissemination of neo-Nazism and other types of practices, which enable the escalation of contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance connected to it (Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2022)', p.8)

<sup>17</sup> Russkiy Mir, 2022, *RUSSIA TO HOLD INTERNATIONAL ANTI-FASCIST CONGRESS ANNUALLY*

<sup>18</sup> Radio Svoboda, 2022, 'Путин подписал закон о наказании за осквернение георгиевской ленты', 29 декабря 2022 ('Putin signed a law on punishment for the desecration of the St. George ribbon', 29 December 2022)

<sup>19</sup> Cherviatsova, A., 2021, *Controlling the Past: The recent developments in Russia's memory policy*, Human Rights in Context

historians have denounced Russia's 'equation of the Ukrainian state with the Nazi regime to justify its unprovoked aggression', calling Moscow's propaganda 'factually wrong, morally repugnant and deeply offensive' to the 'victims of Nazism and those who courageously fought against it'. The Security Service of Ukraine exposed Russia's Federal Security Service report outlining the disinformation themes that Russian officials should promote to rally support for the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

- The start of the 2022 Russian war initiated a flurry of activities aimed at further **centralizing Russian education** with a reinforced focus on inculcating regime sanctioned propagandist ideological postulates among the Russian youth.

September 1, 2023 marks the beginning of the implementation of the newly introduced 'gold standard of knowledge' in Russian educational institutions. It is based on a unified benchmark of teaching and textbook composition in Russian language, literature and history, among others, in schools throughout the Russian Federation.<sup>21</sup> A new history textbook for the 11<sup>th</sup> grade incorporates material on what the Russian authorities call the 'special military operation' in Ukraine, portraying it as a 'just' cause and predicting Moscow's victory over the West.<sup>22</sup> There has also been a doubling down on youth initiatives such as the international 'Victory essay' contest, whereby Russian and international youth write on the occasion of the end of World War II as a 'counteraction of the falsification of history conducted by the European countries'.<sup>23</sup>

These educational initiatives build on and reinforce preceding developments aimed at instilling Russian youth with the Kremlin's emphasis on patriotism as a way of rallying around the state. The Russian authorities began to lend their support to and commissioned regime-friendly historians to produce history textbooks that extoll the virtues of Putin's Presidencies as a pinnacle of Russian history. An overt manifestation of that process was the 2007 release of a handbook on the modern history of Russia, enthusiastically promoted by the Kremlin.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, historians' work that challenges Kremlin-sanctioned narratives have been subject to persecution. A case in point is Yuri Dmitriev, whose criticism of the Russian state and its responsibility for the Gulag led to criminal proceedings for alleged sexual misconduct.<sup>25</sup> Since then, numerous other criminal prosecution cases have been opened against critically-minded historians.<sup>26</sup>

The Kremlin has additionally externalized its strategies for influencing youth and framing educational content. This has been most starkly demonstrated through activities for **forcefully re-educating Ukrainian children in captured territories**. As revealed by the Conflict Observatory, a vast network of Russian-run sites and processes were used to relocate thousands of Ukraine's children to areas under Russian government control. The Observatory's report details the Russian

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2022, *To Vilify Ukraine, The Kremlin Resorts to Antisemitism*, Global Engagement Center

<sup>21</sup> Agranovich, M., 2023, 'Что нового ждет российские школы и университеты', *Российская газета*, 9 января 2023 г. ('What's new for Russian schools and universities', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 9 January 2023)

<sup>22</sup> Shukla, S., Sebastian, C., 2023, 'This soldier died in Ukraine. Now his face is on a desk to inspire Russian schoolchildren', *CNN*, 17 July 2023

<sup>23</sup> Emelianenko, V., 2022, 'В московском Музее Победы и в 42 странах мира прошла акция "Диктант Победы"', *Российская газета*, 3 сентября 2022 ('The action "Victory Dictation" was held at the Moscow Victory Museum and in 42 countries of the world', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 3 September 2022)

<sup>24</sup> Liñán, M. V., 2010, 'History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia,' *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43(2), pp.167-178

<sup>25</sup> Meduza, 2020, 'Occupying the places of memory' Gulag specialist Andrea Gullotta explains what's at stake in the criminal case against historian Yuri Dmitriev

<sup>26</sup> FIDH, 2021, *RUSSIA: "CRIMES AGAINST HISTORY"*

government's systematic efforts to sever communication between the taken children and their relatives and prevent the children's return to Ukraine, guided by the overall aim to deny and suppress Ukrainian identity, history and culture.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Ukrainian schools in the territories occupied by Russian forces have come under pressure to hand over all history and Ukrainian language textbooks and switch to Russian schooling, while also being subject to physical destruction as a result of Russian bombings and shelling.<sup>28</sup>

- In the **wider realm of culture**, an ongoing process of establishing state domination over cultural products and encroaching on pluralistic civil societal activities to conform to the Kremlin's version of history has been under way especially with the gradual consolidation of the authoritarian regime since the late 2000s.

Cinema and film production were recognized as important tools for glorifying Russia's current regime as well as its past. To that end, in 2008, the Council for the Development of the Russian Film Industry was set up with the aim to finance films focused on war and history conveying patriotism, military service and traditional family values.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, movies that do not conform to the authorities' propagandist lines have been boycotted. In 2017, for example, two movies were released, which caused uproar. *Matilda* – a romantic drama about a love affair of Tsar Nicholas II, and *the Death of Stalin* – a political satire about the events following Stalin's death, ignited debates about the understanding of Russia's past, the status of Russian historical figures and their relevance for national self-conceptions in the present. The questioning of the moral qualities of Russia's rulers, particularly through humoristic depictions, became subject to violent opposition, rallies and criticism, eventually leading to bans on the screening of the films.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to film production, commemorative events have represented embodied practices and performances prompting the Russian population to take on the roles – and identify themselves with, the past. Historical re-enactments,<sup>31</sup> having become increasingly popular in Russia, and the large-scale annual Immortal Regiment processions (commemorating family members who fought in World War II) have served as an instrument of patriotic propaganda oblivious to a finer reckoning with Russia's past, including crimes and atrocities.

Simultaneously, alternative initiatives aimed to promote an objective assessment of and learning about the past as organized by independent civil societal institutions have been undermined and blocked. For example, human rights organization Memorial's conduct of an annual competition for high school students research papers 'People in History: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russia' was subject to smear attacks in the media as a supposed effort to 'rewrite Russian history'. Students were discouraged from participating and pressured by schools, local governments or the FSB.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, the foundational importance of the deployment of history as part of the Russian regime's sharp power arsenal is manifest on the level of state discourse, policy and action structuring the

---

<sup>27</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2023, *Evidence of Russia's War Crimes and Other Atrocities in Ukraine: Recent Reporting on Child Relocations*, Office of the Spokesperson

<sup>28</sup> Hyde, L., 2023, 'War in Ukraine has another front line: The classroom', *Politico*, 9 January 2023

<sup>29</sup> Liñán, M. V., 2010, 'History as a propaganda tool in Putin's Russia', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 43(2), pp.167-178

<sup>30</sup> Kratochvíl, P., Shakhonova, G., 2021, 'The Patriotic Turn and Re-Building Russia's Historical Memory: Resisting the West, Leading the Post-Soviet East?', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 68 (5), pp. 442-456

<sup>31</sup> Hanukai, M., 2020, 'Resurrection by Surrogation: Spectral Performance in Putin's Russia', *Slavic Review*, 79(4), pp. 800-824

<sup>32</sup> International Memorial Board, 2019, *On School Competition "People in History: 20th Century Russia"*

political, social, informational and educational spheres across the country. In addition to the weaponization of history for domestic purposes, the Kremlin has externalized historical distortions and falsifications particularly through disinformation in attempting to establish its influence in third countries. The invasion of Ukraine itself was informed by Putin's own forays into history, according to which Kyiv is devoid of its own separate agency, Russians and Ukrainians are ostensibly part of one nation and Ukraine represents a battleground with the West as Moscow's main self-designated enemy.<sup>33</sup> Beyond Ukraine and particularly in Bulgaria, even if a fully-fledged war is not waged, the Kremlin's aggressive misuse of history serves as the ideational weapon for swaying perceptions and affinities.

---

<sup>33</sup> Portnov, A., 2022, *Ukraine Insider Paper 1: Why Russia Started the War, and How Putin Misunderstood Ukraine*, Institute for Global Analytics, pp. 1-20



# BULGARIA: The Untold Story of Russia Breeds Malign Fiction

Bulgaria's ideational scene has historically been defined by the continuing phenomenon of divided loyalties – between Western Europe as an example of progress and Russia as a culturally and emotionally close 'savior'. That is, Western Europe and Russia are key significant 'Others' in Bulgaria's national identity. Europe represents an example of social, political and economic development, while Russia plays an important role in the Bulgarians' cultural sensibilities and emotional attachments linked to religious, ethnic, linguistic similarities and perceived supposed need for historical gratitude, particularly as a result of Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire on the heels of Russian military and diplomatic activities.<sup>34</sup>

Hence, perceptions of historical bonds constitute a key factor in how Bulgarians relate to Russia. The persistent relevance of such pro-Russian dispositions is attested to by a Globsec poll, which concludes that a shared history and alleged common 'pan-Slavic' ethnic and cultural background with Russia are important for the Bulgarians. 84% of the polled Bulgarian respondents perceived Russia to be their country's traditional Slavic brother nation.<sup>35</sup>

The Bulgarians' ingrained positive – albeit insufficiently informed and selectively remembered, views of Russian-Bulgarian historical interactions have been instrumentalized and weaponized by the Kremlin in contemporary circumstances. To further understand and identify the scope, channels and actors promoting Russia-friendly distortions of Bulgarian-Russian ties, this section of the report provides the results of a **pioneering examination of the portrayal and interpretation of Russia's role in Bulgarian history in the totality of the 'carriers of historical memory' in Bulgaria**. These carriers contain, enshrine and perpetuate a particular representation of memory in three main ideational, discursive and material areas that are constitutive for passing down historical understandings in a society:

- The sphere of *educational discursive written sources* based on history textbooks deployed in school teaching as well as university faculty research orientations, the creation and focus of university curricula.
- *Monumental heritage* consisting of statues and museums as visible and tangible markers of historical symbolism.
- The *media space*, including the actors and outlets that disseminate pro-Russian historical disinformation.

---

<sup>34</sup> Filipova, R., 2022, *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 213, 219-220

<sup>35</sup> Hajdu, D., et al., 2023, *GLOBSEC Trends 2023: United we (still) stand*, GLOBSEC, p. 38

A comprehensive investigation of the dominant presentation of Russia in these three realms has not been carried out so far and, yet, an assessment of the extent of deeply embedded pro-Russian historical conceptions is crucial to proposing the way forward as to how to counter them.

## Education and history textbooks: The Russian tale persists unexplored

The educational system represents a prime carrier of historical memory as it conveys history knowledge to successive generations in schools and socializes new scholars of history into already existing frames of reference and academic debates as part of tertiary education. Written textbook materials codify dominantly constructed and sanctioned historical interpretations and are therefore a key source of insight into prevalent historical understandings (even though individual teachers' perspectives and family history and memory also condition youth's history views, they are more particularistic and less research-accessible). For their part, faculty research orientations point to prevalent academic 'schools of thought' and the possibility of the production of advanced knowledge that can also challenge existing paradigms. Conversely, underdeveloped fields of study can perpetuate insufficiently researched areas, yielding themselves to stereotypically and even ideologically framed established interpretations.

**Bulgaria's educational policy has shied away from undertaking significant changes to the existing educational material in schools.** The review of the school curricula initiated in 2022 did not lead to a substantive reassessment of content, including as regards history teaching. The Strategic Framework for the Development of Education, Teaching and Learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021-2030) vaguely and briefly states the necessity to develop critical thinking skills for understanding, among others, history and media.<sup>36</sup> For his part, President Rumen Radev has stated his view that the educational system needs to safeguard and consolidate Bulgarian national identity and consciousness.<sup>37</sup> However, the conservative-nationalist bent of such intentions and related proposals for introducing patriotic education is likely to deepen the negative trends as presented below.

**History teaching in the Bulgarian school educational system** is based on the availability of multiple textbook versions, compiled by different publishing houses and authors and approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. An exclusive focus on Bulgarian history from antiquity to the present is provided in 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, while in 12<sup>th</sup> grade there is an emphasis on Bulgarian history since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as situated in the context of larger European developments.<sup>38</sup> A comprehensive review of all history textbook versions for each of those grades has been carried out to identify the major trends in the portrayal of the Russian impact during critical episodes in Bulgarian history, when Russia exercised a significant role in affecting Bulgaria's internal and external environment. These episodes include (1) the pre-independence Revival period and the national revolutionaries' attitudes to Russian involvement in the Bulgarian

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria, *Стратегическа рамка за развитие на образованието, обучението и ученето в Република България (2021 – 2030)*, стр. 23 (*Strategic framework for the development of education, teaching and learning in the Republic of Bulgaria (2021 – 2030)*, p. 23)

<sup>37</sup> Mediapool, 2023, 'Служебният кабинет предлага две патриотични програми за ученици', 28 март 2023 г. ('The caretaker government proposes two patriotic programs for students', 28 March 2023)

<sup>38</sup> As gleaned from The Ministry of Education and Science in the Republic of Bulgaria, 2023, *Списъци на познавателни книжки, учебници и учебни комплекти, които могат да се ползват в системата на предучилищното и училищното образование (Lists of reference books, textbooks and study sets that can be used in the preschool and school education system)*

struggles for independence; (2) the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire on the heels of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 and the ensuing temporary Russian government in Bulgaria (1877-1879); (3) the process of unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia (as Bulgarian territories were divided by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin) and the emerging divide between Russophiles and Russophones in Bulgarian politics; (4) the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria at the end of World War II; (5) the Soviet-supported and controlled communist regime in Bulgaria.

- **4<sup>th</sup> grade history teaching: Muffling Russia, praising Europe and criticizing communism.** The main history textbook versions published by Domino, Anubis, Prosveta and Bulvest share a similar discursive-interpretive orientation in three main areas.

First, there is an outstanding trend of maintaining silence and refraining from detailed discussions of the role played by Russia in key episodes of Bulgarian history. For example, all three textbook versions avoid mentioning Russia as part of the liberation process at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Instead, lessons highlight subsequent developments related to the Congress of Berlin of 1878 (a conference aimed to codify the results of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878), which is similarly portrayed as motivated by the fact that ‘the big European states did not have an interest in a large new country (i.e. Bulgaria) in the Balkans’, ‘tearing Bulgarian lands apart’.<sup>39</sup> In a similar vein, the role of Russia – as a staunch opponent of the Bulgarian unification process, is not the subject of discussions in the textbooks’ lessons dedicated to that period.<sup>40</sup>

Second, all three textbook versions converge on a positive portrayal of the EU and the benefits stemming from Bulgaria’s membership in the Union.<sup>41</sup>

Third, the Domino and Prosveta editions share an objective-critical presentation of the communist period in Bulgarian history. It is highlighted that the citizens were deprived of rights and freedoms and that the Bulgarian Communist Party stayed in power by instilling fear in the people. Despite paying lip service to equality, the ruling elite lived in luxury, unlike the majority of the population.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Misheva, K., Genchev, S., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Домино*, стр. 30 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Domino*, p. 30)

Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – Анупис*, стр. 30 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLET BULGARIA – Anubis*, p. 30)

Tsvetanska, S., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Просвета Плюс София*, стр. 38 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Prosveta Plus Sofia*, p. 38)

Penin, R., Yakimov, G., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 42-43 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA – BULVEST 2000*, pp. 42-43)

<sup>40</sup> Misheva, K., Genchev, S., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Домино*, стр. 32 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Domino*, p. 32)

Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – Анупис*, стр. 34 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLET BULGARIA – Anubis*, p. 34)

Tsvetanska, S., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Просвета Плюс София*, стр. 42 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Prosveta Plus Sofia*, p. 42)

Penin, R., Yakimov, G., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 46-47 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA – BULVEST 2000*, pp. 46-47)

<sup>41</sup> Misheva, K., Genchev, S., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Домино*, стр. 46 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Domino*, p. 46)

Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – Анупис*, стр. 50 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLET BULGARIA – Anubis*, p. 50)

Tsvetanska, S., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Просвета Плюс София*, стр. 54 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Prosveta Plus Sofia*, p. 54)

Penin, R., Yakimov, G., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 62 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA – BULVEST 2000*, p. 62)

<sup>42</sup> Misheva, K., Genchev, S., 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Домино*, стр. 46 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Domino*, p. 46)

Tsvetanska, S., et al, 2019, ‘Човекът и обществото 4 клас’, *Просвета Плюс София*, стр. 48 (‘Individual and society 4 grade’, *Prosveta Plus Sofia*, p. 48)

In contrast, the Anubis textbook does not discuss the communist period; the Bulvest edition mentions developments during communism briefly presenting positive and negative sides.<sup>43</sup>

- **7<sup>th</sup> grade: Silencing the Russian role and asking the students about it.** As the history teaching material grows in complexity and volume for the last year of junior high school, finer details regarding the portrayal of Russia emerge in the four main textbook versions published by Bulvest, Anubis, Prosveta and Riva. A common characteristic of all these versions is the persistent trend – as continued from 4<sup>th</sup> grade education, of devoting limited space to discussing the various facets of Russia's involvement in and influence on Bulgaria's political, social and economic history during the liberation from Ottoman rule and onwards into contemporary times. Positive, uncritical presentations of Russia are also identified. Moreover, a pattern is established, whereby students are asked to assess the role of Russia by themselves, which allows textbooks to deflect interpretive responsibility. Yet, the textbooks differ in terms of nuance of depictions (especially as regards the extent of deployment of evaluative epithets to extoll Russian policies) and in the assessment of communism, as some textbook versions (particularly Anubis) are less critical of this period than others.

The silencing and selective embellishment of the Russian role can be observed in relation to a number of critical episodes in Bulgarian history, whereby Russian policies were not perceived unequivocally by the Bulgarians themselves and had a corrosive impact. All four textbook versions refrain from discussing **the Russia-critical views of the Bulgarian revolutionaries** of the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival period, such as Georgi Rakovski, Hristo Botev, Vasil Levski.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, it can be surmised that emphasizing the opposition to Russia on the part of some of the most cherished national figures can dent the established aura of Moscow as Bulgaria's 'benefactor'.

**Lessons on the liberation and the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878** vary from limited discussions, particularly of Russian motives for starting the war as in the Bulvest<sup>45</sup> and Riva<sup>46</sup> editions, to somewhat more detailed accounts. The Anubis textbook stresses that although Russia pursued its geopolitical interests in the Straits, this nevertheless still made her a protector and liberator of the Bulgarians, as 'the desire to defend the Bulgarians was strongest there'. It invites students to make a presentation on the statues dedicated to the war.<sup>47</sup> Prosveta also emphasizes the sympathy for the Bulgarian nation as well as Russia's imperial interests.<sup>48</sup> Favorable interpretations without a critical assessment of the deficiencies of the temporary Russian rule (1877-1879) instituted in Bulgaria after

<sup>43</sup> Penin, R., Yakimov, G., 2019, 'Човекът и обществото 4 клас', *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ – БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 56 ('Individual and society 4 grade', *KLETT BULGARIA – BULVEST 2000*, p. 56)

<sup>44</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 30 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 30)

Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 24-27 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 24-27)

Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 47, 50, 55 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 47, 50, 55)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 41, 45 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, pp. 41, 45)

<sup>45</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 44 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 44)

<sup>46</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 50-51 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, pp. 50-51)

<sup>47</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 30-31 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 30-31)

<sup>48</sup> Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 59 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 59)

the Liberation additionally prevail.<sup>49</sup> The Anubis version accentuates that Russia's main goals after the liberation were connected to the restoration and consolidation of Bulgarian statehood through Russia-controlled governance structures, no downsides to which are identified. Hence, Russian rule is portrayed as benevolent and seemingly having Bulgaria's best interests in mind.<sup>50</sup>

In a similar vein, **Russia's steadfast opposition to and undermining of Bulgarian diplomatic efforts to unite the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia** (as Bulgarian territories were divided by the 1878 Treaty of Berlin) are either silenced as in Anubis<sup>51</sup> and discussed very briefly in one sentence as in Riva<sup>52</sup> or toned down as in Bulvest. The latter argues that Russia was in favor of Bulgarian unification but without Bulgarian Prince (knyaz) Alexander Battenberg who was seen as a conduit of Western influence. The strategy of not negotiating with Russia regarding the unification process was viewed by the Russian tsar as aiming to separate Bulgaria from Russia.<sup>53</sup> Prosveta also maintains that the Russian tsar was afraid of the growing Western influence in Bulgaria and did not want to complicate relations with the Western powers. Students are again asked to assess the role of Russia in the development of the Principality of Bulgaria, although the textbook does not do so extensively itself.<sup>54</sup> It nonetheless does lay out the only explicitly Russia-critical views by acknowledging that some Bulgarian political forces stood up to the 'crude Russian interference' in Bulgarian affairs.<sup>55</sup> Bulvest and Riva similarly recognize in passing that the Russian posture during the unification process contributed to the division in society between 'Russophiles' and 'Russophobes'.<sup>56</sup>

As regards another critical episode in Bulgarian-Russian relations – **the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria**, the four textbooks' interpretations range more widely than in other instances between briefly and vaguely mentioning the event to embellishing, or conversely, subtly criticizing Soviet actions. The Anubis textbook version does not discuss the Soviet army's role in Bulgaria's domestic politics and the Sovietization of the country under the USSR's control, asking students to declare their position in favor or against the People's Court (established in 1944 to deal with the communists' opponents through executions or imprisonment).<sup>57</sup> Riva is likewise nondefinitive in its presentation of this historical episode, describing the 'entry' (rather than occupation) of Soviet forces into Bulgarian territory.<sup>58</sup> The Bulvest textbook goes furthest in terms of toning down the

<sup>49</sup> Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 66 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 66)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 61-62 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, pp. 61-62)

<sup>50</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 50 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 50)

<sup>51</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 52 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 52)

<sup>52</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 66 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, p. 66)

<sup>53</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 84 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 84)

<sup>54</sup> Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 71, 75 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 71, 75)

<sup>55</sup> Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 80, 82, 106 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 80, 82, 106)

<sup>56</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 88-90 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 88-90)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 69 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, p. 69)

<sup>57</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 87-90 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 87-90)

<sup>58</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 100, 120-121 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, pp. 100, 120-121)

Soviet occupation of Bulgaria as it subtly places blame on the then Bulgarian government for the Soviet declaration of war on Bulgaria because it ostensibly reconfirmed the country's neutrality instead of breaking diplomatic ties with Germany.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the Prosveta edition argued that then Bulgarian Prime Minister Konstantin Muraviev took decisive steps for extricating Bulgaria from the war but the Soviet Union nevertheless declared war on Sofia.<sup>60</sup>

The most clear-cut difference between three of the textbooks, compiled by Bulvest, Prosveta and Riva on the one hand, and Anubis, on the other, concerns the **presentation of the communist period**. The former three textbooks offer an objective-critical analysis of the atrocities committed by the communist regime, the stifling of freedoms and mismanagement of the economy.<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Anubis devotes a long lesson to communist leader Todor Zhivkov, who is said to receive a mixed/controversial assessment by historians, journalists and society as a whole. A dilution of his image seems to be aimed at – that just like any other historical-political figure, his rule had both positive and negative sides. Students are asked to assess tsars Boris III and Ferdinand I on the model they provided for Zhivkov, thus subliminally equating the status of Bulgaria's monarchical figures of the pre-communist period and the communist leader himself. To support the alleged controversy surrounding Zhivkov, the Anubis edition cites a textbook from 1983 and a textbook from 2002.<sup>62</sup> Yet, it is not mentioned that textbooks from before 1989 were subject to heavy state propaganda and cannot therefore be viably compared to their post-communist counterparts (despite the latter's flaws).

A relativization of statues is also aimed at as the Anubis textbook claims that statues are built, or removed depending on the internal political and international conjecture (i.e. rather than on the basis of objective historical assessments). Students are asked to think why there is no controversy only regarding the monuments dedicated to Bulgarian revolutionaries of the Revival period and soldier monuments.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, those textbooks that include lessons on **post-1989 developments** in Bulgaria also differ widely in their interpretations. The Anubis textbook version acknowledges that the EU offered programs for supporting the former Soviet satellites but placed conditions too. The impression is created that Bulgaria had to follow unquestioningly NATO's 'orders' without mentioning that entry in the Alliance depended on vital reforms in the area of security. It is stated that the EU and NATO restricted Bulgaria's ability to take independent decisions and good relations with Russia have been dented, which is supposedly having negative consequences for Bulgaria's economy and culture.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Riva provides unequivocally positive assessments of the EU and NATO. NATO is

<sup>59</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 114 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 114)

<sup>60</sup> Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 133 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 133)

<sup>61</sup> Yakimov, G., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *БУЛВЕСТ 2000/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 142, 154, 158, 164 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *BULVEST 2000/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 142, 154, 158, 164)

Gavrilova, R., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 143, 146, 149 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 143, 146, 149)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 123 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, p. 123)

<sup>62</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 92-98 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 92-98)

<sup>63</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 104 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, p. 104)

<sup>64</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *Анубис/КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 108-111 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *Anubis/KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 108-111)

presented as the most powerful defense organization in the world, which is a guarantor of Bulgarian security. The EU is the most prestigious economic and political structure on the continent.<sup>65</sup>

- **10<sup>th</sup> grade: Russia remains a mystery.** Bulvest, Anubis, Prosveta and Riva also produce the four main history textbooks used for teaching in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, compiling expanded versions of the material already similarly structured for 7<sup>th</sup> grade history studies. The textbooks continue to generally subdue discussion of the Russian role in Bulgarian history, on the whole devoting limited space to Russia-related developments. This could potentially be regarded as purposeful suppression/silencing, further raising questions about the relationship between the breadth of the textbooks (covering Bulgarian history from antiquity to Sofia's entry into the EU in 200+ pages) as against the depth of analyses (as some important historical events receive a brief treatment of a few sentences). Lessons frequently ask students to draw conclusions on the basis of information that they have to look for and which is not present in the study material.

The textbooks' handling of the **attitudes of the Bulgarian revolutionaries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards Russia** can be situated on two ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, the Bulvest and Riva editions maintain silence on the revolutionaries' Russia-critical stances. Even though lessons are dedicated to the views and political projects of the revolutionary figures, there is no mention of their position on Russia.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, the Anubis textbook lays out the differences among the revolutionaries in terms of their attitudes to Russia.<sup>67</sup> The Prosveta edition similarly classifies Bulgarian revolutionary committees according to their international orientation – the Russophile ones and those which proclaimed a more independent path to liberation.<sup>68</sup>

All four textbooks provide general portrayals of the **liberation of Bulgaria** with only a very brief treatment of the Russian motives for starting the war against the Ottoman Empire in 1877-1878, or omitting this strand of analysis altogether. The editions are at pains to stress the independent Bulgarian effort in the liberation process. Bulvest offers a schematic representation of the events, whereby various accounts are brought to bear and share the memories and assessments of Russian military and political leaders by casting a positive light on Russia's military planning and attitudes. There are no counterarguments or evidence pointing towards an alternative interpretation. The reasons for Russia's decision to go to war against Turkey are summarized in one sentence – out of a 388-page thick textbook.<sup>69</sup> The Anubis textbook does acknowledge that there was a lack of commitment from St. Petersburg to the cause of the Bulgarians prior to the 1877-1878 war. It is also noted that various nationalities participated in the war of liberation apart from the Russians (a fact that Moscow prefers to silence and downplay), additionally emphasizing that the Bulgarians did not receive their freedom

<sup>65</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2018, 'История и цивилизация 7 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 148-149 ('History and civilization 7 grade', *RIVA*, pp. 148-149)

<sup>66</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, 'История и цивилизация 10 клас', *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 37 ('History and civilization 10 grade', *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, p. 37)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, 'История и цивилизация 10 клас', *РИВА*, стр. 145 ('History and civilization 10 grade', *RIVA*, p. 145)

<sup>67</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2019, 'История и цивилизация 10 клас', *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 132, 144 ('History and civilization 10 grade', *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, pp. 132, 144)

<sup>68</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, 'История и цивилизация 10 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 140, 143, 161 ('History and civilization 10 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 140, 143, 161)

<sup>69</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, 'История и цивилизация 10 клас', *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 206 ('History and civilization 10 grade', *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, p. 206)

‘as a gift’.<sup>70</sup> In the Prosveta textbook, the lesson on the liberation does not lay out the motivations behind the Russian decision to start a war against the Ottoman Empire (although elsewhere Russia’s geopolitical ambitions are mentioned).<sup>71</sup> The military battles are presented in detail; however, the poor Russian planning is not discussed.<sup>72</sup> The concern seems to be to accentuate that the Bulgarians participated in the war on equal terms. Likewise, there is no discussion of Russian motivations in Riva’s textbook, only a few sentences describe Russia’s involvement in a vague manner and its discussion is left to the students.<sup>73</sup> The lesson stresses the Bulgarian contribution to the war effort: Bulgaria’s gaining of independent statehood and democratic self-government is presented as the result of the national revolution, the Russian-Turkish war and the peace treaties.<sup>74</sup>

All four editions similarly converge on an uncritical portrayal of the temporary Russian government.<sup>75</sup> It is presented as having performed intensive work for the establishment of Bulgarian institutions and the preparation of Bulgarian society for independent political and economic life, mediating a smooth transition from the society of the Revival period to self-government.<sup>76</sup> Anubis doubles down on how the Russian government introduced modern legislation, tax system reform, organization of local elections and the establishment of state institutions.<sup>77</sup>

The textbooks do not offer detailed assessments of **Russia’s undercutting of Bulgaria’s drive for unification**. Riva mentions the Russian role in one sentence.<sup>78</sup> Bulvest and Anubis present brief and non-definitive accounts of how Russian diplomacy expressed strong dissatisfaction with the unification as it was carried out without its participation and did not correspond to St. Petersburg’s plans for Bulgaria.<sup>79</sup> It is generally stated that Russia, Germany and Austria had agreed among each other that they would not support the unification but they would not oppose it either.<sup>80</sup> Prosveta provides some critical nuance about the negative impact of Russian policies and yet it remains similarly subdued and brief.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 124, 132, 141-143 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, pp. 124, 132, 141-143)

<sup>71</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 140, 172 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 140, 172)

<sup>72</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 156 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 156)

<sup>73</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 151 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, p. 151)

<sup>74</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 164 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, p. 164)

<sup>75</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 164 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 164)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 165 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, p. 165)

<sup>76</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 236 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, p. 236)

<sup>77</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 164 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, p. 164)

<sup>78</sup> Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 173 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, p. 173)

<sup>79</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 250 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, p. 250)

<sup>80</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 170, 173 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, pp. 170, 173)

<sup>81</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 175 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 175)

The four history textbooks further provide very sparing detail and assessment of the **Soviet occupation of Bulgaria**, usually presenting the movement and presence of Soviet forces in the country as ‘entry’ rather than fully-fledged occupation. Bulvest states that the USSR declared war on Bulgaria and ‘entered’ the country and that at the end of World War II Sofia found itself in the Soviet sphere of influence as a result of the arrangements among the Entente.<sup>82</sup> Anubis and Riva only briefly mention the Soviet occupation.<sup>83</sup> The Prosveta textbook mentions that the USSR declared war on Bulgaria but does not contain any more detail. In subsequent lessons, the role of the Bulgarian communists is emphasized as they Sovietize Bulgaria but the role of the USSR itself is not discussed as extensively. It is said that political changes took place against the background of Soviet occupation and that the decisive factor facilitating the communists’ ascent to power was the presence of the Soviet army.<sup>84</sup>

Finally, the four textbook versions converge on a critical assessment of the **communist period in Bulgaria** based on the commitment of atrocities, political and cultural repression and economic mismanagement.<sup>85</sup>

- **12<sup>th</sup> grade: Advanced study without discussing Moscow’s role in Bulgaria.** History education in the last year of high school is optional as part of students’ decision as to whether to undergo specialized history training. The textbooks for the 12<sup>th</sup> grade are compiled by Klett and Prosveta and continue trends of the portrayal of Russia already established in history teaching in earlier school years. Despite the fact that the editions feature the most advanced and detailed historical content, there is still insufficient – if any, discussion dedicated to the Russian impact on Bulgaria, either in the main body of the texts or in the tasks. A greater focus on European history prevails over material dedicated to Bulgaria. The only mention of Moscow’s role in the Klett edition is related to Bulgarian political parties’ differing attitudes to Russia and there are only two sentences devoted to the actions of the Soviet army in Bulgaria at the end of World War II.<sup>86</sup> Prosveta’s textbook acknowledges that Bulgaria was occupied by the USSR, which was decisive for the establishment of the communist regime.<sup>87</sup> At the same time, building on the objective-critical analysis of communism observable in previous school grades, the textbooks provide veritable depictions of the internal Soviet situation during the Cold War, including the gross violation of human rights, suppression of dissidence and the

<sup>82</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 286, 304 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, pp. 286, 304)

<sup>83</sup> Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 195, 208 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, pp. 195, 208)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 210, 228 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, pp. 210, 228)

<sup>84</sup> Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 214, 231 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 214, 231)

<sup>85</sup> Baeva, I., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/БУЛВЕСТ 2000*, стр. 304 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/BULVEST 2000*, p. 304)

Matanov, H., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ/Анубис*, стр. 219-224 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *KLETT BULGARIA/Anubis*, pp. 219-224)

Pavlov, P., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 234, 237, 255 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 234, 237, 255)

Palangurski, M., et al, 2019, ‘История и цивилизация 10 клас’, *РИВА*, стр. 231 (‘History and civilization 10 grade’, *RIVA*, p. 231)

<sup>86</sup> Vachkov, D., et al, 2021, ‘История и цивилизация 12 клас, Модул 1 Власт и институции’, *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 16, 34 (‘History and civilization 12 grade Module 1 Power and institutions’, *KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 16, 34)

<sup>87</sup> Gruev, M., et al, 2021, ‘История и цивилизация 12 клас’, *Просвета – София*, стр. 64 (‘History and civilization 12 grade’, *Prosveta – Sofia*, p. 64)

rampant anti-American propaganda.<sup>88</sup> The totalitarian ideologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are discussed in detail.

Overall, the key trend characterizing history education throughout primary, junior high and high school is contained in **maintaining silence on and refraining from detailed analyses of the frequently negative repercussions of the Russian role** in Bulgarian political, social and economic developments, further accompanied by positive depictions of Moscow's policies and only occasional criticism. Moreover, **interpretive responsibility is deflected by outsourcing it to the students themselves**, as they are invited to evaluate Russia's stances, yet oftentimes without possessing authoritative textbook material to ground their conclusions in. Hence, there is an absence of clear-cut assessments backed up by multi-faceted historical record on Russian actions in textbooks, which reflects the wider lack of well-grounded understanding and consensus in Bulgarian society about Russia's impact on the country. Long-standing uncritical pro-Russian dispositions in Bulgarian society are thus perpetuated, rather than resolved, through the educational system. Nevertheless, a generally unified objective-critical analysis of communism observable in almost all textbooks could at least start to correct nostalgically tinged perceptions of the communist period that older generations, in conjunction with Kremlin propaganda, can pass down to the youth.

**TABLE 1:**  
**Comparative characteristics of the portrayal of Russia in history textbooks**

<p><b>4<sup>th</sup> grade</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silence/insufficient discussion of the adverse effects of the Russian role in Bulgarian history</li> <li>• Positive portrayal of the EU</li> <li>• Generally critical assessment of the communist period</li> </ul>	<p><b>7<sup>th</sup> grade</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silence/insufficient discussion of the adverse effects of the Russian role in Bulgarian history</li> <li>• Positive/uncritical representations of Russia</li> <li>• Deflect interpretive responsibility to students</li> <li>• Lack of unified assessment of communist period across textbooks</li> </ul>
<p><b>10<sup>th</sup> grade</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Silence/insufficient discussion of the adverse effects of the Russian role in Bulgarian history</li> <li>• Privileging breadth over depth of material</li> <li>• Deflect interpretive responsibility to students</li> <li>• Generally critical assessment of the communist period</li> </ul>	<p><b>12<sup>th</sup> grade</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide most advanced and detailed content</li> <li>• Silence/Insufficient discussion of the adverse effects of the Russian role in Bulgarian history</li> <li>• Critical assessment of the communist period and Soviet Union</li> </ul>

For its part, **university-level teaching and research is similarly characterized by a limited focus on the Russian role in Bulgarian history**. A review of history faculty research orientations in the most prominent Bulgarian universities that offer history education (Sofia University, New Bulgarian University, Veliko Turnovo University, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences) demonstrates

<sup>88</sup> Vachkov, D., et al, 2021, 'История и цивилизация 12 клас, Модул 1 Власт и институции', *КЛЕТ БЪЛГАРИЯ*, стр. 91, 120, 122, 128 ('History and civilization 12 grade Module 1 Power and institutions', *KLETT BULGARIA*, pp. 91, 120, 122, 128)  
Gruev, M., et al, 2021, 'История и цивилизация 12 клас', *Просвета – София*, стр. 16, 61-63, 67-74 ('History and civilization 12 grade', *Prosveta – Sofia*, pp. 16, 61-63, 67-74)

that, on the whole, there are few studies<sup>89</sup> that tackle head-on the impact of Russian policies on Bulgaria's historical trajectory. There are studies examining specific aspects of the Bulgarian revival and revolutionary movement as well as the interwar period, but little overall research attention is devoted to the critical episodes of the liberation, unification, Soviet occupation and the assessment of the Russian role in them. In general, history academics' specializations group around Bulgarian medieval history, the period of Ottoman rule, the revival and revolutionary organization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, political institutions, military, financial, social and ethnic processes in post-liberation Bulgaria.<sup>90</sup> It is also notable that some projects of the Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences have been carried out in cooperation with the Russian (as well as Chinese) Academy of Sciences.<sup>91</sup>

Hence, **the overall shortage in the development of independent Russian historical studies programs circumscribes the production of original and well-grounded research** that can challenge established views and relate more objective knowledge to the students.

### *History textbooks vs. the wider universe of sources*

So how does textbook material regarding Russia's role in crucial periods of Bulgarian history tally against primary and secondary sources produced by reputed authors (some of whom contemporaries of those events) and archival documentation? A review of such sources reveals gaps and omissions in textbook material occasioned by selective and incomplete presentations of the historical record.

**Rediscovering the writings and views of the Bulgarian revolutionaries and public figures of the early 19<sup>th</sup> and late 20<sup>th</sup> century** can reveal their critical orientation towards Russian actions in Bulgaria. For example, the works of Zakhari Stoyanov (frequently downplayed and avoided by pro-Russian circles) analyze the attitudes of the leaders of the national-liberation movement, who were against official Russia since *'they knew that the Russian whip hurts more than the Turkish one'*. For instance, Georgi Rakovski – founder of the organized revolutionary struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, sharply criticized Russian policies as deceptive since they did not have

<sup>89</sup> For example, Petko Petkov argues that the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano signed between the Russian and Ottoman Empire is mistakenly represented as definitively settling Bulgaria's liberation not least because it was preliminary in character, attempting to codify Russian interests, while the other Great Powers were not included in it; its significance and the date of its signing (3 March) were elevated by the Bulgarian Communist Party to the status of a national holiday: Petkov, P., 2019, 'За „Освобождението“ (старо и ново тълкуване)', Дни на науката'2018. Сборник с доклади от научните конференции на СУБ – Велико Търново 2018. В. Търново: Фабер, 2019, стр. 9-17 ('On the "Liberation" (new and old interpretation)', Days of science'2018. A collection of reports from the scientific conferences of the Union of scientists – Veliko Turnovo 2018. V. Turnovo: Faber, 2019, pp. 9-17) Petkov, P., 'Как и защо 19 февруари / 3 март стана официален и национален празник на България?' ('How and why 19 February / 3 March became an official and national holiday of Bulgaria?')

Also, Vanya Ratcheva has pointed out how the Russian diplomatic representatives in the Balkans attempted to denigrate the political aspect of the revolutionary committees and to distance themselves from claims that the Russians were fomenting revolutionary activity: Ratcheva, V., 2011, 'Левски и Русия', *стисание „История“*, стр. 17 ('Levski and Rusia', *History*, p. 17)

Ratcheva further problematizes the tendency in Bulgarian historiography to accentuate the 'unrivalled' role of Russia as a uniting force of all Slavs and an ally in their aspirations for freedom. Yet, particularly in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century it was reiterated that Russia did not have an interest in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the fate of the subordinate nations would be negotiated with the other Great Powers: Ratcheva, V., 'Руската политика и българската идея за политическа автономия в някои от изявите на българската емиграция от първата половина на 19 в.', *стисание „Исторически преглед“*, стр. 5-6, 12 ('Russian policy and the Bulgarian idea of political autonomy in some of the activities of the Bulgarian emigration in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century', *Historical Review*, pp. 5-6, 12)

<sup>90</sup> As gleaned from the research orientations of the respective history faculties:  
Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, *Академичен състав* (Academic staff)  
New Bulgarian University, *Щамни* (Staff)  
The University of Veliko Tarnovo, *Състав* (Staff)

Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *НАУЧЕН СЪСТАВ* (ACADEMIC STAFF)

<sup>91</sup> Institute for Historical Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, *МЕЖДУНАРОДНИ ПРОЕКТИ* (INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS)

the Bulgarians' best interests and freedom in mind but aimed to annihilate the Bulgarian nationality instead of standing up to Turkey. Peterburg's policy of resettling Bulgarians to Russian lands came in for particular criticism as a propagandist ruse aimed to attract labor force on false promises of better living conditions, while depopulating Bulgaria.<sup>92</sup>

For his part, Zakhari Stoyanov further tackles and problematizes the notion that the Russian Empire entered into the 1877-1878 war with the Ottoman Empire out of altruistic motives. Rather, it was led by imperialistic concerns (gaining access to the Straits and establishing control over the Balkan peninsula) and it never consistently supported the Christian and Slavic populations in the Balkans over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Crimean War of 1853-1856 already demonstrated that Petersburg preferred to reach an agreement with the Turks instead of propping up the insurrections of the subjugated Balkan peoples.<sup>93</sup>

Zakhari Stoyanov's analyses of Russian policies towards Bulgaria additionally expose a number of trends that have persisted through time and characterize Moscow's actions nowadays too. He pointed out the money-making motive of the Russophiles and media censorship, whereby pro-Russian newspapers conveyed unswervingly the official Russian line, while the Russia-critical outlets were suppressed.<sup>94</sup> Stoyanov was well-acquainted with internal Russian developments and deemed it important to familiarize the Bulgarian public with them. Once the Bulgarians learned that their counterparts in the Russian Empire experienced less favorable material and educational conditions and extreme subjugation of freedoms, the Russian agents in Bulgaria would not be able to convince anyone of the greatness of Russia and the necessity to defer to it.<sup>95</sup>

Moreover, Evgeny Utin, a representative of the Russian liberal intelligentsia and war correspondent from the Bulgarian territories during the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878, offers a **first-hand glimpse into aspects of the war that tend to remain blackboxed in history textbooks and wider representations of the liberation**, including the Russians' attitude to the Bulgarians and the demand for gratitude, the downsides of the temporary Russian government as well as the deficiencies of Russian military planning and performance. In a nationally self-critical assessment, the author argues that only a nation that has attained a high level of internal development can claim to liberate others and not be afraid of the revolutionary spirit in another nation. Utin admits that the Russians did their best to stop the all-encompassing revolution of the Bulgarians – the latter's passive suffering was appreciated but their age-old struggle and armed insurrections were not.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, the Russians' excessive demands for gratitude from the Bulgarians were informed by two main factors. First, the Russian paternalist tradition looks at the protected as voiceless, who are obliged to only listen and thank. In turn, the subordinate Russian population do thank even for the smallest success in public life due to its dependence on arbitrary rule. Therefore, the Russians also

<sup>92</sup> Rakovski, G. S., 2022, *Преселение в Русия или Руската убийствена политика за българите. С предисловие от З. Стоянов*, ГУТА-Н (*Relocation to Russia or the murderous Russian policies toward the Bulgarians. With a foreword from Z. Stoyanov*, GUTA-N)

<sup>93</sup> Stoyanov, Z., 2022, *Борба за отечеството. Писма и документи. Съчинения в осем тома*, издателство "Захарий Стоянов", том VIII, книга 1, стр. 55-57 (*Fight for the Fatherland. Letters and Documents. Essays in Eight Volumes*, Zakharii Stoyanov publishing house, Volume VIII, book 1, pp. 55-57)

<sup>94</sup> Stoyanov, Z., 2022, *Борба за отечеството. Писма и документи. Съчинения в осем тома*, издателство "Захарий Стоянов", том VIII, книга 1, стр. 22, 48-49, 119-122, 165, 170 (*Fight for the Fatherland. Letters and Documents. Essays in Eight Volumes*, Zakharii Stoyanov publishing house, Volume VIII, book 1, pp. 22, 48-49, 119-122, 165, 170)

<sup>95</sup> Stoyanov, Z., 2022, *Борба за отечеството. Писма и документи. Съчинения в осем тома*, издателство "Захарий Стоянов", том VIII, книга 2, стр. 124, 219, 389 (*Fight for the Fatherland. Letters and Documents. Essays in Eight Volumes*, Zakharii Stoyanov publishing house, Volume VIII, book 2, pp. 124, 219, 389)

<sup>96</sup> Utin, E., 2017, *Писма от България*, Абагар, стр. 18, 203-205, 209 (*Letters from Bulgaria*, Abagar, pp. 18, 203-205, 209)

require gratitude from others. Second, the expectations of thankfulness were based on erroneous views such as insufficient knowledge of Bulgarian history, exaggerated perceptions of supposed benevolence demonstrated towards the Bulgarians in the past and the seemingly boundless love of the southern Slavs for Russia.<sup>97</sup>

Utin shines a light on the military performance of Russia during the war, which is rarely subject to historical debates and teaching in Bulgaria. The Russian military was beset by significant deficiencies in terms of the supply of resources (such as shortages in ammunition and maps) and military-medical management, which were the result of incompetence, drawbacks in military command, abuse and unpreparedness.<sup>98</sup> The author further reveals the significant shortcomings of the temporary Russian government in Bulgaria. The civil servants who were appointed were ill-prepared for administrative work and were completely focused on military affairs. They were unjust and unnecessarily cruel to the Bulgarian population, extracting money from them so that the Turkish-imposed taxes were replaced with Russian ones. There was a complete lack of knowledge of Bulgaria and the Russian traditions of governance were inappropriately imposed on Bulgarian customs and conditions.<sup>99</sup>

The authoritative historiography of esteemed diplomat, writer and historian of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Simeon Radev, demonstrates **the scope of Russia's interference in Bulgarian politics, diplomatic manoeuvring to undermine unification efforts, personal animosities and the evolution of the Bulgarian public mood**. He points out the extent of the hatred that tsar Alexander III harbored against Bulgarian prince Alexander Battenberg as the basis for Petersburg's policies opposing unification.<sup>100</sup> The work also describes at length how the Russian Empire's representatives in Bulgaria, particularly General Kaulbars, incited riots such as the pro-Russian officers' rebellion of 1887 on the heels of the coup against Battenberg, preconditioned by Peterburg's displeasure at Bulgarian unification done without Russian approval.<sup>101</sup> It is exposed that the threat of Russian occupation of Bulgaria represented a credible possibility at the time, while the Russian intelligentsia considered that the Russian representatives in Bulgaria were to blame for the bilateral conflict, as the Bulgarians had the right to defend their independence.<sup>102</sup>

Importantly, Simeon Radev's volume highlights the changes in the Bulgarian public's dispositions and how already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century 'gratitude' to Russia for the liberation was fading away. The combined factors of the growing national self-confidence, especially catalyzed by Bulgaria's defeat of Serbia in the war of 1885 when Belgrade opposed Bulgarian unification, the Russian-led dethronement of Battenberg and blatant interference in Bulgarian politics led to a conviction that the Bulgarians not only did not have to rely on Russia but could also oppose it.<sup>103</sup> A similar picture capturing the strong impetus for independent action as a prevalent social

<sup>97</sup> Utin, E., 2017, *Писма от България*, Абагар, стр. 86-88, 181 (*Letters from Bulgaria*, Abagar, pp. 86-88, 181)

<sup>98</sup> Utin, E., 2017, *Писма от България*, Абагар, стр. 271-282, 290, 308 (*Letters from Bulgaria*, Abagar, pp. 271-282, 290, 308)

<sup>99</sup> Utin, E., 2017, *Писма от България*, Абагар, стр. 33-35, 95-96, 102-103, 112 (*Letters from Bulgaria*, Abagar, pp. 33-35, 95-96, 102-103, 112)

<sup>100</sup> Radev, S., 2022, *Строители на съвременна България*, Лист, том 3, стр. 12, 27 (*Builders of Modern Bulgaria*, List, Volume 3, pp. 12, 27)

<sup>101</sup> Radev, S., 2022, *Строители на съвременна България*, Лист, том 3, стр. 28, 40, 81-83 (*Builders of Modern Bulgaria*, List, Volume 3, pp. 28, 40, 81-83)

<sup>102</sup> Radev, S., 2022, *Строители на съвременна България*, Лист, том 3, стр. 115, 207, 215-223 (*Builders of Modern Bulgaria*, List, Volume 3, pp. 115, 207, 215-223)

<sup>103</sup> Radev, S., 2022, *Строители на съвременна България*, Лист, том 3, стр. 188-195 (*Builders of Modern Bulgaria*, List, Volume 3, pp. 188-195)

sentiment in Bulgaria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is provided by history author Georgi Pashev.<sup>104</sup> These accounts of the unification thus demonstrate that although history teaching and historical propaganda tend to predominantly fixate on the memory of the liberation, transposing it to current times, historical developments and changes in the Bulgarian mindset were turning away from unquestioning Russophilism.

Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria requires a detailed examination of the extent to which **the USSR affected social and political processes in Bulgaria leading up to the imposition of the communist regime**. For example, Tsenko Barev – distinguished frontline activist of the Bulgarian Agricultural National Union (briefly a constituent member of the United Front established in 1943) reveals in his authoritative work how the communist party in Bulgaria together with the Soviet occupational forces squeezed out all political opponents through force and terror. His book shows that the communists did not represent a commanding political force in Bulgaria, having to rely on the armed militia and the Soviet army. On the other hand, more influential Bulgarian parties – such as the agriculturalists, were not so exclusively or at all oriented on cooperation with the Soviet Union and espoused democratic principles.<sup>105</sup>

## Statues and museums: Russia's immovable presence

The physically tangible heritage of Russian-Soviet actions in Bulgaria – in the form of statues and museums, has been subject to **constant controversy without a definitive resolution**. More impetus for the removal of Soviet-era monuments was given in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine but the outcomes are still inconclusive. Public-political clashes over the status of arguably the most conspicuous symbol of Soviet-Russian domination – the Monument to the Soviet Army towering over Sofia, have revealed the main friction points between the opposing camps related to differing understandings of history and its impact on the present as well as the legal aspects of monumental heritage. Ultimately, the end result of those clashes is the perpetuation of deadlock, which favors the pro-Russian status quo, ardently defending Moscow's statues. The **absence of comprehensive research<sup>106</sup> and institutions of national remembrance** – a common practice in other CEE countries as revealed in further sections of this report, additionally deprive debates of a sound knowledge and policy basis for a critical assessment of the communist past.

Over time, the two main and most active opposing camps favoring the removal or preservation of the Russian-Soviet statues have been centered around the descendants of the post-1989 democratic opposition (most notably the political coalition Democratic Bulgaria), on the one hand, and left-leaning politicians and public figures related to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party), on the other. The former have been joined by GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) and We Continue the Change, while the latter have been

<sup>104</sup> Pashev, G., 2022, *Да живеят Съединението. Документална повест*, Хермес, стр. 77-81 (*Long Live the Unification. Documentary Novel*, Hermes, pp. 77-81)

<sup>105</sup> Barev, Ts., 2022, *Принос към историята на Българския земеделски съюз*, Изток-Запад, стр. 384, 405, 418-420 (*Contribution to the History of the Bulgarian Agricultural Union*, East-West, pp. 384, 405, 418-420)

<sup>106</sup> One of the few publications which deals with the history of the creation of Russia-dedicated monuments in Bulgaria demonstrates that the most prominent statues commemorating the liberation were built on a Russian, rather than Bulgarian, initiative glorifying Russian tsar Alexander II instead of the soldiers from the Russian Empire who perished in the 1877-1878 Russian-Turkish war: Pashova, A., Vodenicharov, P., 2022, 'Първите руски паметници в България, свързани с Руско-Османската война 1877-1878 – трансформации на паметта', *Либерален преглед* ('The first Russian monuments in Bulgaria, related to the Russo-Ottoman War 1877-1878 – transformations of memory', *Liberal Review*)

propped up by the Russian authorities as well as representatives of the pro-Russian, far-right nationalist political spectrum, particularly Vazrazhdane.

**The defenders of Russian-Soviet monuments frame their overall discourses on the basis of the claim that history has to be preserved ‘as it is’ and that ‘memory is memory, good or bad’,<sup>107</sup>** thus imparting to their propagandistically-conditioned historical views the status of historical fact and asserting that a removal or demolition of Moscow’s monumental heritage would amount to the ‘rewriting of history’. This take on history is matched by a number of other historically-distorted disinformation narratives, typically smearing alternative views as the act of liberal globalism trying to erase national distinctiveness in pursuit of ulterior motives.

First, the attempt to remove the statues is painted by Russian authorities and their Bulgarian supporters as an **act of vandalism, supposedly revealing morally outrageous destructive impulses.**<sup>108</sup> Second, opposition to Soviet/Russian statues is dubbed as **fascist behavior, displayed by pro-Western liberals.** Third, the attempt to remove Soviet/Russian statues is presented as an **act of rewriting the history of World War II and censorship** revising the results of that war and the victory over fascism.<sup>109</sup> Fourth, a **rhetorical shift** in pro-Russian disinformation has also been observed as it has tried to sideline arguments that dispute the liberating role of the Soviet army in Bulgaria (as the army was an occupier and Sofia had previously been allied to Nazi Germany) – and hence question the status of the monument to the Soviet army in Sofia, by generalizing the symbolism of the statue. That is, the Soviet army’s general role in ‘liberating’ Europe, rather than Bulgaria, from fascism is emphasized.<sup>110</sup>

These propagandist claims have been activated whenever protests against Soviet monuments take place and initiatives are advanced to remove them. For instance, on the occasion of the breakage of the placard of the Soviet army monument in Sofia motivated by the moral outrage that a citizen harbored against Putin’s war against Ukraine, the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria stated that the monument had become a victim of blind aggression and lack of memory as the vandals tried to disrespect the feat of the Soviet soldiers. The official Russian narrative insinuated that systematic work for rewriting history is taking place, erasing the role played by the USSR for the victory over Nazi Germany and the demonization of everything Russian, which could not have led to any other result but to educate generations, for whom there is no holiness. There are calls on the Bulgarian authorities to stop the ‘distortion of shared history’.<sup>111</sup> For their part, BSP activists refurbished the placard attached to the Soviet monument, also qualifying the damage that was done to it as ‘an

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/vazrazhdane.bg/posts/pfbid0zSgu1XxaNEMJDNoCN29ftaFRen526qxyD3W5pihPvrywfwPSApMAfmaZD7hW74i2l>

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02UXYXSDZWTwdRT5KPdNbpnH6eAPAao1LZppVJDJVymsWdJ4gWWK-mH8a8XYBA1jkl>

Epicenter, 2023, ‘Андрей Райчев за Паметника на Съветската армия: Война с миналото! От нея няма изход’, 10 март 2023 г. (‘Andrey Raichev on the Monument to the Soviet army: War with the past! There is no way out of it’, 10 March 2023)

Krasteva, K., 2023, ‘Да махнем всички паметници! Ще зейнат дупки на местата им – истински символ на времето’, *Епицентър*, 9 март 2023 г. (‘Let’s remove all monuments! Enormous gulfs will be opened – a real symbol of the times’, *Epicenter*, 9 March 2023)

<sup>109</sup> Glasove, 2023, ‘Читатели на “Гласове”: Пренаписването на история е хилядолетна практика на неоварварите’, 8 март 2023 г. (‘Readers of Glasove: Rewriting history is a thousand-old barbarian practice’, 8 March 2023)

Pogled.info, 2023, ‘Симеон Миланов: За войната, която българските десни либерали водят с историята’, 7 март 2023 г. (‘Simeon Milanov: On the war that Bulgarian center-right liberals are waging against history’, 7 March 2023)

<sup>110</sup> Djoeva, T., 2023, ‘Проф. Пантев: Трети март е вечна дата в историята ни! Трябва да сме признателни, но не подчинени’, *Епицентър*, 3 март 2023 г. (‘Prof. Pantev: March 3 is an eternal date in our history! We have to acknowledge that without being submissive’, *Epicenter*, 3 March 2023)

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid022Fqc4o8FQTHktjS3GgZwoNCHPA6FM3cLfkbuyXjEziDF7UFN5NK-4cpNXkmXXzwP7l>

act of vandalism'. The restoration of the placard was presented as the protection of history, which is said to be monuments' function. Opposition to the monument and its falsification of history (i.e. portraying the Soviet army as a 'liberator' of Bulgaria) is dubbed as destructive thinking and behavior bound to repeat the mistakes of the past.<sup>112</sup>

In further similar instances, the splashing of red paint on the statue of the Soviet army in Sofia on the eve of September 6, 2022 (marking Bulgaria's unification day) was attributed by the Russian Embassy to 'Russophobe Bulgarians', who committed 'undignified', 'vile' acts demonstrating a lack of historical memory.<sup>113</sup> Likewise, following the painting of a slogan 'Without Putin, without war' on the statue of the Soviet soldier in Burgas, the Russian Embassy argued that the war on statues is waged by the weak, allegedly characterized by their insufficient knowledge of the past and unwillingness to draw lessons from it.<sup>114</sup> The pro-Russian Facebook group with a large followership (Rusofili, over 36 000 followers) posted an ode glorifying the supposed 'feat' of those who defended the monument dedicated to the Soviet army in Sofia between May and July 2022 (i.e. when Bulgarian supporters of Ukraine protested against neutrality and called for the dispatch of military assistance to Ukraine, but were assailed by pro-Kremlin groups at the site of the monument).<sup>115</sup>

Moreover, spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova maintained that Sofia Municipality's decision in March 2023 to remove the monument to the Soviet army was a 'wild' initiative advanced by the Euro-Atlanticists who control the municipality. The Bulgarians who protect the monument are said to be motivated by a patriotic urge, showing that despite the virulent anti-Russian propaganda people do not remain nonchalant against the background of 'neo-Nazism in Ukraine', remembering and honoring the feat of the Russian soldier who brought freedom, peace and justice.<sup>116</sup> Vazrazhdane uses similar rhetorical devices asserting that the decision of Sofia municipality creates new dividing lines in Bulgarian society as a matter of 'brutal foreign interference'. Contemporary fascists are said to be masked as Euro-Atlanticists.<sup>117</sup>

Pro-Russian groups have also attempted to advance **dubious legal arguments in favor of the preservation of the monuments**. The Russophili movement has insisted that the Soviet army monument in Sofia is owned by the Bulgarian state and its status is supposedly protected as part of the Convention for the protection of the architectural heritage of Europe and the Treaty of friendship and cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Bulgaria.<sup>118</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Epicenter, 2023, 'Иван Таков: Изпълнихме обещаното – плочата на Паметника на Съветската армия е възстановена', 7 май 2023 г. ('Ivan Takov: We fulfilled what was promised – the placard of the Soviet army monument has been restored', 7 May 2023)

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02v8vFqfSsUgpdz6wDhFewzQ1Hb9Gbk31EiLqHmNx9XS8i6BKPe5tLx-wR6HKwUePdSl>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02Ex9P7mTbyex4Kse1btdQC2YfPncyUdiicBVZafcsiypSFsfak73V2xhgjjS-2FUTNI>

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/257614811404423/posts/1479537882545437/>

<sup>116</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid0wqm3ySv3Mq4NMj4ea4w8yTsuKWBjMbdrtMXNz7sy4XozC53zByx3ZeX-wgE3pwUbel>  
<https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid0jvZzCmCRi8WcVYYweWvaMjQrWdjPiV8DzNDrcjetQmHYrP8LohXB-jjxan5c195xkl>

<sup>117</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=928475974797745](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=928475974797745)  
Glasove, 2023, 'Паметниците се премахват, защото псевдолибералстващата група не е свикнала с по-сложни движения на ума', 7 март 2023 г. ('The monuments are being removed because the pseudo-liberal group is not used to more complicated thinking', 7 March 2023)

<sup>118</sup> Mladenova, R., 2023, *Правен статус на Паметника на Съветската армия в София*, Русофили, (*Legal status of the Monument to the Soviet Army in Sofia*, Rusofili)

However, these claims have been countered in a number of ways, particularly by representatives of Democratic Bulgaria. The position of the pro-Russian groups does not mention and take into consideration the Bulgarian Law on cultural heritage, according to which the Soviet army monument does not qualify as a singular immovable cultural asset. Moreover, the monument also lacks the status of a soldiers' statue as confirmed by a statement of the Ministry of Defense. The monument is additionally outside of the scope of the Treaty of friendship and cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Bulgaria of 1992 and the Agreement between the government of the Russian Federation and the government of the Republic of Bulgaria on cooperation in the sphere of culture, education and science in 1993 because it was built and paid for by Bulgaria and those documents further refer to soldiers' statues.<sup>119</sup>

Moreover, the question of the ownership of the Soviet army monument remains unclear since over the years Sofia Municipality and the Ministry of Culture have shifted responsibility for clarifying who owns the monument.<sup>120</sup> In any case, even if ownership is vested in the state authorities, this does not invalidate any initiatives for the removal of the monument, as the Russophili try to suggest by imparting to the state the aura of a guardian.

**The legally-based debunking of pro-Russian groups' defense of Russian-Soviet monuments has been accompanied by politically- as well as civically-led initiatives**, whose practical materialization has however been blocked and lingers in uncertainty. Already in 1993, Sofia Municipality decided to remove the Soviet army monument. Representatives of Democratic Bulgaria have insistently called for that at least since 2019. And in the midst of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the political impetus for dealing with the Soviet-communist past has grown in urgency. For example, GERB and Democratic Bulgaria put forward a more stringent regime of sanctions for non-compliance with the Law on declaring the criminal nature of the communist regime in Bulgaria of 2000, including as regards continued non-removal of the statues and symbols of that period.<sup>121</sup> Yet, although in March 2023 Sofia's municipal council took the decision to ask the state authorities to remove the Soviet army monument, the caretaker Prime Minister Galab Donev urged politicians to leave discussions of the matter for after the elections in April, thus temporarily silencing the ongoing initiative.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to politically-led activities, **civic organizations have further stood for the removal of Soviet-era monuments**. For example, the Civic initiative for the dismantlement of the Soviet army monument in Sofia has gathered public figures who have continuously advocated for the cause. For its part, a civic initiative named Dusk for Light called on mayors to turn off the lights on Soviet statues on the eve of September 22 (Bulgaria's Day of Independence) as a marker of Bulgarians' readiness to overcome dependence on the Kremlin, to support democratic values in Europe and Ukraine and as a step toward the final removal of monuments symbolizing the Soviet occupation of Bulgaria.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> DB Sofia, *Преместване на монумента „Паметник на Съветската армия“ (Relocation of the “Monument to the Soviet Army”)*

<sup>120</sup> Cherneva, D., 2022, 'Юлиана Методиева: Кога ще се сбогуваме с комунизма?', *Marginalia* ('Juliana Metodieva: When will we say goodbye to communism?')

<sup>121</sup> Encheva, T., 2022, 'ГЕРБ-СДС и ДБ предлагат комунистическите паметници да отидат в музея', *bTV novinite*, 1 декември 2022 г. ('GERB-SDS and DB propose that communist monuments go to the museum', 1 December 2022)

<sup>122</sup> Lateva, Z., 2023, 'София иска махане на Паметника на Съветската армия, премиерът остави темата за след изборите (галерия)', *Mediapool*, 9 март 2023 г. ('Sofia wants the removal of the Monument to the Soviet army, the Prime Minister left the topic for after the elections (gallery)', 9 March 2023)

<sup>123</sup> *Marginalia*, 2022, 'Кметове на България, изключете в Деня на независимостта прожекторите на съветските паметници!', ('Mayors in Bulgaria, turn off the projectors on the Soviet monuments on Independence Day!')

Overall, the vicissitudes and continual clashes over the fate of the Soviet-era immovable heritage in Bulgaria has frozen, instead of resolved, the status quo. That is, political and civic attempts to remove or demolish Soviet monuments have been counteracted by pro-Russian groups, who have actively disseminated Kremlin historical disinformation thus framing public debates. In contradistinction to many of its CEE counterparts, Bulgaria has not had a comprehensive initiative for dealing with the communist past, particularly in the form of remembrance institutes, while the opening of the secret files of the former regime's state security services has taken place in an intermittent, incomplete and frequently politically motivated manner.

Indeed, Bulgaria's **Museum of Art from the Socialist Period – located in the backyard of the Ministry of Culture, symbolizes the country's inability to reckon with its past.** Rather than providing a critical assessment of the communist regime, the general ambience of the museum is informed by the delivery of snapshots of art from the period 'speaking for itself', including paintings depicting party leaders and themes related to communism and its establishment (insurgency, class struggle) as well as propagandist posters. Some of the communist-era monuments and sculptures have been taken from museums and galleries; others have been removed from towns (primarily small ones). Many more, however, are due to be removed. Last but not least, the 30-minute movie that is offered to the public includes broadcasts of rallies glorifying party leaders, the regime and friendship with the Soviet Union and of youth brigades helping to build socialist Bulgaria. The

### Box 1: Monument to the Soviet army in Sofia



Source: Vesti.bg

The Soviet army monument as a site of contestation of historical memory: clashes between supporters of Russia and Ukraine since the start of the war; damage to the placard, and repainting as a form of protest against the claim that Soviet forces 'liberated' Bulgaria at the close of World War II define the landscape and surroundings of the statue.

footage implicitly conveys the motives of the communist regime – to rally the people around the party and consolidate its power.

Yet, absent a much more definitively and critically evaluated perspective on the communist past, the Bulgarian public space will continue to be beholden to divisive clashes, where pro-Kremlin historical propaganda poses as an equally valid viewpoint.

## Pro-Russian historical disinformation: Virtual capture

The cumulative effect of the lack of a significant, society-wide critical assessment of Bulgaria's historically-loaded relations with Russia – as visible in the relative silence maintained on Russia in history textbooks and the inconclusive clashes over the status of Russian immovable heritage, is the provision of a fertile ground for external actors to frame domestic debates. The Kremlin has actively interfered in shaping perceptions of Bulgarian-Russian historical interactions by disseminating the historically distorted general claim that bilateral relations are bound by 'brotherly', Slavic commonality of fate and have always been mutually beneficial. Hence, Sofia needs to lean on Moscow politically and economically as the latter supposedly represents a benevolent benefactor, to whom the Bulgarians ultimately owe 'eternal' gratitude.

This propagandist discourse serves as a foundation for Russia's influence efforts in Bulgaria and informs specific disinformation narratives regarding key episodes in Bulgarian history. A year-long media content analysis was conducted (from August 2022 to July 2023) continuously monitoring Bulgarian social media (including pro-Kremlin Facebook group pages and YouTube) and pro-Russian print and online media outlets (encompassing widely circulated newspapers with varying intensity of pro-Russian leanings such as *Trud* and *Filter*; ideologically-minded, socialist/BSP-leaning outlets such as *Pogled.info*; sensationalist outlets/tabloids; websites led by known journalists such as *Epicenter* and *Glavno* and anonymous/marginal websites whose content is nevertheless widely shared and reprinted).<sup>124</sup> The analysis of the prevalent patterns of pro-Russian messaging and its frequency reveals that **official Kremlin sources and their local Bulgarian proxies consistently activate historical disinformation campaigns with respect to the commemoration of history milestones.**

- **March 3: The beginning of the Russian-Bulgarian history tale.** Pro-Russian historical disinformation is prominently active in terms of promoting a version of Bulgarian history informed by the ostensibly 'unbreakable' bond between Russia and Bulgaria cemented by the glorification of March 3 as Bulgaria's national holiday.

On the occasion of March 3, 2022 celebrations, the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria made a statement (gathering over 6500 reactions and 1000 comments on Facebook),<sup>125</sup> which presented the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 as a key event in 'shared history', predetermining Bulgarian-Russian relations for a long time. The memory of the role of Russia in the war is imparted an **essentialist and eternal character as it is said to be ingrained in the genetic code of the Bulgarians**, which 'cannot be rewritten unless the nation is destroyed'. The Russian Embassy additionally promoted

<sup>124</sup> The selection of outlets is based on a classification of pro-Russian social and 'mainstream' media sources in Bulgaria, as elaborated in Filipova, R., Shopov, V., 2022, *Authoritarians on a Media Offensive in the Midst of War: The Informational Influence of Russia, China, Turkey, Iran and the Gulf States in Southeast Europe*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Media Programme South East Europe, pp. 31-32

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1778705875846187>

a number of cultural-literary initiatives that disseminate propagandist views of Bulgarian-Russian relations and place those in the context of the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine. The campaign 'Letter to the Russian soldier-liberator' was dedicated to the anniversary of the Russian-Turkish war but the tokens sent by Bulgarians as part of the campaign were said to be a source of emotional support for the Russian soldiers on the frontline, who – like their great forebearers during the Great Patriotic War, bravely resist the Nazis supported by the West.<sup>126</sup>

The Russian Federation's diplomatic representation has further amplified and promoted bilateral cultural-historical events such the commemoration of the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the Shipka monastery (dedicated to the soldiers who perished in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878). The event gathered Bulgarian and Russian historians (including from Russian state-related institutions such as the Russian Historical Society, the History of Russia Fund, Phanagoria Museum) extolling Bulgarian-Russian friendship.<sup>127</sup> A TASS coverage of the commemoration termed it a 'central spiritual event' in the bilateral calendar for 2022.<sup>128</sup> The claim about the allegedly unbreakable historical bonds between Bulgarians and Russians is in turn used to counter accusations about the presence of paid Russian agents in Bulgaria by arguing that the key agent is 'our contemporary history'.<sup>129</sup>

In a similar vein, the pro-Russian Bulgarian media published manifold commentaries that frame March 3 as an 'unshakeable and eternal date in the nation's history' of 'indisputable importance', thus aiming to close off discussions about the appropriateness of celebrating the country's national day on this date given its divisiveness (not least because the San Stefano peace treaty signed then between the Russian and Ottoman Empires was of a preliminary/draft character and the large territories envisaged for Bulgaria had not been agreed with the rest of the Great Powers). To promote this aim, pro-Russian framings assert that **history should be left to the historians, whereby the supposedly positive role played by Russia is a 'fact'** that does not yield itself to interpretations.<sup>130</sup> Along these lines, a pro-Russian Facebook group (България и Русия/Bulgaria and Russia) cited at length Vladimir Putin's statement according to which Bulgaria and Russia are connected by a shared history and mutual love. It is further insinuated that certain sections of the political elite in Bulgaria, however, incited by the US, smear Russia by showing disrespect to the Russian soldiers who fought for Bulgaria's liberation but nothing can supposedly change the fact that Bulgarians and Russians are 'brothers by blood'.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02xmi5cLrYYWTapWxiimtw5n1fuz9Q49UNsviQGujTw4u3FygV2r3rzL-1CzJMbwPEGI>

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02Y6QZDukq3TrpSskddgFtcasghcZhvCQEu7BGjd52MbDdrAjacp-c8dAfsZgmjCb8rl>

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=437404454932163>

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02HSrBLJUz4vfsMTPkirRPTcURLQvvBN6UtJMPp5Pq1WDZ89E6jYb-kctQwmoPM7BQwl>

<sup>130</sup> Djoeva, T., 2023, 'Проф. Пантев: Трети март е вечна дата в историята ни! Трябва да сме признателни, но не подчинени', *Епицентър*, 3 март 2023 г. ('Prof. Pantev: March 3 is an eternal date in our history! We have to acknowledge that without being submissive', *Epicenter*, 3 March 2023)

Djoeva, T., 2023, 'Акад. Георги Марков: Без Цар Освободител нямаше да има Народно събрание', *Епицентър*, 3 март 2023 г. ('Academician Georgi Markov: Without the Tsar-Liberator there would have been no National Assembly', *Epicenter*, 3 March 2023)

Epicenter, 2023, 'Нешка Робева: Останахме си рая – зла, завистлива и неблагодарна!', 6 март 2023 г. ('Neshka Robeva: We remained servants – evil, envious and ungrateful!', 6 March 2023)

Trud online, 2023, 'Историк: Още от Първата световна война руската пропаганда казва, че сме неблагодарни за Освобождението', 3 март 2023 г. ('Historian: Already since World War I Russian propaganda has been saying that we are ungrateful for the Liberation', 3 March 2023)

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/765017214495204/posts/854769178853340/>

In an article for *Trud*, former leader of the nationalist VMRO party, Krasimir Karakachanov, draws parallels between his contemporary political-rhetorical agenda and historical events – the Great Powers are said to have been ‘moralizers’, who, in the name of their interests and the then European values, tore Bulgaria apart. The restoration of San Stefano borders became an ideal, for which the Bulgarians made sacrifices in the wars that followed instead of bowing down to ‘foreign cosmopolitan interests’. Karakachanov goes on to assert that **nowadays new internationalists, globalists, liberals – in one word, ‘janissaries’ in his definition, are denying March 3 in the name of new European values**, this time due to political imperatives in the war in Ukraine and Bulgarian patriots are dubbed as Russophiles. The Bulgarians, he insists, should be grateful and celebrate in defiance of contemporary liberals, who like their Marxist internationalist predecessors deny March 3 and the San Stefano ideal and the need for a Bulgarian national identity and interest.<sup>132</sup>

Likewise, *Pogled.info* maintains that March 3 activates post-modernists, neoliberals, Russophobes, center-right politicians, who want to change the date of the national holiday. Such initiatives are labelled as preposterous and shameful as supposedly no one can change history. It is reiterated that ‘our liberator’ is Russia – it gave the Bulgarians statehood and vast territories, but Europe, which espouses its ‘European values’ took away a big part of Bulgarian lands.<sup>133</sup>

Furthermore, the pro-Russian account of Russia’s liberation of Bulgaria **has kept silent on the deficiencies of strategic planning and military command as well as insufficient preparation**, which aggravated the war effort. Instead, for example, both the Russian Embassy and *Glavose* copied and disseminated the same text, which brushes aside the organizational inadequacies and many casualties resulting from the latter.<sup>134</sup> Russian Ambassador Eleonora Mitrofanova’s address at a conference dedicated to the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Russo-Turkish war claimed that Russia’s foreign policy had always aimed to create a more just world. She singled out the ascribed achievements of the temporary Russian government for laying the foundations of Bulgarian statehood (when in fact that government was characterized by similar deficiencies as in the military sphere and aimed to establish control over Bulgaria).<sup>135</sup>

The Facebook group *Rusofili* likewise presented in an uncritical manner the liberation of Stara Zagora<sup>136</sup> and the history-focused group *Bulgarian memory* (with over 101 000 followers) provides lengthy recounts of battles during the Russo-Turkish war without any nuance and criticism of the preparedness and strategic planning of the Russians, gathering thousands of likes.<sup>137</sup> The Russian Embassy also announced that it had facilitated the construction and ‘gifting’ of a monument to Hristo

<sup>132</sup> Karakachanov, K., 2023, ‘След близо 500 години потисничество и издевателства българите извоювахме правото си да бъдем свободен народ’, *Труд*, 3 март 2023 г. (‘After almost 500 years of subordination and torture the Bulgarians fought out for the right to be free as a nation’, *Trud*, 3 March 2023)

<sup>133</sup> Anchev, P., 2023, ‘Трети март е рожденият ден на българската държава’, *Pogled.info*, 1 март 2023 г. (‘3 March is the birthday of the Bulgarian state’, 1 March 2023)

Dareva, V., 2023, ‘Фашибозукът се развилня’, *Pogled.info*, 7 март 2023 г. (‘The fasci-bazouk went wild’, 7 March 2023)

<sup>134</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02EuNj5q6sh5UNerieaxoXkzSLGaoFkYbxY6XN33m2ASdgBvvrIniAgpbE-3ZUL6gcxl>

Ivanova, I., 2023, ‘Преди 145 години Русия освободи София от турската власт’, *Гласове*, 4 януари 2023 г. (‘145 years ago Russia liberated Sofia from Ottoman rule’, *Glavose*, 4 January 2023)

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid0dZWmTaH3YETYy68pTtdT7EVmKp6eT28iykcWcrZgcNCEAY-p4LB7QWYDnNXvFDKHA1>

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/RussophiliaBulgarophilia/posts/pfbid0JMTMwddZefocD3WuLHbfmdqpXBix1XdXo3PxMzRPER-LPWxLUsoQ7m5iRX3eDMK991>

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100064316994560>

Botev aimed at reminding of the ‘unbreakable’ ties between the two nations.<sup>138</sup> Yet, this can be seen as an act of appropriating historical memory and distorting it since the Bulgarian revolutionary expressed Russia-critical views.

- **May 9: Preserving Russia’s sanctity.** The commemoration of May 9, marking Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, represented another occasion on which the oft-repeated false juxtaposition between Russia as a ‘liberator’ and all those who oppose Russian policies as ‘Nazis’ continued to be enunciated.

In her May 9, 2023 address, the Russian Ambassador to Bulgaria claimed that **the desire to rewrite history, short historical memory and political servility have revived Nazism.**<sup>139</sup> Bulgarian pro-Russian commentators further localized Russian discourse to fit the Bulgarian context. Nako Stefanov, chairman of the Bulgarian council for peace, and member of the founding committee of the March for peace and sovereignty, asserted that **‘fascist’ ideology inspires criticism of the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, which has over the past 30 years reared its head in Bulgaria.** A civil war is being ignited by Sofia municipality, which raised the flag of Ukraine – a ‘Nazi’ country, on the building of the municipality on the pretext of a ‘so-called’ invasion. If the Soviet army hadn’t entered Bulgaria, he continues, the borders of Bulgaria would have been completely different.<sup>140</sup>

More general propagandist messaging about the ostensible Russian benevolence towards Bulgaria, acting as a protector and ‘liberator’ has been promoted by Epicenter, particularly through an interview claiming that Bulgarian territory is coveted by many, including some of its neighbors. But, it is maintained, **Russia will never allow anyone, not least Turkey, even a piece of land to be taken away from Bulgaria or to enslave it.** Russia fought and shed blood in order for Bulgaria to regain its independence. Moscow is said to have never dictated to the Bulgarians how to live but it will never permit anybody to retake their domination over the country.<sup>141</sup> Glasove summarized readers’ comments regarding the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, all of which are similar and argue that Europe owes gratitude to Moscow for liberating it from Nazism. Today’s Europe is said to be haunted by the specter of ‘neoliberal Trotskism’, imposing ‘totalitarian fascism’.<sup>142</sup>

In other instances of history-related propaganda linked to the Soviet Union, the Association of the Russophiles in Bulgaria **glorify the USSR and how it was supposedly only thanks to its advocacy that Bulgaria regained the territory of Southern Dobrudja** and avoided being ‘cut’ into pieces after World War II<sup>143</sup> (when in fact the return of that territory to Bulgaria had been decided in 1940 through the Treaty of Craiova between Bulgaria and Romania and mediated by the Great Powers. The agreement was not suspended after World War II, as decided by the Allies). Representatives of

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02DW8ToaB4aKbEFTP8wCoseJypXjKTdTEhGctP4AfVh4FCR5koF-fa2X4fGKycuaajul>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1186782716056056>

<sup>140</sup> Poglel.info, 2023, ‘Проф. Нако Стефанов за 9ти май: През последните години у нас стъпка по стъпка фашизмът надига глава!’, 12 май 2023 г. (‘Prof. Nako Stefanov on May 9: In recent years, fascism is rearing its head here step by step!’), 12 May 2023)

<sup>141</sup> Epicenter, 2023, ‘Яков Кедми пред Васил Василев: И късче от България няма да бъде взето – Русия няма да позволи’, 9 май 2023 г. (‘Yakov Kedmi for Vasil Vasilev: Not a piece of Bulgaria will be taken away – Russia won’t allow it’), 9 May 2023)

<sup>142</sup> Glasove, 2023, ‘Читатели на “Гласове”: Щели да смажат Русия, както смазали нацистка Германия. А кой смаза нацистка Германия?’, 8 май 2023 г. (‘Readers of “Glasove”: They were going to smash Russia the way they smashed Nazi Germany. And who smashed Nazi Germany?’), 8 May 2023)

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Rusofili.Bulgaria/posts/pfbid02Y4ctCZYyGWZZMDcNtrGHjV3b9bXa5tFH3H12oM21U-To738oYmsU8wKHj1npboevdl>

the Association of the Russophiles in Bulgaria also appear on Russian media and in an interview for Rossiya 24 it is asserted that Russia liberated Bulgaria two times and restored Bulgarian statehood, which is said to be known by the Bulgarians but no one asks their opinion.<sup>144</sup> The chairman of the Association, Nikolay Malinov, appeared in a discussion on Russia's Channel 1, whereby the conversation reiterated that Bulgaria was liberated by Russia multiple times, yet gratitude was not always forthcoming.<sup>145</sup>

**Unjustified historical analogies related to World War II and the period preceding it have also been employed by pro-Russian propaganda as a way of tarnishing Bulgarian weapons exports to Kyiv.** Vazrazhdane's leader Kostadin Kostadinov, for example, attempted to ostensibly demonstrate the 'hawkish' Bulgarian position nowadays asserting that even during World War II Sofia did not declare war on the USSR (yet, the latter did declare war on Bulgaria). Kostadinov menacingly warned that **those Bulgarians who enthusiastically supported the German Reich were later tried by the People's Court and the same can happen to those who are in favor of weapons supplies to Ukraine.**<sup>146</sup> In an **interview with News Front** directly from the National Assembly, Kostadinov discussed ways in which the decision to export weapons can be reversed as Bulgarian statehood exists thanks to Russia so Sofia should not follow through with this decision termed as 'treasonous'.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, as part of a declaration<sup>148</sup> condemning Parliament's vote for military assistance to Kyiv, **Nikolay Malinov compared the decision to export weapons with Bulgaria's decision to join Hitler's coalition in 1941** both of which are said to have been contrary to the preferences of the public since the Bulgarian population is claimed to be overwhelming Russophile.<sup>149</sup>

- **May 24: Hijacking common civilizational roots.** Russian propaganda framed celebrations as part of May 24, 2023, marking Cyril and Methodius' invention of the Cyrillic alphabet, as indicating the 'shared bonds' between Bulgarians and Russians.

The Russian Embassy's address for the occasion asserted that this is a **shared commemoration**. The catalyst for the formation of the system of traditional values – supposedly uniting the Bulgarian and Russian nation, was the creation of the alphabet. It is maintained that subtracting from the current political circumstances and the complicated situation, Bulgarians and Russians continue to speak the same language.<sup>150</sup> Bulgarian commentators additionally reinforced the narrative that Bulgaria is at the heart of Slavic culture, which supposedly binds the country to Russia in a timeless manner.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1242684486325327>

<sup>145</sup> YouTube channel of ND Rusofili, 2023, 'Николай Малинов в "Большая игра" на 26.1.2023 г.' ('Nikolay Malinov in the "Great game" on 26.1.2023')

<sup>146</sup> Kostadin Kostadinov YouTube channel, 2022, 'ИЗВЪНРЕДНО: ПЪТЯТ КЪМ ВОЙНАТА' ('BREAKING: THE ROAD TO WAR')

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/vazrazhdane.bg/videos/1076927626385360>

<sup>148</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0RtomqGXnmFscURw1HvGg3Pod8CJGmrovpiftawdoEJN-MuenUYcQXq7KnzBmYjhdki&id=100086566225520](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0RtomqGXnmFscURw1HvGg3Pod8CJGmrovpiftawdoEJN-MuenUYcQXq7KnzBmYjhdki&id=100086566225520)

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/4780559025352204/posts/8215329148541824/> Novinata.bg, 2022, 'Николай Малинов сравни днешната ситуация в България с решението от 1941 г. да се присъединим към Хитлер', 8 ноември 2022 г. ('Nikolay Malinov compared the contemporary situation in Bulgaria with the decision in 1941 to ally with Hitler', 8 November 2022)

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/rusembul/posts/pfbid02GmgTGWGbpPJNGB9G6tBWdx6NfUcWnxqvUdtnzocAhrh1pqqvsvTVaxb-ZDDgtLrdl>

<sup>151</sup> Pogled.info, 2023, '24 май: Духовното наследство на България, вкоренено в 300 милиона души', 24 май 2023 г. ('24 May: Bulgaria's spiritual heritage, instilled in 300 million people', 24 May 2023)

Moreover, pro-Russian disinformation has attempted to **publicly undermine the proposed constitutional codification of May 24 as the official national holiday along three major narrative lines**, according to which the proposal 1) sows division in Bulgarian society; 2) rewrites history via a Russophobe and unpatriotic lens; and 3) shifts attention away from March 3 as a supposedly more foundational event.

Kostadin Kostadinov's position that We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria are drawing dividing lines in Bulgarian society, demonstrating hatred against Bulgarian-ness, spearheaded opposition to the constitutional change. In an instance of significant sharpening of disinformation discourse and using Vladimir Putin's same propagandist phrasing threatening a civil war when his regime is challenged, Kostadinov claimed that the 'fascists' currently governing Bulgaria are following the Ukrainian scenario aiming to **plunge the country into a civil war** based on an 'American plan for the destruction of Bulgaria'.<sup>152</sup> Beyond Vazrazhdane, the disinformation narrative about the opening of societal fissures has been taken up in many other commentaries. For instance, in an overview article, Trud summarizes different views for and against May 24 to become the official national holiday but defends the position that if a given date is to be designated as an official national holiday in the constitution, there needs to be an overwhelming societal consensus (implying that currently there isn't one).<sup>153</sup>

A related discursive framing has claimed that denigrating the status of March 3 amounts to the **re-writing of history by Russophobe and anti-national elites**. Pogled.info publicized opinions, which held that the change of the national holiday represents a violation of the historical record, a process which ostensibly started in 1989. Manipulations of memory are presented as key in the practices of the 'Russophobe, liberal political forces' that restored capitalism following the end of communism.<sup>154</sup> The change of the official national holiday is further presented as a deconstruction of Bulgarian statehood.<sup>155</sup> The outlet additionally attempted to mount counter-argumentation against May 24 by claiming that representatives of the governing parties have denigrated the Bulgarian alphabet by overthrowing a resolution for the protection of the Bulgarian language, voted in a law on transliteration, whereby official institutions have to publish official documents in Latin as well, introduce a lot of English-language words when speaking Bulgarian, destroyed the Bulgarian educational system, do not believe in Slavic unity and are ready to renounce history in dealings with North Macedonia.<sup>156</sup>

In a similar vein, Glasove summarizes its readers' commentaries, which claim that denigrating March 3 represents the denial of Bulgarian statehood as May 24 does not reflect traditions of national sovereignty.<sup>157</sup> Epicenter<sup>158</sup> and Trud<sup>159</sup> feature the view that March 3 epitomizes Bulgaria's

<sup>152</sup> Epicenter, 2023, 'Костадинов за смяната на националния празник: Ще ни вкарат в гражданска война!', 23 юли 2023 г. ('Kostadinov on the change of the national holiday: They will embroil us into a civil war!', 23 July 2023)

<sup>153</sup> Trud, 2023, 'Политици изправиха 24 май срещу 3 март', 25 юли 2023 г. ('Politicians pitted May 24 against March 3', 25 July 2023)

<sup>154</sup> Prodanov, V., 2023, 'Националният празник, реставрацията на капитализма и пренаписването на историята', *Pogled.info*, 25 юли 2023 г. ('The national holiday, the restoration of capitalism and the rewriting of history', 25 July 2023)

<sup>155</sup> Pogled.info, 2023, 'Проф. Дарина Григорова за Трети март: Това е част от форсираното раздържавяване на българската държава', 25 юли 2023 г. ('Professor Darina Grigorova on March 3: This is part of the forced deconstruction of the Bulgarian state', 25 July 2023)

<sup>156</sup> Kodjabasheva, R., 2023, '24 май?! Шегувате се?', *Pogled.info*, 25 юли 2023 г. ('May 24? You must be joking?', 25 July 2023)

<sup>157</sup> Glasove, 2023, 'Читатели на "Гласове": Алабалисти, долу ръцете от 3 март!', 24 юли 2023 г. ('Readers of Glasove: Bla-bla people, hands off of March 3!', 24 July 2023)

<sup>158</sup> Epicenter, 2023, 'Кристиан Шкварек: 3 март и Санстефанският идеал, който олицетворява, не подлежат на изчегъртане', 25 юли 2023 г. ('Kristian Shkvarek: March 3 and the San Stefano ideal which it epitomizes are not subject to erasure', 25 July 2023)

<sup>159</sup> Shkvarek, K., 2023, 'Какво е "Трети март"?', *Труд*, 25 юли 2023 г. ('What is "March 3"?', *Trud*, 25 July 2023)

San Stefano dream and ideal, which inspired great patriotic deeds. Nationalism is a main enemy of globalism and internationalism, whose main aim is the dilution of all nations into a joint commonality.

Last but not least, pro-Russian disinformation about May 24 has aimed at an **underestimation of the significance of the developments that this date is a symbol of**. Kostadinov's statement at the National Assembly repeats the claim that March 3 is the foundation for everything else and without it there would have been no Bulgaria and a Bulgarian nation to celebrate May 24.<sup>160</sup> Vazrazhdane's mayoral candidate in Sofia claimed that changing the official holiday was not a main topic right now, as the 'vast' majority of the Bulgarian population does not ostensibly consider it as such.<sup>161</sup> A meme posted on Vazrazhdane's Facebook page featuring the mount of Shipka and calling for 'hands off of March 3' has gathered over 4500 reactions and over 600 shares.<sup>162</sup> In a stark repetition of Russian propaganda, Trud features the view, which goes so far as to assert that Cyril and Methodius were Byzantine scholars who had nothing to do with Bulgaria and that by commemorating them the country accepts Greek dominance. It is claimed that the decision to change the official national holiday goes against the wishes of the Bulgarian people.<sup>163</sup>

- **September 6 and September 22: Embellishing Russia's actions.**

Pro-Russian sources, particularly on social media, weave a narrative that attempts to enhance, embellish and justify Russia's role in the process of Unification<sup>164</sup> and Independence<sup>165</sup> against the background of a historical record which points to the Russian Empire's actual hostility and opposition to the integration and sovereignty of the Bulgarian territories divided by the Treaty of Berlin of 1878. **A pivotal false claim holds that Russia paid (80 million golden francs or over 600 tons of gold) for Bulgaria's unification**, thus promoting the view that the latter act was not a manifestation of independent Bulgarian national identity and autonomous decision-making.

The falsified interpretation of historiography is based on a selective and incomplete citation of facts focusing on how the Russian Empire wrote off a portion of the Ottomans' debt to Petersburg as a result of which the Ottoman Empire withdrew its demand that Bulgaria compensate it with the tax due as part of Sofia's previous status as a tributary rather than independent state. However, pro-Kremlin disinformation remains silent on and omits the fact that because of the Russian-Ottoman agreement Bulgaria took on a debt of 82 million golden leva towards Russia, which further increased the occupational debt with which Sofia had to compensate the Russian coffers for the maintenance of the Russian imperial occupational armed forces and administration over the period of the temporary Russian rule following Bulgaria's liberation from the Ottoman Empire (1877-1879).<sup>166</sup> Hence,

<sup>160</sup> Kostadin Kostadinov YouTube channel, 2023, 'ДОЛУ РЪЦЕТЕ ОТ 3 МАРТ, ПРОДАЖНИЦИ!' ('HANDS OFF OF MARCH 3, TRAITORS!')

<sup>161</sup> Vazrazhdane YouTube channel, 2023, 'Деян Николов: "Управляват ни АГЕНТИ" (подкаст)' ('Deyan Nikolov: "We are being governed by AGENTS"' (podcast)')

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/vazrazhdane.bg/posts/pfbid02619JMjN5iv95Jx2X6Xw9RzU86S13AJkrmJm8SQcGx84r4d6ceUrSafvNa3TbZWUAI>

<sup>163</sup> Epicenter, 2023, 'Валери Найденов: Не е известно св. св. Кирил и Методий да са имали нещо общо с България', 25 юли 2023 г. ('Valeri Naydenov: It is not common knowledge that St. Cyril and Methodius had anything to do with Bulgaria', 25 July 2023)

<sup>164</sup> Bulgaria's Unification marked the process of joining together the territories of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia in 1885.

<sup>165</sup> Bulgaria declared independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1908 as the country was previously under the diplomatic and financial suzerainty of the Empire.

<sup>166</sup> Mediapool, 2022, 'Проф. Евелина Келбечева: България си плаща на Русия за така нареченото "Освобождение"', 8 май 2022 г. ('Prof. Evelina Kelbecheva: Bulgaria paid Russia for its so-called "Liberation"', 8 May 2022) On how Bulgaria was further obliged to contribute outsized resources for the support of the Soviet occupational army: Archives State Agency – Bulgaria, 2022, 'Второто освобождение', YouTube ('The second liberation')

pro-Kremlin disinformation inverts historical events claiming that Russia altruistically supported Bulgaria when in fact Bulgaria was encumbered with a significant financial burden.

These propagandist messages were particularly prominent in anonymous websites (such as the Bulgarian Times),<sup>167</sup> whose material was reposted on Facebook with former member of nationalist, right-wing, pro-Russian party Vazrazhdane – Plamen Paskov, being especially active in terms of disseminating false historical claims. His posts usually gather a high degree of engagement reaching, for instance, almost 4000 likes and more than 2000 shares.<sup>168</sup>

In addition to inaccurate assertions linked to debt policies, reparations and financial history, pro-Russian propaganda aimed to raise Russia's stature in the process of Bulgarian unification by **downplaying and disputing the diplomatic role played by Britain in facilitating Bulgarian unification**. To this end, general interpretations were advanced about assumed traditional British hostility to Sofia. Such interpretations are, however, unrelated to and extraneous to the concrete diplomatic assistance that London provided at the time of unification and rest on dubious historical sources. In particular, Plamen Paskov's post<sup>169</sup> publicizing a commentator's alleged experience of censorship at the Bulgarian National Television (which ostensibly blocked the latter from appearing in public due to his critical view of Britain) was widely shared on pro-Russian Facebook groups such as Българска Легия Антимафия (Bulgarian Antimafia Legion),<sup>170</sup> За братска Русия и България с любов! (For fraternal Russia and Bulgaria with love!).<sup>171</sup>

Moreover, a further type of propagandist messaging attempting to excuse Russian opposition to Bulgaria's unification is based on promoting an assertion about **'Russian imperial exhaustion'**, which maintains that the Russian Empire was too tired from wars to get embroiled in the unification process. In turn, downgrading the Bulgarian act of unification takes places through a discursive emphasis on the **inability to also obtain Macedonian territories**.<sup>172</sup> These claims were widely (re) shared in various pro-Russian Facebook groups, including Имам право да знам (I have the right to know),<sup>173</sup> Българският народ е с Русия! Не на Байдън (The Bulgarian nation is with Russia! No to Biden!),<sup>174</sup> България и Русия заедно веќе / Болгария и Россия вместе веќе (Bulgaria and Russia together forever).<sup>175</sup>

Reporting on Bulgaria's Days of Unification and Independence in print and online media outlets further accentuated domestic political positions, particularly in the context of the then upcoming parliamentary elections on October 2, 2022. 'Status quo' parties called for **transposing the historical lesson of unity in contemporary politics as a slogan attempting to counter reformist**

<sup>167</sup> The Bulgarian Times, 2022, 'Русия плати за Съединението и независимостта на България', 22 септември 2022 г. ('Russia paid for Bulgaria's Unification and independence', 22 September 2022)

<sup>168</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/paskov.plamen/posts/pfbid04dttkx7rzuFC6RNp4CfQT8RtGCABu8urPrQYT5qzHppy9gL6bVgd-DUHExeW8bd4KI>

<sup>169</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/paskov.plamen/posts/pfbid02RQhYxKpHwBpp3QoAzisWww1Vwr6m7rzFxURZ74DXPRaQ8LqHju4i6YM1oukRKmmSI>

<sup>170</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BGANTIMAFIA/posts/3235140413418291/>

<sup>171</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/329967744230587/posts/1204717743422245/>

<sup>172</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/paskov.plamen/posts/pfbid02tzjjrr5StHQjBwSZCTnXVRCKCXQ7bG5MMiUv7tXny4TbpCP-J16FTUGDv1prCFacTI>

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/989354788174753/posts/1542507239526169/>

<sup>174</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1125303394979609/posts/1256077705235510/>

<sup>175</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/681719895557993/posts/1599779770418663/>

politicians' unwillingness to cooperate with established political forces deemed to be corrupt.<sup>176</sup>

Pro-Russian daily Trud also featured the alleged use of history in Bulgaria as a political instrument aimed at smearing Russia without regard for the 'truth' as the only factor that is said to matter in historical discussions is the inculcation of hatred and intolerance for the supposedly uniformly positive role played by Russia in Bulgarian politics and society.<sup>177</sup> Pro-Russian, socialist-leaning Pogled.info contrasted the independence gained in 1908 with the post-1989 period claimed to be defined by various dependencies, including 'vassal-like' subordination and involvement in foreign military conflicts, while it is assessed that the ideal position for Bulgaria would be neutrality vis-à-vis the Russia-Ukraine war.<sup>178</sup> Standart News published an article entitled 'What mess the Unification brought to us: a former President speaks out', which misleads as to the statement of former President Petar Stoyanov, who traces the division between Russophiles and Russophobes to the unification as a paradox because the latter represented an independent Bulgarian achievement.<sup>179</sup>

### Box 2: Pro-Russian historical disinformation on Bulgarian social media



An exemplary Facebook post in the pro-Russian group Russophiles and friends of Russia: the post reiterates one of the most prevalent historical narratives that Russia liberated and saved Bulgaria three times and is addressed to 'the Bulgarians who support the Ukrainian genocide and terrorism'.

The first line of the meme counts 223 000 Russian soldiers who died for Bulgaria's liberation in the Russian-Turkish war. **History check:** a variety of nationalities participated in the war, including Ukrainians, Finns, Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, etc.

The second line claims that Russia paid 67,4 tons of gold or 81 million francs in the form of Turkish reparations written off by Russia. **History check:** Bulgaria took on this debt.

The third line asserts that Stalin forbade the US and England to dismember Bulgaria in three parts under Turkish control. **History check:** at the Yalta conference there were discussions regarding degrees of Western and Soviet influence in countries of Central and Eastern Europe rather than the division of territories in the eastern half of the continent (where Soviet military forces were overwhelmingly present).

<sup>176</sup> Ericenter, 2022, 'Костадинов: Днес България не е обединена и това е най-голямото предизвикателство пред „Възраждане“', 6 септември 2022 г. ('Kostadinov: Today Bulgaria is not united and this is the greatest challenge ahead of Vazrazhdane', 6 September 2022)

Ericenter, 2022, 'Йордан Цонев: Пагубни за обществото са разделителните линии, които чертаят политиците', 7 септември 2022 г. ('Yordan Tsonev: The dividing lines drawn by the politicians are detrimental to society', 7 September 2022)

Trud, 2022, 'Борисов: След като преди 2 години ни разделиха, трябва да мислим как да обединяваме народа (ВИДЕО)', 6 септември 2022 г. ('Borissov: After they divided us 2 years ago, we have to think about how to unite the nation (VIDEO)', 6 September 2022)

Trud, 2022, 'Гълъб Донеv: След 10 дни ни предстои да направим избор, нека да не допускаме исторически грешки (ВИДЕО)', 22 септември 2022 г. (Trud, 2022, 'Galab Donev: We are about to make a choice in 10 days, let us not make historical mistakes (VIDEO)', 22 September 2022)

<sup>177</sup> Dyuлgerova, N., 2022, 'Историята като политически инструмент', Труд, 22 септември 2022 г. ('History as a political instrument', Trud, 22 September 2022)

<sup>178</sup> Garkov, O., 2022, 'Честит Деня на Независимостта, Приятели! ...и поредни избори...', Pogled.info, 22 септември 2022 г. ('Happy Independence Day, Friends!...and yet more elections...', 22 September 2022)

<sup>179</sup> Angelov, I., 2022, 'Каква бея ни донесе Съединението? Проговори бивш президент', Стандарт, 6 септември 2022 г. ('What mess did the Unification bring to us? A former President speaks out', Standart, 6 September 2022)





# CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE LOOKS BACK TO THE PAST: Approaches to Memory

1989 marked a revolutionary time, which initiated wholesale transformational processes in Central and Eastern Europe – the countries having formerly constituted the Soviet bloc and the European part of the USSR, encompassing the development of liberal democracy, free market economy and civilizational return to Europe. Yet, the promise of 1989 was unevenly realized as the diversity of outcomes of the attempted post-communist transformations demonstrates: CEE states have not managed to join the Euro-Atlantic, liberal democratic community of nations in the same way or at all.<sup>180</sup>

Indeed, the capacity to critically assess the communist-authoritarian past and effect democratization – not simply as a political-institutional arrangement but also as a deeply embedded cultural form, depended on long-term historically framed understandings of democracy. That is, countries of CEE with a more firmly rooted experience of democracy and its constitutive values were better capable of reinstating them since 1989 and hence more decisively part with the authoritarian past. In parallel to this process, the patterns of Europeanization of foreign policy in CEE and the ability to join Euro-Atlantic structures have been shaped by national-state identities. Culturally-historically conditioned conceptions of Europe were reenacted in post-1989 circumstances and informed the extent to which a given Central and East European country could apply and act according to a set of European norms posited as foundational for the outlook and behavior of European states and institutions (the EU, OSCE, Council of Europe).<sup>181</sup>

Cross-country patterns in dealing with the memory of the past have been notable, as the states of the Baltic and Central European subregion of CEE have outpaced their Balkan counterparts, and Bulgaria in particular, in terms of creating the ideational and institutional infrastructure for reckoning with communism and Soviet domination. This section of the report details the most prominent instances of memory initiatives, including memory institutes, museums, truth commissions, commemorative practices, established across CEE. They can serve as an example of how Bulgaria can proceed with the still incomplete assessment of its past as well as provide a note of caution about the pitfalls of memory initiatives. Such pitfalls are particularly related to

---

<sup>180</sup> For more on this process see Filipova, R., 2022, 'Central and Eastern Europe after the 1989 Revolution: Diverging Identities in a Reunifying Era', Ch. 1 in *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 27-51

<sup>181</sup> On the process of Europeanization as being informed by a set of European values that can be posited and understood as an ideal-typical model of 'European-ness', see Filipova, R., 2022, 'Shades of Affinity: An Interactive Constructivist Theory of Self and Other in Bordering Belongingness', Ch. 3 in *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 81-86

controversies stemming from the politicization of history and selective reckoning with the past that emphasizes the nation's victimhood but underplays its complicity in crimes.

## Baltic memory policies: Leading the way

Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia took early and decisive steps for dealing with the history of the deleterious consequences of Soviet domination for these countries' populations and statehood. For example, in **Estonia**, already at the end of the 1980s, there was a rapid emergence of the field of historical memory as an approach rooted in pre-World War II traditions and distinct from the Soviet repression and selectivity of the historical record. **Legislative initiatives were advanced to assess and take account of the losses inflicted by the crimes of the Soviet regime.** The Law on the Extrajudicial Mass Repressions in Soviet Estonia during the 1940s and 1950s (December 1988); the decree On the Rehabilitation of Persons Extrajudicially Repressed or Wrongfully Convicted (1990 and amended in 1992); as well as the Persons Repressed by Occupying Powers Act (2003) set out to define an unlawfully repressed person during Soviet atrocities and establish such individuals' general rehabilitation, allowances, benefits and pension rights.

**Remembrance organizations also played a prominent role in re-evaluating the communist past.** The Estonian Memory Institute was founded in 2008. Curated by an international board of 10 international scholars and politicians, the institute was motivated by the aim to investigate the communist regime and examine violations of human rights. The **reshaping of the Estonian monumental landscape** began early on in the late 1980s when the majority of monuments dedicated to the War of Independence (marking the victorious Estonian struggle against the Bolshevik offensive of 1918-1919), which were destroyed or hidden during the Soviet period, were restored on the initiative of the local rather than national authorities.<sup>182</sup>

**Museums represent a further important avenue for reassessing the past** and relating it to wider domestic and international audiences. After 1989, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia created museums dedicated to commemorating 20<sup>th</sup>-century occupations of their territories. The **Vabamu Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Estonia** was established in 1998, focusing on the 1940-1991 period of Estonian history. It tells the personal stories of the victims of Nazi and Soviet occupations, particularly through documentaries and period artifacts. The decision to establish the **Museum of the Occupation of Latvia** was taken in 1993 and it similarly aims to commemorate the victims of the Nazi and Soviet occupations between 1940 and 1990s, remind the world of the atrocities committed by foreign powers on Latvian soil as well as counter Russian disinformation about the Soviet occupation. The museum maintains an extensive outreach program, producing educational materials for use in schools and publications in multiple languages featuring overviews of the occupation period, academic articles, novels by former dissidents. The idea for the establishment of an exposition of dismantled monumental sculptures from the Soviet period gained traction in Lithuania in 1998 and was later realized in the form of **Grutas Park**. It presents in a stretch of 2 kilometers Soviet-era statues removed from Lithuanian cities further focusing on simulated reality, entertainment and leisure (for which the Park has come under criticism for mocking the tragic history of the Lithuanian people).<sup>183</sup>

<sup>182</sup> Tamm, M., 2013, 'In search of lost time: Memory politics in Estonia, 1991-2011', *Nationalities Papers*, 41(4), pp. 651-674

<sup>183</sup> Velmet, A., 2011, 'OCCUPIED IDENTITIES: NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN BALTIC MUSEUMS OF OCCUPATIONS', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 42(2), pp. 189-211

**Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine gave a further impetus to the removal or dismantlement of still remaining Soviet-era monuments.** In a prominent example, the Estonian authorities removed a Soviet tank monument outside of the majority Russian inhabited city of Narva, placing it on display in the Estonian national war museum. The Latvian Parliament passed a law that provides for the dismantling of the sites glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes, including the Monument to the Soviet soldiers-Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders in the Victory Park in Riga. Importantly, the law includes a provision stipulating that **the relevant municipality has the right to initiate dismantling regardless of the ownership of the site and the land on which it is located.**<sup>184</sup> The Lithuanian parliament also adopted a Law on the Prohibition of Promoting Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes and their Ideologies, nicknamed the 'de-sovietization' bill, in order to accelerate the removal of Soviet statues and monuments as well as change the remaining names of streets and squares hailing from the Soviet era. **The Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Centre or municipal authorities are to decide if an object falls under the law,** whereby a special inter-institutional commission will have to submit its assessment beforehand.<sup>185</sup>

At the same time, the three Baltic countries have demonstrated willingness to come to terms with the question of their implication in Nazi collaboration during World War II. Although Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have focused on the crimes of communism and their own victimization by the Soviet regime denying the notion of co-responsibility for Nazi atrocities, they nevertheless created presidential truth commissions to deal with the latter issue (albeit with varying levels of success) in the context of their Western partners' urge to address involvement in the Holocaust.

The **International Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Soviet and Nazi Regimes in Lithuania** provided diversified accounts of past crimes, whose transparency and soundness was underwritten by the availability of an English-language electronic database of the compiled research works, publication of lists of primary sources and extensive reviews. The **Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity** did not feature especially prominent results not least because the charges of involvement in Nazi crimes were much fewer in scale, while the exclusively international membership of the commission meant that it was not invested in domestic debates. The remit of the **Commission of the Historians of Latvia** was confined to the organization and support of academic research and exchange. It did not actively engage international scholars and produced a patchy, rather than consistently organized historical record.<sup>186</sup>

---

<sup>184</sup> Saeima News, 2022, '[Saeima passes a law to dismantle sites glorifying the Soviet and Nazi regimes](#)'

<sup>185</sup> Lisauskaite, D., 2022, '[New 'desovietisation' law takes aim at Lithuania's remaining Soviet-era signs](#)' LRT, 6 June 2022

<sup>186</sup> Pettai, E. C., 2015, '[Negotiating History for Reconciliation: A Comparative Evaluation of the Baltic Presidential Commissions](#)' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 67(7), pp. 1079-1101

### Box 3: The removal of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn



Source: National Defense University

The controversies surrounding the removal in 2007 of the Bronze Soldier statue, dedicated to the Soviet ‘liberators’ of Tallinn from the Nazi occupation, demonstrate how identity clashes between groups in society – the Estonian ethnic majority and Russian minority (comprising 24% of the Estonian population), that are centered on a monument can be mediated.

Tensions surrounding the statue had been flaring as Russian-speaking residents had rediscovered the monument as a site of collective self-identification. For them, the monument symbolized the heroic World War II victory of Russia as their ancestral homeland. On the other hand, Estonian nationalists were interpreting the monument as a symbol of Estonia’s occupation, domination and suffering.<sup>187</sup>

In the context of societal and political clashes, the then Estonian government took the decision to remove the statue and relocate it in a military cemetery. Clashes erupted as a result, leading to several days of public unrest and riots. Nevertheless, the decision to remove the Bronze Soldier was followed through even in the face of Moscow’s own harsh reaction, including a steep decline in Russian oil transits through Estonia, a boycott of Estonian goods in Russia, cyberattacks on websites part of Estonia’s critical infrastructure, a week-long blockade of the Estonian Embassy in Moscow by the Russian youth organization Nashi.<sup>188</sup>

Hence, **resolute government action** mediated conflict between societal groups and at the same time **placated the Russian minority** by re-erecting the Bronze Soldier at a different location and holding a ceremony commemorating the fallen during World War II.

<sup>187</sup> Gabowitsch, M., 2018, ‘The Limits of Iconoclasm: Soviet War Memorials since the End of Socialism’, *International Public History*, 1(2), pp. 20180014

Mälksoo, M., 2009, ‘Liminality and Contested Europeanness: Conflicting Memory Politics in the Baltic Space’, *Identity and Foreign Policy*, pp. 65-83.

<sup>188</sup> Ehala, M., 2009, ‘The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia’, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, pp. 139-158

## Central Europe: From a decisive break from the past to memory clashes

The Central European countries also made timely (albeit on occasion varying) progress in terms of assessing and overcoming their communist-Soviet past. For instance, by 1993, of the nearly 500 Soviet-era monuments in **Poland** 130 had been removed from public spaces and frequently replaced with freedom monuments on the basis of **local initiative** rather than direction from the central government. Similarly, in 1993, **Budapest's municipal General Assembly decided to open a Statue Park** on the outskirts of the city to house Red Army monuments. Yet outside of Hungary's capital removal of Soviet-era statues was not necessarily conducted in a systematic manner.<sup>189</sup> In the early post-communist period, Budapest also saw the erection of monuments dedicated to the memory of the 1956 revolution.<sup>190</sup>

As in the Baltic states, **legislative initiatives condemning the atrocities of communism were taken up in the early 1990s**. For example, the Act on the Unlawfulness of the Communist Regime and about the Resistance against it was ratified by the Czech Parliament in 1993 representing a milestone in the country's reckoning with the communist past. In 1995, the Office for the Documentation and Prosecution of Communist Crimes was established under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, concentrating on prosecution and documentation of the offenses committed by the communist party and state security nomenklatura.<sup>191</sup>

**Memory institutes were further established across Central Europe**. The Institute of National Remembrance of Poland (IPN) was founded in 1998 and emerged following controversies related to the status of former communist secret agents in Polish politics. IPN thus set out to preserve and make accessible the archives of the communist security services. Its mission has also focused on investigating crimes committed during the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the country through the Chief Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation. The Institute further consists of, among others, the National Education Office, which prepares educational materials on Polish history and engages extensively with schools. The Historical Research Office disseminates knowledge and conducts academic research on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century history of Poland.<sup>192</sup> IPN has towered over other Polish educational and research institutions by virtue of the size of its budget, number of employees and volume of archival material. However, the Institute has often come under criticism for not maintaining sufficient neutrality in the context of party politics, making controversial public statements, insufficient research quality and impact and a one-sided presentation of communism (such as remaining silent on the fact that a significant part of Polish society did not necessarily resist the regime).

**Slovakia's National Memory Institute** was founded in 2002 with the aim to evaluate the Nazi and Soviet occupations, disclose documentation on persecuted individuals, prompt criminal prosecution of crimes as well as conduct historical research.<sup>193</sup> Yet, the Institute's work has been subject to controversy as it has not advanced a complete confrontation with the nation's participation in the Holocaust (perceived as an affront to the story of Slovak national victimhood). Moreover, the

<sup>189</sup> Gabowitsch, M., 2018, 'The Limits of Iconoclasm: Soviet War Memorials since the End of Socialism', *International Public History*, 1(2), pp. 20180014

<sup>190</sup> Székely, J., 2018, 'Absences and Excesses in the Memory Politics of Budapest after 1989', *Europe Now Journal*

<sup>191</sup> Kopeček, M., 2013, 'Czech Republic: From the Politics of History to Memory as Political Language', *Cultures of History Forum*

<sup>192</sup> Institute of National Remembrance, Poland, 2006, *Mission*

<sup>193</sup> Nation's Memory Institute, Slovakia, *Mission*

reassertion of the legitimacy of the wartime fascist state has taken place through the appointment by Parliament of apologists of the wartime regime.<sup>194</sup> **Czechia's Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes** started functioning in 2007 informed by the goal to conduct research, provide documentation, educate and accentuate the voices of the victims of communist rule.<sup>195</sup> The Institute has similarly faced critical scrutiny over the politicized nature of its leadership – appointed by the Senate (upper house of the Czech Parliament), as well as the lack of nuance in presenting a unified story of struggle against communism, even though significant portions of the public acquiesced into the regime.

In Hungary, **the Terror House Museum**, which started functioning in 2002, illustrates in a tangible manner the suffering of the victims of the Nazi and Soviet occupations and further points out that the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended with the victory of freedom and independence.<sup>196</sup> Nevertheless, particularly at the time of its unveiling the museum was criticized for being used as a tool in political battles. The then Viktor Orban government financed and opened it in the midst of an election campaign and as a way to tarnish the image of his socialist opponents.<sup>197</sup> Orban subsequently continued to build on the anti-communist narrative to stake his claim on power as the one who would finally purge all remnants of the socialist past, which had deprived Hungary of the ability to fully enjoy the benefits of the transition.

**Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted a wave of demolitions of still remaining Soviet-era monuments.** For instance, the President of Poland's National Remembrance Institute called for swift action to remove symbols that might promote communism in public spaces.<sup>198</sup> On the 6<sup>th</sup> month anniversary of the Kremlin's aggression, a memorial dedicated to Red Army soldiers in the Polish town of Brzeg was taken down.<sup>199</sup>

Yet, the **conservative backlash in CEE countries has led to a reconsideration of the memory politics of the 1990s and 2000s**, frequently undermining of objective historical research. For example, right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS) has placed a particular emphasis on underlining narratives of Polish greatness and heroism during World War II, which has been most explicitly and controversially manifested in the denial of Polish complicity in the Holocaust. In 2018, the so-called Holocaust law was passed in the Polish Parliament, introducing prison sentences for suggestions that the Poles took part in committing crimes against Jews. Even though provisions of criminal responsibility were eventually removed following international uproar, financial responsibility can still be borne under the law. A campaign to undercut the work of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk was also mounted. PiS railed against what they saw as a cosmopolitan version of history that blends Poles' sufferings during the war with those of other East European nations, thus diluting Poland's unique nationally heroic experience.<sup>200</sup>

<sup>194</sup> Nedelsky, N., 2016, "'The Struggle for the Memory of the Nation': Post-Communist Slovakia and its World War II Past", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 38(4), pp. 969–992

<sup>195</sup> Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, *RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION PROJECTS*

<sup>196</sup> House of Terror Museum, *The History of the Museum*

<sup>197</sup> Fuller, T., 2022, 'Stark history/Some see a stunt: Memory becomes battleground in Budapest's House of Terror', *New York Times*, 2 August 2022

<sup>198</sup> Polish News, 2022, 'Chrzowice. The monument in honor of the Red Army was dismantled', 24 March 2022

<sup>199</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022, 'Poland Demolishes Soviet War Memorial', 24 August 2022

<sup>200</sup> Machciewicz, P., 2023, 'When History Matters Too Much: Historians and the Politics of History in Poland,' *Contemporary European History*, 32(1), pp. 15–20

In Hungary, long-time Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has consolidated his power based not least by capitalizing on the collective sense of injustice and positioning himself as a politician that can redress the iniquities in Hungary's past (from Habsburg rule to the Treaty of Trianon following World War I which deprived Hungary of significant territories and population). At the same time, he similarly denies any Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust.<sup>201</sup>

#### Box 4: The removal of Ivan Konev's statue in Prague



Source: EURACTIV

The case of the removal from Prague's public space of the statue dedicated to Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev, who led the Red Army forces' offensive against the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, is instructive as divisions preceding the dismantlement were reminiscent of clashes in Bulgaria. Handling the status of the monument took place through a **gradual evolution of approaches rather than one-off decisive action**, ranging from repurposing via the attachment of a new plaque to the final removal of the whole statue. Local authorities in Prague took the lead in these initiatives, whose unfoldment spanned a 6-year period.

Contestation over the symbolism of the monument began in 2014 following Russia's annexation of Crimea. In 2018, local authorities decided to add a new plaque to the original inscription, which only referred to Konev as the savior of Prague, in order to provide a broader, critical explanation. In addition to crediting Konev with commanding the forces that liberated parts of Bohemia and Prague, it was noted that Konev's military command had been complicit in the suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the construction of the Berlin Wall and the intelligence surveillance preceding the invasion of the armed forces of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia.

The pro-Russian Czech President Miloš Zeman, members of the Czech Communist Party, the Russian Embassy charged that the rebranding represented 'the rewriting of history', while pro-EU politicians and sections of society defended the attachment of the new plaque. After repeated attacks on the statue, the municipal authorities finally decided to transfer the statue to an art repository of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Memorial Museum.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>201</sup> Meijen, J., Vermeersch, P., 2023, 'Populist Memory Politics and the Performance of Victimhood: Analysing the Political Exploitation of Historical Injustice in Central Europe', *Government and Opposition*, pp. 1-19

Nadkarni, M., 2020, *Remains of Socialism: Memory and the futures of the past in postsocialist Hungary*, Cornell University Press

<sup>202</sup> Řehořová, I., 2021, 'Visual symbols, democracy and memory: The monument of Ivan Stepanovich Konev and the memory of communism in the Czech Republic', *Memory Studies*, 14(6), pp. 1241-1254

Vrba, J., 2020, 'Monumental Conflict: Controversies Surrounding the Removal of the Marshal Konev Statue in Prague', *Cultures of History Forum*

## Romania: Catching up

Although Bulgaria and Romania shared similarities with regard to the lagging pace and success of their transition to democracy – in contrast to the frontrunners in the Baltic and Central European region, Bucharest has nevertheless boasted more prominent progress than Sofia in coming to terms with its communist past.

The old communist networks, particularly the successor to Romania's Communist Party as well as the former state security services, exerted a significant influence over post-1989 Romanian politics and society, which represented a significant obstacle to a more decisive break from the past. Still, reformist-minded politicians and civil society organizations managed to push initiatives in the area of historical memory. The establishment of the **Sighet Memorial** in 1997 as a national historical site under Law 95 represented the most coordinated effort by that time at collating archival material and testimonies as well as honoring the victims of communist repression. The Memorial encompasses a museum located in a building, which was a former prison where opponents of the regime were incarcerated. The creation of the museum was preceded and then supported by the activity of the International Centre for Studies into Communism, conducting academic research on the communist regime.<sup>203</sup>

The **Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile** (IICCMER), established in 2005, is a government-sponsored organization, which examines the crimes of the Romanian communist regime and further supports educational projects, making available to the public archives and other types of documentation relating to communism.<sup>204</sup>

A rival attempt to lead the way in assessing the communist past was related to the **Tismaneanu Report of 2007**, issued by the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania (known as the Tismaneanu Report after its chairman Vladimir Tismaneanu) and supported by then Romanian President Traian Băsescu. Its mandate was focused on exposing the institutional mechanisms of communist repression, recommending legal reforms for compensating the victims of repression and outlining the criminal and illegal nature of the former regime.

Yet, admittedly, the results of the work of the commission were negatively impacted, among others, by the short timeframe in which the report had to be produced, the hurried, often politically-motivated appointment of participating members and insufficient rigor. The report did not achieve national reconciliation as testified by the acrimonious reception of the politicians vested in the former communist networks. Nonetheless, the report represented a symbolic attempt at reckoning with communism, even if with limited success.<sup>205</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> The Memorial of the Victims of Communism and of the Resistance, *General information*  
Ciobanu, M., 2009, 'Criminalising the Past and Reconstructing Collective Memory: The Romanian Truth Commission', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(2), pp. 313–336

<sup>204</sup> The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes, Romania, *History*

<sup>205</sup> Ciobanu, M., 2009, 'Criminalising the Past and Reconstructing Collective Memory: The Romanian Truth Commission', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(2), pp. 313–336

## Ukraine: Historical memory galvanized by wars

Ukraine's reclaiming of its history, stripped of Russian propagandist narratives and cultural-symbolic vestiges of the Soviet period, was particularly galvanized by Russia's military invasions of 2014 and 2022.

Up to the invasions, Ukrainian memory politics were characterized by clashes between pro-Russian groups promoting Soviet nostalgia and the national democrats. After the 2004 Orange revolution, pro-European President Viktor Yushchenko mounted a number of initiatives aimed at restoring and reclaiming Ukrainian national memory. He prioritized the rehabilitation of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) as well as the legal recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide of Ukrainians perpetrated by the Soviet regime. The latter process culminated in the 2006 Law on the Holodomor, which makes illegal the public denial of the famine.<sup>206</sup> The **Institute of National Remembrance** was also established in 2006 as a central body of executive power whose activities are directed and coordinated by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine through the Minister of Culture and Information Policy. The overall goal of the Institute is focused on the restoration and preservation of the national memory of the Ukrainian people through a comprehensive study of the history of Ukrainian statehood, the popularization of Ukrainian history abroad, perpetuating the memory of the defenders of Ukrainian liberty and territorial integrity.<sup>207</sup>

An especially prominent initiative with regard to memory policy is related to the **Ukrainian decommunization laws** passed in 2015, also known as the 'memory laws'. Although the dismantlement of communist monuments started in Ukraine's regions already in the late Soviet period, the new legal measures drastically sped up the process. The provision that prohibits the use of communist and Nazi symbols entailed the rapid removal of communist-era statues (such as the ubiquitous statues of Lenin) and renaming of streets and public spaces.

After the start of the 2022 invasion, Ukraine went further in reevaluating its historical-cultural domination by Russia<sup>208</sup> and proceeded to remove monuments dating back to the Russian Empire. The narrative about the great Russian culture/Russian 'civilizational center' juxtaposed to the Ukrainian 'cultural periphery' began to be concretely pushed back against through the removal of statues dedicated to Russian poet Alexander Pushkin and renaming streets labelled after Russian artists and literary figures. In a prominent case, a monument dedicated to the Russian Empress Catherine the Great was removed from public display in Odesa, since she may not have been a founder of the city (according to Russia-propagated beliefs) and contributed to the destruction the Ukrainian Cossack autonomy. Additionally, the Kyiv city council decided to dismantle a statue glorifying the 'unification of Ukraine with Russia' and a monument to the Pereiaslav Agreement of 1654 (whereby the Cossacks' support for Russia against Poland eventually led to the former's subjugation of Ukraine).<sup>209</sup>

<sup>206</sup> Zhurzhenko, T., 2022, *Legislating Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine, Memory Laws and Historical Justice*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham

<sup>207</sup> The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, *Положення про Інститут* (Regulations on the Institute)

<sup>208</sup> Naiem, M., 2023, *Ukraine Insider, Part 4: Invisible Hierarchies: Russian Cultural Domination of Ukraine Through Language and Stereotypes*, Institute for Global Analytics, pp. 1-13

<sup>209</sup> Ben, B., 2022, 'Pushkin monuments disappear from Ukrainian streets following Lenin, as decolonization is underway', *Euro-maidan Press*, 4 May 2022

### Box 5: Short of removal: Artistic recontextualization and intervention



**Source:** Designs You Trust, the Hydra sculpture in Bucharest

Although the removal of communist/Soviet-era statues signals a more definitive break with the past effecting a unified understanding of memory and identity, cases of particularly societally divisive debates and historical holdovers have led to **compromise solutions and forms of protest** informed by artistic recontextualization and intervention.

For example, the **Monument to Soviet Tank Crews in Prague** was repainted in pink several times before being relocated to a Military Technical Museum. It was also repeatedly reemployed in further artistic displays. In 2011-2012, it was displayed again in Prague to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops. It was additionally used to symbolize the 1990s at an exhibition on the 20<sup>th</sup> century shown in Brno.<sup>210</sup>

In Romania, the continued impact of the communist past and inability to come to terms with it in a wholesale manner have been subject to artistic critique. **'Project 1990'** (taking place between 2010 and 2014) featured 20 temporary artistic interventions on the empty pedestal of the former statue of Lenin in Bucharest. They aimed to mount criticism of Romanian society as still being beholden to the communist past through anti-nostalgic and ironic treatment of symbols of the past. The 'Hydra' sculpture (pictured above) recreated Lenin's statue with seven heads in the form of roses connected to long necks. The roses represented the electoral symbol of the post-communist social democrats, suggesting that the post-1989 Romanian political elite was a byproduct of the communist regime.<sup>211</sup>

Beyond CEE, in Italy, reassessing the fascist past has not taken place as comprehensively as in Germany, producing equivocation and half-hearted solutions. For instance, **the Victory Monument in the northern Italian town of Bolzano** commemorates fascism and has been the rallying site for far-right marches.

The controversial nature of this monument has been particularly accentuated among the German speakers, who view it as a historical tribute to the fascist Italianization process, based on the suppression of German culture and rights (after the then predominantly German-speaking city and province were awarded to Italy in 1919 on security grounds). Yet, the Italians see the monument as a confirmation of their own Italian identity. The irreconcilability of positions was mediated through a recontextualization of the monument based on defusing its fascist connotations. The first intervention was to attach LED lighting in order to symbolically stifle the fascist rhetoric while preserving the architectural integrity of the monument. Also, a museum was built in a crypt beneath the building, illuminating the history and debates surrounding the monument.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>210</sup> Gabowitsch, M., 2021, 'What has happened to Soviet war memorials since 1989/91? An overview', *Politika*

<sup>211</sup> Preda, C., 2016, 'Project 1990' as an Anti-Monument in Bucharest and the Aestheticisation of Memory', *Südosteuropa*, 64(3), pp. 307-324

<sup>212</sup> Sakalis, A., 2022, 'Across Europe, many controversial monuments still remain. Alex Sakalis visits a small Italian town that has found a way to contextualise and defuse the architectural legacy of fascism', *BBC*, 18 January 2022

Yet, some of Ukraine's initiatives in relation to reassessing the past have been criticized for lack of nuance and taking a definitive approach that can selectively elevate some historical figures/episodes and completely downgrade others. For example, the memory laws have been subject to criticism, particularly as regards the stipulation that codifies honoring of the memory of the fighters for the independence of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Controversial groups such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army were included among the fighters and their status was in this way officially recognized. Concerns were thus voiced about a potential 'regulation of memory' that selectively omits negative historical developments such as the atrocities carried out by some of the fighters for Ukrainian independence against Poles and Jews during World War II.<sup>213</sup>

Nevertheless, the wider context of Ukraine as a nation at war facing constant aggression from Russia can provide a greater degree of justification for Kyiv's stringent legal-historical provisions aimed at eradicating the remnants of Russian-Soviet domination and maintaining societal resilience and unity. Balancing this out with maintaining the democratic credentials of the country remains an ongoing challenge.

---

<sup>213</sup> Marples, D. R., 2018, 'Decommunization, Memory Laws, and "Builders of Ukraine in the 20th Century"', *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, 39(1), pp.1-22





# The Way Forward for Bulgaria's Past Amid Social Division

Bulgaria's fundamental ideational ambivalence and lack of definitive orientation toward the West have shaped, as the preceding analysis has revealed, deeply embedded pro-Russian historical interpretations that remain largely unchallenged in the educational system; continual clashes and deadlock over the fate of monumental heritage; and virulent pro-Kremlin historical disinformation in the media space.

Addressing the Russian factor in Bulgaria's historical policy and in the informational environment thus requires, first and foremost, to take into account and propose ways for tackling the key characteristic of Bulgarian society's disposition towards Russia: continuous emotionally charged division derived from the traditional opposition between 'Russophiles' and 'Russophobes'. Once the conceptual possibilities for moving past entrenched cultural-social fissures are identified, this section of the study further lays out practical recommendations, drawn in particular from other CEE countries' memory policies.

## Can deliberation ameliorate social division?

Deliberation has often been posited as a promising avenue for mediating entrenched points of social conflict. The discipline of Social Psychology has emphasized that **the positive outcomes of discussion lead to the acceptance of alternative viewpoints and can facilitate attitude change**. Exposure to new information and diverse opinions in the deliberative process should foster a degree of open-mindedness and engagement with positions that are different from one's own. The increase in factual knowledge, in particular, can create more informed opinions and willingness to cooperate.<sup>214</sup> The deliberative turn in political theory also stressed that antagonism in divided societies can be overcome through a discursive form of democracy based on engagement in the public sphere only loosely connected to the state. Deliberative forums in the public sphere should focus on particular needs and issue-specific networks rather than general values (which tend to generate the most conflict) and should operate at a distance from sovereign authority.<sup>215</sup>

Pinning high theoretical hopes on the deliberative process has not been consistently borne out conceptually and empirically, especially as set against the countervailing downsides of extended

---

<sup>214</sup> PytlikZillig, L.M., Hutchens, M.J., Muhlberger, P., Gonzalez, F.J., Tomkins, A.J., 2018, 'Attitude Change and Polarization', in *Deliberative Public Engagement with Science. An Empirical Investigation*, Springer Briefs in Psychology, Springer, Cham

<sup>215</sup> Dryzek, J. S., 2005, 'Deliberative Democracy in Divided Societies: Alternatives to Agonism and Analgesia', *Political Theory*, 33(2), pp. 218–242

groups discussions. Already in 1975, the group polarization hypothesis gained ground, according to which **group discussion tends to enhance the average pre-group inclinations of group members and further consolidate inter-group differences**. A crucial psychological mechanism behind this process concerns interpersonal comparison, whereby people desire to perceive and present themselves favorably in relation to others and exposure to others' positions may stimulate the person to adjust their response so as to maintain a desirable self-perception.<sup>216</sup> On an even deeper level, the bonds of a shared social identity preclude receptivity to alternative viewpoints that can destabilize socially binding ideas and entrenched dispositions. Through motivated reasoning individuals search for information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. In political science terms, some of the stipulations of deliberative democracy shy away from dealing with fundamental values-based conflict and cannot therefore offer viable ways for tackling deeply embedded social oppositions.

Empirically-backed political science and psychological research of these conceptual premises has confirmed the persistence – rather than change, in ideas as a result of repeated interaction and discussion. Rumena Filipova's study of the patterns of Europeanization of the foreign policies of Poland, Bulgaria and Russia between 1989 and 2015 found that culturally-historically conditioned conceptions of Europe (and the values that inform them) based on CEE states' distinct national and sub-regional identities were reenacted in post-1989 circumstances and shaped these states' external behavior. In particular, the interactive process of identification and socialization between the Western (European) Other and the CEE Selves that has defined the borders of belongingness to the Euro-Atlantic community since 1989 did not lead to fundamental ideational redefinition of how European values are understood and practiced in the three countries under examination. Instead, change took place on the level of tactical beliefs and the styles, nuances and accents of belief expression.<sup>217</sup>

Additionally, Social Psychological studies into different aspects of the deliberative processes have often found no major positive impact of deliberation on inter-group agreement or have recorded inconclusive results. For example, an examination of the key features of deliberation – critical thinking prompts and information formatting, has revealed that they do not exert an effect on attitude change.<sup>218</sup> Another piece of research drawing on data from a pilot deliberative assembly in Ireland shows inconclusive and mixed results as to whether personal attributes such as gender, age, education, openness to new ideas lead to a greater attitude change in the deliberative process.<sup>219</sup> Also, an investigation into the extent to which observing the procedural modes of deliberation (based on the presence of trained facilitators and strictly enforced rules for discussion) promote agreement did not produce consistent statistically significant findings.<sup>220</sup>

---

<sup>216</sup> Myers, D. G., Lamm, H., 1975, 'The Polarizing Effect of Group Discussion: The discovery that discussion tends to enhance the average prediscussion tendency has stimulated new insights about the nature of group influence', *American Scientist*, 63(3), pp. 297–303

Myers, D. G., 1975, 'Discussion-Induced Attitude Polarization', *Human Relations*, 28(8), pp. 699–714

<sup>217</sup> Filipova, R., 2022, *Constructing the Limits of Europe: Identity and Foreign Policy in Poland, Bulgaria, and Russia since 1989*, Ibidem/Columbia University Press, pp. 380-381

<sup>218</sup> PytlikZillig, L.M., Hutchens, M.J., Muhlberger, P., Gonzalez, F.J., Tomkins, A.J., 2018, 'Attitude Change and Polarization', in *Deliberative Public Engagement with Science. An Empirical Investigation*, Springer Briefs in Psychology, Springer, Cham

<sup>219</sup> Suiter, J., Farrell, D. M., O'Malley, E., 2016, 'When do deliberative citizens change their opinions? Evidence from the Irish Citizens' Assembly' *International Political Science Review*, 37(2), pp. 198–212

<sup>220</sup> Strandberg, K., et al., 2019, 'Do Discussions in Like-Minded Groups Necessarily Lead to More Extreme Opinions? Deliberative Democracy and Group Polarization', *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, 40(1), pp. 41–57

On other hand, psychological research has supported the argument about the **impact of existing predispositions as the most relevant predictor of attitude persistence and change**. Deliberation is found to strengthen previously held beliefs on identity issues such as immigration, while there is more room for attitude modification in relation to issue areas that are more technical in nature.<sup>221</sup> In general, the stronger the opinion held, the less amenable it is to change.<sup>222</sup>

So if discussions cannot reliably and consistently foster reconciliation among the competing deeply held views of different groups, what options are left to bridge differences and forge a common direction? **A prime instigator of social change can be vested in effective and credible leadership**. Accumulated research has demonstrated that the attributes of a leader figure overwhelmingly in the followership's readiness to modify their ideas and behavior (in a social, political, educational or corporate setting). A credible, high-prestige leadership has been shown to induce opinion change even if the leader espouses a view that is discrepant from one's own.<sup>223</sup>

- Social scientific research findings thus suggest that holding, for example, **deliberative citizen councils** (organized by local authorities) or extended media debates on how to deal with Russian/Soviet monumental heritage **may be counterproductive and exacerbate already existing tensions**. Inter-group differences and identities are likely to be strengthened and become even more polarized, especially as the vested interests of pro-Kremlin political, media and business networks are at stake and distort and undermine the rules of fair discussion (as informed by transparent information and civility).
- Instead, **civic and political leadership should take the initiative in advancing educational campaigns and promotional materials** that feature objective scholarly views on history.

## Fostering a Russia-critical historical memory and education

Taking into account the specificities and pitfalls of Bulgaria's divisive debates about Russia, the following concrete recommendations can point to the way forward in terms of beginning to resolve entangled issues of historical memory and education. Indeed, addressing historical perceptions is the paramount foundation, which is necessary for building society's cognitive resilience that can in turn offset the effectiveness of the Kremlin's historical propaganda spearheaded through the media.

<sup>221</sup> Smets, K., Isernia, P., 2014, 'The role of deliberation in attitude change: An empirical assessment of three theoretical mechanisms', *European Union Politics*, 15(3), pp. 389–409

<sup>222</sup> Wojcieszak, M. E., 2012, 'On Strong Attitudes and Group Deliberation: Relationships, Structure, Changes, and Effects', *Political Psychology*, 33(2), pp. 225–242  
Zhang, K., 2019, 'Encountering Dissimilar Views in Deliberation: Political Knowledge, Attitude Strength, and Opinion Change', *Political Psychology*, 40(2), pp. 315–333

<sup>223</sup> Widgery, R. N., Tubbs, S. L., 1997, 'Leadership and Attitude Change Theory', *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 4(2), pp. 3–17  
Kelman, H. C., Eagly, A. H., 1965, 'Attitude toward the communicator, perception of communication content, and attitude change', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1(1), pp. 63–78  
Ritchie, E., Phares, E. J., 1969, 'Attitude change as a function of internal-external control and communicator status', *Journal of Personality*, 37(3), pp. 429–443  
Aronson, E., Turner, J. A., Carlsmith, J. M., 1963, 'Communicator credibility and communication discrepancy as determinants of opinion change', *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(1), pp. 31–36  
Eagly, A. H., Chaiken, S., 1975, 'An attribution analysis of the effect of communicator characteristics on opinion change: The case of communicator attractiveness', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 32(1), pp. 136–144

- Create an **advisory board at the Ministry of Education and Science consisting of both Bulgarian and international historians** in order to forge new directions in the interpretation of Russia's role in Bulgarian history.
  - ✓ **Publish an open access research database**, which collects and showcases all resources on the basis of which historical analyses and debates within the board are conducted.
- **Develop research and teaching programs on Russian studies at the university level** that allow for scholars' specialization and deepening of academic fields that build on generalist lessons of Russian history/domestic and foreign policy covered by generic courses.
- Drawing on other CEE states' experience, **Bulgaria should lay the institutional framework for assessing, researching, educating and raising awareness of its communist past**. Although memory institutes, truth commissions, legislative initiatives have at times become sites for politicized battles over memory (such as the instrumentalization of anti-communism for political gain) and conservative backlashes whitewashing the unpalatable episodes in a nation's history, the creation of such institutions is nevertheless an essential step in coming to terms with the past. Their absence in Bulgaria deprives society of visible and tangible 'repositories' of memory, even if they may become subject to controversy.
  - ✓ **Establish a new museum dedicated to the communist past**, which provides a critical assessment of the regime, including its atrocities and repression of rights. Draw on the example of such museums across Central and Eastern Europe (the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, the Sighet Museum in Romania) that also conduct academic research in history, prepare educational materials and implement outreach to schools.
  - ✓ Albeit with a significant delay of 33 years after the end of communism, **open a national remembrance institute** modelled on similar institutions across the Baltic countries and Central Europe. Unlike truth commissions (such as that in Romania) and memory laws (as in Ukraine), which can become even more politicized and raise objections of implementing a regulatory memory regime, memory institutes' focus on historical research, investigation of the crimes of the communist regime, educational initiatives and provision of archival documentation can be a more enduring platform for studying and evaluating the past. Insulation from political influence can be aimed at through, for example, the appointment of an independent oversight board that reviews and monitors the soundness and quality of the output produced.
  - ✓ **Move past debates about ownership issues related to monuments** since this is a matter secondary to political and values-based decisions. The experience of CEE countries, in particular the cases of the Bronze Soldier and Ivan Konev's statue, show that ownership is not an intractable problem and either state or local authorities can take action as long as there is sufficient resolve to remove Soviet-era monumental heritage and different levels of government do not mutually block each other.
- Despite the belatedness of policies for instituting transitional justice on the basis of lustration and the provision of unhindered access to the secret files of communist state security agents, **it may still be important to hold a debate in society about the impact of the former regime's security networks on Bulgaria's post-1989 politics**. The turnover of generations means that individuals serving under communism's state security will gradually withdraw from Bulgarian political life. But a thorough review of the secret files may shine a retrospective light on who profited illegally from the transitional process and how former communist networks have been perpetuated and transformed.

- **Foster historical literacy within society** by developing effective historical communication (on the example of the pioneering work of the [History Communication Institute](#), which gathers a wide range of stakeholders with the aim to ensure accurate historical information serves the educational needs of the public).
  - ✓ Expert information about history should be presented to the public in a creative and engaging way through dedicated podcasts and social media pages, for example, developed and coordinated by history researchers.
  - ✓ Historically-sensitive policy-making should be promoted by involving historians in a more consistent manner into policy decisions.

## Insulating the media environment from foreign influence

The prevalence of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in the Bulgarian media environment, whereby historical propaganda stands out prominently, requires coordinated action on the government, civil societal as well as international level:

- **An objective approach to historical memories and consciousness needs to be promoted in a consistent manner** and be part of strategic communications that provide positive narratives about Bulgaria's past and its future direction.
- **Disinformation must be widely recognized and accepted among the political elite as a threat to national security** and well-being in society. Accordingly, information security departments/strat com units at ministries (particularly Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) need to be adequately resourced and treat disinformation as a priority threat. For instance, Lithuania's recently established National Crisis Management Center serves as an umbrella platform coordinating state institutions. It is a critical organizational unit in crisis and emergency prevention and management, providing continuous monitoring of threats to interests of national security.
- **Expose to the public intelligence information** about murky financial ties between the Kremlin and its local political, business and media proxies, which disseminate pro-Russian narratives.
- **Define the legal boundaries of permissible vs. offensive speech**, whereby false and deceptive content should be regulated more stringently (alongside with hate speech). More decisive action needs to be taken against Russian (and Chinese) malign narratives through the codification of measures against foreign disinformation in legislation. The national media regulatory body should more comprehensively enforce legal, ethical and professional standards in journalism.
- **National public broadcasting should be promoted and supported as a key pillar of quality journalism** on the basis of financial and editorial independence. For instance, the Czech television and radio are financed via license fees outside of governmental control and are supervised by independent oversight boards.
- **News outlets should consider disabling commentary sections under articles (potentially on a more permanent basis)** if comments follow a pattern of consistent violation of the civility of discourse, whereby disinformation echo-chambers are reinforced.

- **Audience-specific identification and development of informational, media literacy and capacity-building campaigns targeting the ‘undecideds’:** groups within society, which do not harbor strong ideological views and are therefore more receptive to quality information.
- **Organization of nation-wide media literacy activities geared to students with a focus on history.** On the example of Slovakia’s Olympiad of Critical Thinking media literacy contests can reach a large number of schools and youth organizations. It was established in 2021 and a year later it had 6 000 participants from over 200 high schools. Instead of abstract lectures, the Olympiad uses interactive ways of immersing the students into the real-world informational space: students are asked to answer questions and assess information from existing social media posts/websites and are further prompted to adapt to modern threats, e.g. AI.
- **Foster more dialogue through regional formats and transnational experience sharing between Russia and China experts** in order to identify the growing convergences of goals, narratives, methods and tactics in Moscow’s and Beijing’s influence campaigns around the world.
- **Create cross-country collaborative networks among civil societal organizations and journalists** that can exchange knowledge about their respective societies’ best practices and vulnerabilities as well as file alerts about disinformation campaigns with an international resonance.



