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In Search of a Modern Mnemonic Narrative of Communism: Russia's Mnemopolitical Mimesis during the Medvedev Presidency

Maria Mälksoo[*]

"We need a modern narrative"

Russia's eclectic reckoning with its communist past and its glaring eschewal of transitional justice has received a fair share of criticism across the disciplinary boundaries of political science, law, and contemporary history (e.g., Adler 2012a, b; Andrieu 2011; Nuzov 2014; Satter 2012; Schlögel 2013; Stan 2009). The controversial politics of memory[1] during the Putin era, in particular, has been denounced as aimed at constructing a new national mythology of the positive legacies of the communist period in Russian history, rather than accounting for the crimes of the antecedent regime. While human rights organizations, such as the "Memorial" Society, have dug into the social memory of communism in earnest ever since the gradual collapse of the Soviet system, the political elites have generally avoided contemplating issues of responsibility and guilt in the context of the Second World War, the Soviet suppression of Russia's neighboring nations and states, and mass repressions inflicted on the Russian nation itself. The preferred frame of public remembrance regarding the violent legacy of communism has been the victimhood if not outright martyrdom of the Russian people. The tendency to evade questions of accountability by foregrounding the immensity of the Russians' own suffering under the Soviet

regime is hardly surprising against the backdrop of a significant degree of continuity between the Soviet and post-Soviet elites in contemporary Russia (Gill 2013; Sakwa 2011).

Yet, during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (2008-12), the need for a new mnemonic narrative of communism that would be more suitable for Russia's international image and desired symbolic status in international society, was acknowledged in the official circles of the country. In June 2010, Konstantin Kosachev, Chair of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs, published an article wherein he argued that the damage to Russia's reputation was beginning to outweigh the advantages brought by defending the Soviet past on the international arena (Kosachev 2010). Accordingly, he called for devising a "set of principles, a 'historical doctrine' of sorts", in order to clarify Russia's position with regard to the Soviet past in terms that would be easily comprehensible to its foreign partners. According to Kosachev, such a strategic move would enable a sharp distinction to be drawn between historical evaluations of Soviet actions at the domestic and international levels. Emphasizing that while Russia fulfilled all the international obligations of the USSR as its successor state, it could not be held morally or legally responsible for the actions and crimes committed by the Soviet authorities, Kosachev sought to protect Russia against possible future demands for compensation for the victims of Soviet crimes as well as to deflect East European attempts at provoking Russia into aggressive responses on the historical memory front (Fedor 2010; Torbakov 2011).

The eminent Russian foreign political heavy-weight Sergei Karaganov, *head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and the chairman of the Standing Committee on Historical Memory*[2] *under the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights* delivered, in his turn, a quite remarkable programmatic speech on the issue of policy on the Soviet past at a meeting with President Medvedev in Yekaterinburg on 1 February 2011. This meeting was organized by *the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights,* a consultative body established for assisting, informing, and advising the president in

the exercise of his constitutional responsibilities vis-à-vis human rights, freedoms, and civil society institutions.[3] It brought together historians and representatives of social organizations, the "Memorial" Society among them. Setting out his vision for reconstituting the Russian identity through a re-evaluation of the Soviet past, Karaganov claimed that Russian society could not regain its self-respect until it faced up to the "terrible sin" that was the revolution and the subsequent decades of totalitarian rule (Karaganov 2011a). Evoking the notion of *samogenotsid* (or self-genocide)[4] to describe the Civil War and the Stalinist terror, Karaganov's Yekaterinburg speech built upon some of the points he had previously made in another programmatic piece, evocatively titled "The Russian Katyn" (Karaganov 2010). In his Yekaterinburg speech, Karaganov defined the victims of Soviet terror as "the best" of society, and called upon contemporary Russian society to identify with these victims, instead of the perpetrators (Karaganov 2011a).[5] He made the case for launching a state-run mass movement aimed at memorializing and honoring the victims of political repressions during the Soviet period. Arguably, the benefits would include the creation of a new patriotic elite with a real sense of responsibility for the country; and the earning of respect and good will internationally.[6]

Accordingly, the Committee on Historical Memory proposed a list of measures in 2011 aimed at adjusting the Russian collective remembrance of the Soviet experience in the interests of Medvedev's modernization strategy. The cornerstone of these draft proposals was the idea that Russia should aim to take a leading role in the struggle against totalitarian legacies in post-Soviet and post-communist space, as the country which had suffered most of all. Russia should accordingly spearhead a large-scale memorialization campaign throughout the former Soviet space (i.e. the Commonwealth of Independent States and the Baltic states), with the possibility of eventually expanding this to the broader European level, since allegedly "all Europe was a victim, all Europe was guilty of the tragedies of the twentieth century—of the two world wars, of the two totalitarianisms, of the most severe schism, which has yet to

be overcome completely."[7] The proposals included renaming the Day of Popular Unity (4 November) as the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of the Civil War and National Reconciliation, reflecting the view that the totalitarian regime had waged war against the people of Russia from 1917 to 1991, and raising the status of 30 October, the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Political Repression in the Russian calendar of political remembrance. In addition, the development of a state-supported public campaign for the mass construction of monuments to victims of the totalitarian regime, and the opening up of the archives was called for. These steps were devised to prepare the ground for the political and legal assessment of the crimes of the communist regime in order to "detotalitarianize" Russian public consciousness. As Karaganov maintained in his Yekaterinburg speech, the aim of the project on the "Perpetuation of the Memory of the Victims of the Totalitarian Regime and National Reconciliation" was "de-Stalinization and de-Communization of the Russian public mind and our country in general".[8] Its main goal was to "ensure transformation of the consciousness of both Russian society and the Russian elite", for:

> modernization of the country will be impossible either at the technical or on the political level without changing the consciousness of society, without nurturing the people's sense of responsibility for themselves and for the country, the feeling of pride in it, albeit bitter at times (Karaganov 2011a).

What should we make of these mnemopolitical moves? Did these calls for mnemonical modernization subscribe to, or rather challenge, the Western power to define the normative meaning of what constitutes the proper way of coming to terms with a violent past? This process is generally understood as engaging transitional justice, that according to a 2004 report by the UN Secretary General, comprises "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation" (UN SecGen 2004: 3). Yet, while Medvedev lent his support to some of the good intentions behind the project on the "Perpetuation of the Memory of the Victims of the

Totalitarian Regime and National Reconciliation", his backing of the "Memorial" Society-driven request for a political-legal judgment of the crimes of the communist regime was not forthcoming (see "Stenograficheskii otchet" 2011). To date, Russia's official record in the legal, political, administrative and symbolic dimensions of addressing the legacy of the Soviet regime has remained at best half-hearted, if not outright revisionist during the consolidation of the current illiberal government. The harassment of "Perm-36" and the consequent "self-liquidation" of the NGO managing the country's most important museum of Gulag,[9] along with the increasing political pressure on civil society organizations, including the "Memorial" Society which was originally involved in the drafting of proposals for the perpetuation of the memory of the victims of political repressions, and the Sakharov Center, are particularly evocative reminders of Russia's mnemopolitical reversal during president Putin's third term in the office. The Russian case has accordingly been described as a good counterexample of transitional justice for its "faux" or pseudo-transitional justice interventions that have been aimed not at democratization and the protection of victims' rights so much as at legitimizing the new political elite (Andrieu 2011).

This article suggests an understanding of the calls for a "new historical doctrine", as aired from the country's official quarters during the Medvedev presidency, through the lens of mimesis. I subsequently conceptualize the Medvedev-era "de-Communization" campaign as an attempt to sustain the "legitimate exceptionalism" of Russia's way of dealing with the Soviet past while seeking to do away with being cast as a failure of post-communist transitional justice, or, in a sense, an "abnormal" state (cf. Hagström 2015; Lawson and Tannaka 2011). Below I outline the argument for understanding Russia's quest for a "modern" mnemonic narrative as an attempt to "normalize" the country internationally. Taking a cue from Ayşe Zarakol's (2014: 313) suggestion that historical stigmatization of non-Western states, inter alia Russia, contributes both to their compliance with and rejection of particular international norms, I understand the most recent state-supported

"de-Stalinization" campaign as an example of mimesis, rather than a wholehearted attempt at compliance with the (Western) norm of transitional justice. The search for an internationally passable mnemonic narrative about Russia's relationship towards the Soviet past as put forth during the Medvedev presidency closely reflects Russia's ongoing quest for a specific status in international society. As Zarakol (2014: 313) observes, "emulation and non-compliance are at times the two sides of the same coin". Instead of providing a safe route to "international normalcy" then, mimesis ultimately threatens the order as defined by the "normal" (ibid.: 316).

My main claim is that the emphasis on the volume of national suffering and self-victimization discourse in the Medvedev-era calls to establish a "new historical doctrine" about the communist period was not matched by engagement with the issues of responsibility and accountability. Depicting Russians as the people who suffered most in the Soviet period not only helped to circumvent the international implications of the violence perpetrated by the communist regime, but also implied a sense of vindication through the emphasis on Russia's self-sacrifice, as though Russians suffered and died also for others in the community of nations of the former USSR, thus obfuscating the allocation of clear responsibility. While Russians were invited to identify with the persecuted, the persecutors remained an unidentified tragic force. The allusions of overwhelming Russian martyrdom under the Soviet regime hence enabled the continuing instrumentalization of a selective remembrance of the Soviet experiment for contemporary political benefit.

"Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?" (cf. Winterson 2011)

Symbolically, the calls for renewed de-Communization of Russia under Medvedev appeared to be quite a radical rupture compared to Vladimir Putin's previous terms in the office of the president of the Russian Federation which were characterized by the explicit distancing of the country from bearing any historical responsibility for the crimes of the Soviet regime. Putin's second term in office

(2004-2008), in particular, was marked by various attempts to reconnect with the proud moments of Russia's communist past, leading to the securitization and sacralization of the victory of the Great Patriotic War, along with the state-orchestrated pompous public remembrance of this event.

The apparent mnemopolitical shift during Medvedev's presidency has been regarded as an obvious ploy aimed at bringing Russia's mnemopolitical arsenal in line with Medvedev's modernization strategy in order to win more "hearts and minds" in Europe, and generally improve relations with the West (Sherlock 2011). The acknowledged need for a modern mnemonic narrative of communism tallied with a broader strategic objective to improve and project Russia's "soft power" more efficiently abroad.[10] Just as Lavrentii Beria, the Minister of Internal Affairs and the first de-Stalinizer, as unlikely as this might seem, recognized that de-Stalinization was "a strong weapon in the struggle for power" (Khlevniuk, cited in Adler 2002: 77), a similar logic was discernible in Karaganov's contemporary invocation of the term. Since at least the Khrushchev era, de-Stalinization has been a way of breaking with the immediate past, distancing oneself from the ideology and/or actions of one's predecessors *inter alia* with the aim of "bending with the political winds" (Adler 2002: 77-78).

I would like to offer an alternative, or rather complementary, reading of Russia's mnemonical reputation management here, utilizing insights from post-colonial theory. Taking my cue from Bhabha (1994) in particular, Russia's search for a "modern" mnemonic narrative could be interpreted as a hybrid attempt to "normalize" the country as an actor in international politics. I depart from the premise that Russia's search for a modern mnemonic narrative is a response to the hegemonic construction of East European memory of the twentieth century as different from an implicit or explicit European "standard account". The Russian quest for mnemonical modernization thus emerges as part of its quest for international "normality", with "modernity" in mnemopolitics functioning as the equivalent of such normality.

Yet, in order to account more substantively for the Medvedev-era "de-Stalinization"[11] campaign, as it was curiously dubbed, I suggest that it might be better understood as a form of resisting the hegemonic European discourse about what constitutes a "normal relationship" vis-à-vis one's violent past. This strategy of resistance entails seemingly playing along with the terms of the dominant discourse, yet ultimately only mimicking, rather than filling out the discourse with real actions aimed at "coming to terms" with one's past in earnest. If we view these mnemopolitical moves in Russia towards "modernizing" its collective assessment of the communist experiment as merely a strategic case of paying lip-service to the European expectations about how one should handle the criminal legacy of the totalitarian period, then we miss the power of the mimetic to potentially redefine the mimicked subject (that is, the European conception of a link between democratization and the society's ability and will to deal with a violent past). Besides the concern for symbolic power, there are vital issues of respect, recognition, and ontological security (or the security of a state's self-defined identity) (cf. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008) involved in the quest for "mnemonical modernization". As Karaganov put it:

> In reality, its [the project's] main aim is to modernize the consciousness of the Russian people, as well as that of all the peoples of the USSR, who were left badly wounded by seventy years of the Communist, totalitarian regime. One of the main ways of dealing with this trauma is through showing respect to the millions who perished in Communist times: by building monuments for them and tending their graves. In cultivating this sense of respect for them people will learn to respect themselves, and each other. It is about giving people back that sense of self-respect. This was not developed as an anti-Stalin initiative. De-Stalinization happened in the sixties and later. As I see it, this program deals at the fundamental level with restoring people's faith in themselves (Karaganov 2011b).

Russia's post-Soviet mnemopolitical hurdles have indeed been exacerbated by the lack of a clearly distinguishable "self" to which Russia could have returned after the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to sustain the consistency of its collective "selfhood". It is hardly surprising, against that backdrop, that contemporary Russia's state-sanctioned memory politics regarding its relationship to the Soviet past might be described as ambivalent, to say the least. Victory in the "Great Patriotic War" and the mass crimes of the very regime that governed and led the country through that war sit

uneasily together in the modern Russian mnemonical template, marking the poles of ontological security and insecurity, respectively. Russia's difficulties in reckoning with the communist past have been magnified by the complicated demands of facing the "other in oneself".

During his first two terms in the office of the president, Vladimir Putin generally distanced Russia from any historical responsibility for the crimes of the Soviet regime.[12] Gradually, the attempts to selectively pick and choose which bits and pieces of the Soviet past to cherish and which to forget became more varied with cautious recognition also of the darker chapters of the Soviet legacy, as exemplified by Putin's symbolic visit to a key site of the Stalinist Great Terror, the Butovo killing field on 30 October 2007, and his remarks at the commemoration ceremony of the victims of Katyn on 7 April 2010 (see Mälksoo 2012, for further discussion). Medvedev, in his turn, forcefully declared his conviction that the "memory of national tragedies is as sacred as the memory of victories" (Medvedev 2009). As a rule, Russia's post-Soviet mnemopolitical dynamics has nonetheless been replete with status-conscious trajectories of an ongoing quest for ontological security as a state in international society. Societally, furthermore, Russian people have equally sought to retain a basic ontological consistency throughout the tumultuous post-Soviet decades—in spite of the fundamental difficulties they have faced in integrating the Soviet experience into a coherent and positive national "self". If anything, it was the decade of the 1990s which invited "almost universal condemnation" in Russia (Prozorov 2008: 208). The immediate post-Cold War "memory thaw" proved to be ultimately indecisive, and was followed by attempts to re-connect with aspects of the previous socio-political predicament in order to find some stability after the sudden rupture in the ontological sense of the "Russian self" as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, further intensified by the chaotic onslaught of brutal capitalism of the early 1990s. Against that backdrop, it is perhaps not so striking that sociological polls have persistently quoted significant percentages of the Russian population as regarding Stalin as someone who "did more good than

bad for the country" (Garagozov 2008: 20), and have indicated a general lack of a sense of any responsibility for the crimes committed under the Soviet regime (Adler 2005; Khapaeva 2008). In the past two years, Stalin's popularity among Russians has soared even further (Monaghan and Gladkova 2015). The issue here might be not so much ignorance as indifference, or "an intentional desire to ignore the dark sides of the Soviet past" (Khazanov 2008: 294). Consequently, attitudes towards the Soviet past are conceived as "a matter of values much more than of knowledge" (ibid.; cf. Forest et al. 2004: 374). When the overarching value is the security of the self, the aspects endangering that security tend to get glossed over or rejected entirely.

All the more dangerous for Russia's successful post-communist healing, argue those analysts who have noticed the tendency towards shunting the tragic legacy of the Soviet period into the sphere of personal remembrance and embracing only the heroic in the public commemoration practices in contemporary Russia (e.g., Garagozov 2008: 27; Khazanov 2008: 295; cf. Tumarkin 1994; Merridale 2000). Some are fiercely critical: according to Khapaeva's diagnosis, for instance, Russian society is "seriously ill" with a "partial amnesia that makes its historical memory strangely selective". Not only are there "no political debates or hot intellectual discussions on how the Soviet crimes influenced and continue to influence contemporary Russian society", but there is also "no intellectual or political force that would make post-Soviet society face the issue of historical responsibility" (Khapaeva 2008: 359). Not surprisingly against that backdrop, there has been no lustration in post-Soviet Russia, no criminal prosecution of perpetrators of crimes in connection with the administration of the Soviet justice, thus leaving "the evil ... insufficiently personified" (Khazanov 2008: 298). The overall Russian memory of Stalinist repressions has been characterized as victim-based, not perpetrator-centric (see further Roginski 2008). Nonetheless, the prospect of building an official central monument to the victims of political repressions in Russia has become realistic only recently.[13]

It is pertinent to inquire here, whether Russia's long-time difficulties related to acknowledging the criminal legacy of its predecessor, the USSR, have been determined by the internally generated obstacles to self-reflection, or have been rather externally generated as a result of Russia's insecurity in its relationships with Europe/the West. As Zarakol (2010: 4) has suggested in the context of Japan and Turkey, intersubjective pressures to handle one's past in a particular way matter more at times when traditional self-routines are broken—and are more likely to create ontological insecurity outside the West. Indeed, it might be reasonable to claim that Russia's difficulties in fully reckoning with its forebear's legacy are related to the complicated demands of ontological security due to the still continuing openness of its international belonging (cf. Zarakol 2010: 6). Russia's general non-compliance with the Western norm of transitional justice reflects its sensitivity towards the particular origin of that norm (cf. Zarakol 2014: 313). Yet, its occasional emulation of the transitional justice discourse reveals an equal obsession with its perceived position in the socially stratified international society of established and still liminal members.

Mnemopolitics as mimesis

Departing from the Lacanian point that the making of the self is a narrative act (Epstein 2011), I suggest that the Medvedev-era calls for a "new historical doctrine" in Russia be understood through the lens of mimesis. Following the tripartite distinction of a Canadian psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist Merlin W. Donald, mimicry, imitation, and mimesis refer to different degrees of intensity of the action of (appeared) replication and resemblance. While *mimicry* refers to "the deliberate reduplication in action of a perceived event without careful attention to, or knowledge of, its purpose", and *imitation* pays closer attention to the purpose of reduplication, *mimesis* purposefully reduplicates an event for communicative purposes, taking into account the audience (Donald 2005: 286). It should be noted, though, that mimesis remains "an umbrella term that includes imitation and mimicry", for the levels of mimetic action are not distinguished by any discrete boundaries.

Rather, Donald argues, the three levels form "a scale of successively more abstract or 'intelligent' versions of reduplicative action". Mimesis is the most complex of the three, as it requires the understanding of not only the purpose of the action, but its various social ramifications and interpretations in context as well (Donald 2005: 286-287).

Similarly to President Medvedev's modernization strategy in general, the quest for a new historical doctrine of communism utilized terms explicitly borrowed from the Western liberal democratic discourse while not subjecting the country to the actual demands of that discourse, attempting to sustain a specifically "Russian way" of handling the communist past instead. Likewise, it is important to remember that the Soviet modernizing project remained "vitally attached" to the Western modernizing project in the first place (Buck-Morss 2002: 68). The presentation of the Russian "alternative" is therefore hardly an alternative: by following the rules of dominating discourses on dealing with the totalitarian legacy, Russia produces the effect of ambivalence—as it has done often on previous occasions in history (Morozov and Rumelili 2012), thus reproducing its subject position of liminality. We are witnessing an instance of subtle resistance here: what substantively speaking constitutes a challenge to the master discourse of democratic reckoning with the totalitarian legacy is legitimized in Russia by presenting hybrid demands within the rules of recognition of the dominating discourse so that Russia's difficult past might be handled on its own terms. A subtle, hybrid resistance of this kind is allegedly more empowering than outright opposition or exclusion (Bhabha 1994: 110; for further discussion, see Polat 2011: 1259-60 and 1268). Through mimicry and semblance of the "master discourse", yet without following up on the demands of that discourse with actual policies of transitional justice not just in symbolic, but also legal-political terms, Russian mnemopolitical "modernization" effectively constitutes an act of subversion of the said discourse. Such mimicry enables the subjugated to reverse its subjugation to the hegemonic discourse (see Polat 2011: 1268). More generally, the search for a "modern mnemonic narrative" of communism is an

offspring of Russia's mimetic politics—its mimicking of the forms and language of the Western discourse of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*[14] without substance, or symbolic *activity* without real *action* (cf. Känd 2013).

In that sense, the mimetic move in Russia's official mnemopolitical line during the Medvedev presidency sought to particularize the universalist discourse on "modern" social memory management. The result is the subversion of "democratic memory work" as a fixed, universal referent (cf. Polat 2011: 1260). The above-quoted statements by Karaganov and other members of the Russian political elite thus underscore the irrelevance of pondering whether and how Russia can *modernize* in the sphere of its dealing with its communist legacy. Instead, they highlight how Russia reproduces, reconfigures, and subverts the Western discourses of democratic *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* through its own representational practices (cf. Rumelili 2012: 497). Russia's particularism is hardly constitutive of a non-hegemonic or "democratized" understanding of what constitutes proper "memory work" in International Relations (IR), however. As Rosa Vasilaki rightly points out, particularism in the form of regional IR schools is often merely "the mirror-image of the logic underpinning Western dominance: based on the idea of uniqueness of a 'special' civilization, culture or nation, its 'special' place in the world and its 'special' mission, they often produce their own versions of hegemony and imperialism" (Vasilaki 2012: 7; cf. Morozov and Makarychev 2013). Russian representatives' calls for a new historical doctrine that would be more suitable to the country's foreign political interests seek to, on the one hand, reposition Russia as part of the West/Europe, essentially reproducing the terms of the Western discourse on "good memory work". On the other hand, the limited, and as such, subversive, way Russia substantiates its turn towards condemning the violent legacy of communism only reproduces its own ambiguity vis-à-vis "Western standards", as well as ultimately sustaining its liminal position in European (identity) politics (Rumelili 2012: 498). As Morozov and Rumelili have aptly pointed out:

Russia's role as a Europe-maker is presently determined by the fact that it is

unhappy about its exclusion from the European political space, [and] tries to challenge this exclusion, but this challenge is certainly very far from being a radical one. Instead of confronting western/EU hegemony, Russia, in Gramscian terms, prefers to wage a war of position whose main parameters are defined by the hegemonic force. This inevitably leads to a situation where hegemony is being reproduced and even, precisely due to this challenge, tends to consolidate (Morozov and Rumelili 2012: 42).

Russia's mimesis of de-Communization under Medvedev thus ultimately emerges as a productive hegemonic, rather than explicitly counter-hegemonic strategy, for it has arranged discursive elements of the dominant discourse so as to "promote the goal, the aims and the objective of a hegemony" (Herschinger 2012: 76). Whether or not it really will follow the suggested course of condemning the crimes of the communist regime in the form of real actions in this direction remains to be seen. While retrospective justice can involve either perpetrators, victims or both, it defeats the purpose of its main goal (that is, justice) if any distinction between the two categories is eschewed by collapsing everyone, victims and perpetrators alike, into the category of "victims" of a greater tragic force.[15] The Russian state has generally encouraged regarding the Stalin-era crimes as "tragedies" and has conceived of the Russian people as first and foremost victims (e.g., Putin 2007). Selective demonization of the supreme leader and his henchmen has allowed the Russian people to be absolved of all responsibility and to avoid grappling with the difficult questions of complicity, intentional and unintentional, making it essentially seem as if the Soviet regime existed without the Soviet people (Ferretti 2003: 55, 58). The result, as Maria Ferretti claims, is that the Russian people suffer from a "memory disorder"—since the mourning for the victims of the Soviet regime has not been completed, a sense of (unhealthy) melancholia has ensued which continues to hinder the construction of a new democratic identity for Russia (cf. Etkind 2013).

Hence, there has been a general inclination to handle the repressive Soviet legacy, both societally and by the current regime in Russia, as a series of essentially nameless, and thus also agentless tragedies (Etkind 2009; Khazanov 2008). It is difficult to admit the criminal legacy of the predecessor state if one is simultaneously

attempting to inherit the "good legacy". Such mnemonical cherry-picking is hardly consistent. Yet, admitting self-critically to a certain agency inherited from the Soviet Union would inevitably require Russia to reconsider its sense of self, to revise its current major identity-narrative. The temptation to emphasize the "good" legacy at the expense of disregarding the "bad" is naturally human—and thus always present. Russia's long-time reluctance to reckon with the criminal legacy of communism should not be particularly puzzling against that backdrop, but rather consistent with its attempts to maintain the basic consistency of a positive sense of its social "self".

Conclusion

The question of to what extent the current Russian regime can adapt to the de-legitimization of the Soviet regime without destabilizing itself to the core, remains a valid one. *Without acknowledging and denouncing the role of state security structures in the criminal legacy of the communist experiment, the coming to terms with the Soviet past in Russia would hardly meet the bulk of implicit and explicit Western criteria of full-scale Vergangenheitsbewältigung.* Transitional justice was originally conceived as "handmaiden to liberal political transitions" (Sharp 2014), or a core component of modernization based on the Western democratic model. Russia's *osobyi put'* of coming to terms with its communist past points towards a diversion from this model. As regards lustration, and assessment of the role of the security structures in the previous regime's criminal legacy, this sort of "coming to terms with the past" is unlikely to happen in a Russia governed by a former KGB-operative, actively setting the standards of the "new normal" in Russia's post-Soviet neighborhood via its political and military engagement in the Ukrainian crisis. *The initiatives of the Standing Committee on* Historical Memory under the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights aimed at acknowledgement of the mass crimes of the communist regime still remain to be matched by atonement for these crimes, and the recognition of the full human worth of their victims. Except for the

rehabilitation of the victims of the communist political repressions, a clear structural, political, and symbolic break with the past is yet to happen in contemporary Russia. Without facing the entire moral and political implications of the communist experience, Russia's "breaking with its communist past" remains incomplete (Satter 2012: 300-305). The 2014 "memory law" targeting the "dissemination of intentionally false information about the activities of the Soviet Union during the Second World War" and the "rehabilitation of Nazism" (for discussion, see Koposov 2014; Kurilla 2014; Mälksoo 2015) is a painful reminder of the fact that the trend towards "mnemonical modernization" has apparently gone into full reversal after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012.

What, then, does the Medvedev-era search for a modern mnemonic narrative tell us about Russia's readiness to revise its central narrative of a national "self"? Medvedev's administration apparently understood the positive political effects of softening the hardline stance on boasting the achievements of the Stalin era at the price of belittling the crimes of his regime. It was gradually dawning upon the political elite that the absence of denials and selective glorification of the communist past would likely facilitate Russia's rapprochement with the states formerly in its sphere of influence, as well as create a benevolent atmosphere for the EU-Russia partnership for modernization.

However, the suggested path of victim-centric remembrance of the darker chapters of the Soviet period does not firmly indicate a willingness for self-critical memory work that would also consider the issues of agency, responsibility and regret along with depicting oneself as the greatest victim, or greatest martyr of all. While moral masochism and a cult of suffering are allegedly symptomatic for the Russian psyche and its cultural tradition (Rancour-Laferriere 1995), relating to the Soviet past primarily through a sense of martyrdom can hardly be considered a constructive way of engaging with and learning from the past (cf. Etkind 2013). Common catchphrases about overcoming the negative heritage of the past amount to no more than hollow parroting here. Instead, one can only agree with Denis Sekirinsky (2011), the academic secretary of the National

Committee of Russian Historians, that what is needed in order to overcome the negative heritage of Russia's communist past is the emancipation of people, first and foremost, by "turning them into personalities and citizens able to think independently, make their own decisions and be responsible for their behavior."

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[1]   The notions "mnemopolitics" and "politics of memory" are used interchangeably here, referring to the political coordination and sanctioning of particular narratives of the past, generally manufactured, although hardly ever entirely controlled, by elites. Likewise, "mnemonic" is used as shorthand for "memory-related" in the text. For a "Historically Realist" take on the politics of memory, see Berger (2012).

[2]   Established in 2011, see further at: http://president-sovet.ru/about/comissions/permanent/read/5/ (accessed 11 June 2015).

[3]   See http://en.kremlin.ru/structure/councils#institution-18 (accessed 10 June 2015). For a discussion, see Owen (2012).

[4]   The focus on Stalin´s USSR´s responsibility for domestic genocide evades, however, the discussion of its international genocidal activity in the Second World War (see further Shaw 2013: 78; Naimark 2010; Werth 2008).

[5]   Quite symptomatically, his speech nonetheless displayed the blurring and thus fundamental relativization of the categories of victims and perpetrators: "We all should bow low to the millions of victims. After all, the butchers were victims, too." Later on in the speech, he argued that: "all countries of the former Soviet Union … were among the victims—and among the executioners, too" (Karaganov 2011a).

[6]   "Some fear that recognizing in full the horrors of the Gulag and declassifying all the archives would damage the prestige of the country. They will not. Perpetuation of the memory of the victims of the totalitarian regime can only evoke respect. /--/… Russia is one large Katyn, with the thousands of graves of millions of the best citizens of the USSR. By paying respects to their memory in all the villages and cities, from where they were sent to labor camps or for death, to their mostly nameless graves, we shall regain not only self-esteem, but also the respect of all normal people in the world. After all, we shall do so ourselves, without coercion or pressure from outside, not by compulsion, as losers, but voluntarily" (Karaganov 2011a).

[7]   See further http://www.rg.ru/2011/04/08/repress.html (accessed 11 June 2015).

[8]   For the full transcript of the event, see "Stenograficheskii otchet" (2011).

[9]   See further http://www.perm36.ru/ru/novosti/novosti/724-ano-zakryvaetsya-rabota-prodolzhaetsya.html (accessed 11 June 2015).

[10]   As bluntly exemplified by Karaganov, yet again, in the following excerpt: "Russia should fight for positions on the market of ideas and images, since they are playing a much greater role today than ever in the past. The alternative is an inevitable loss in international competition. This fighting requires up-to-date

propaganda tools, but not only them. One must understand what brands, images and ideas can be sold. And it is even more important to ensure that Russian intellectuals, who are the main producers of ideas and images for the country and for the whole world, begin to side with their homeland and—at least partially—with the government. But this is again a problem of our inner organization, which we will have to restructure anyway. If we do not, the result will be a flop in international competition" (Karaganov 2012).

[11] The concept of de-Stalinization goes way back to the mid-twentieth century. According to Adler (2002: 239), "[a]fter the death of Stalin, state policy traversed the spectrum from de-Stalinization to re-Stalinization to de-Stalinization to de-Sovietization". It is perhaps only symptomatic that the most recent calls for de-Sovietization have been dubbed as "de-Stalinization" in popular media yet again. On the intricacies of previous rounds in the long process of Russian de-Stalinization, see also van Goudoever (1986).

[12] This sentiment has been generally shared societally as well, as arguably the vast majority of Russians refuse to admit any collective responsibility for the Soviet regime. Partly, this is due to the fact that there has hardly been another case but the Soviet Russia where the boundaries between perpetrators, accomplices and victims have been so blurred (Viola 2013; Khazanov 2008: 300-301).

[13] See further http://konkurs.gmig.ru/ (accessed 11 June 2015).

[14] The German term for the process of coming to terms with the totalitarian past has become a universal shorthand for a general phenomenon in post-war European mnemopolitics, betraying thus the particularist origins of the contemporary Western "rule of thumb" in dealing with the legacies of totalitarian rule according to a set of normative expectations and standards.

[15] Cf. Karaganov and Fedotov (2011): *"One cannot demand that victims assume responsibility for the barbarities committed against them! At the same time, we must explicitly condemn the heinous crimes of the totalitarian regime and declare that we do not have (and do not want to have) anything in common with them. Not the slightest shade of blame must rest on those Soviet people who had to live in those difficult years, who grew grain, built houses, hunted down thieves, served in the army, and composed symphonies. They lived the only possible kind of life in those inhuman times. But we must renounce the crimes of that regime."*

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