

Navigating the Crossroads: Democracy, National Identity and Memory Politics in Eastern Europe and Russia

Kestävä kehitys ja oikeusvaltio: tutkiva työpaja tulevaisuuden juridiikasta

Bachelor's thesis

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In the early 21st century, democracy encountered challenges around the world, without yet reaching a level of global crisis. Recently, however, established democracies have seen a rise in intolerance and right-wing populism, with the phenomenon of democratic backsliding becoming a significant concern, particularly within the European Union. Efforts to promote democracy have been hindered by both domestic challenges and external influences from authoritarian states.

This paper, conducted as part of a workshop on the future of jurisprudence, employs a social sciences case study method to explore current democratic challenges and the role of memory politics in Eastern Europe and Russia. It addresses three interconnected themes: the challenges facing democracy, self-perception of contemporary Russia as a great power and the use of memory politics in Eastern Europe and Russia to advance political agendas.

The paper concludes that memory politics and memory laws exert considerable influence in shaping historical interpretations, often prioritising national memories and ideological viewpoints.

Accordingly, memory politics and laws have intensified state tensions, both within the European Union and between Central and Eastern Europe and Russia. An examination of self-perception of contemporary Russia as a great power reveals a complex national identity shaped by history and a narrative of greatness. Its advocacy for a multipolar world order signifies an aspiration to affirm sovereignty and mitigate Western hegemony, despite current strained relations with the West.

Key words: democratic backsliding, memory politics, memory laws, national identity, Russia.

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2000-luvun alussa demokratia kohtasi maailmanlaajuisesti monia haasteita, ajautumatta kuitenkaan vielä globaalin kriisin tasolle. Viime aikoina vakiintuneissa demokratioissa suvaitsemattomuus sekä oikeistopopulismi ovat kuitenkin olleet nousussa, ja demokratialaisuus ilmiönä on noussut keskeiseksi huolenaiheeksi erityisesti Euroopan unionissa. Demokratian edistämistä ovat vaikeuttaneet sekä kansalliset että ulkoiset, autoritaarisista valtioista, johtuvat haasteet.

Tämä opinnäytetyö on tehty osana tulevaisuuden juridiikkaa tutkivaa “Kestävä kehitys ja oikeusvaltio” -työpajaa. Nykyisiä demokratian haasteita ja muistin politiikan roolia Itä-Euroopassa ja Venäjällä on tässä työssä tutkittu soveltamalla yhteiskuntatieteiden tapaustutkimusmenetelmää. Opinnäytetyössä tarkastellaan kolmea, toisiinsa kytkeytyvää teemaa: demokratian kohtaamia haasteita, nyky-Venäjän käsitystä suurvalta-asemastaan sekä muistin politiikan hyödyntämistä poliittisen agendan tukemisessa Itä-Euroopassa ja Venäjällä.

Tutkielman lopputulemana on, että muistin politiikalla ja muistilaeilla on huomattava vaikutus historiaa koskevien tulkintojen muokkaamisessa. Etusijalle asetetaan monesti oma kansallinen muisti ja ideologia. Tästä johtuen muistin politiikka ja -lait ovat lisänneet valtioiden välisiä jännitteitä paitsi Euroopan unionin sisällä, myös Keski- ja Itä-Euroopan ja Venäjän välillä. Nyky-Venäjän käsitys suurvaltastatuksestaan tuo esiin monitahoisen kansallisen identiteetin, jota on muotoutunut pitkälti historiaa ja suuruutta korostavan narratiivin kautta. Venäjän tavoittelema moninapainen maailmanjärjestys kuvastaa sen pyrkimyksiä vahvistaa suvereniteettiaan ja vähentää länsimaista hegemoniaa, haastavista länsisuhteistaan huolimatta.

Avainsanat: demokratialaisuus, muistin politiikka, muistilait, kansallidentiteetti, Venäjä.

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1 Introduction

The shaping of historical narratives through memory politics and memory laws has profound implications for national identity and political dynamics in Eastern Europe and Russia. For Russia, the quest for great power status has been a central theme influencing its domestic and foreign policies. In the post-Soviet era, this pursuit has become intricately linked with the country's approach to historical narratives and memory politics. The emphasis on Russia's thousand-year history is reflected in the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution and President Putin's statements. The paper addresses two primary questions: firstly, how does Russia perceive its status as a great power and what are the key elements of its self-perception; and secondly, how do memory politics and memory laws influence historical interpretations and narratives in Eastern Europe and Russia?

The post-Soviet era, from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to the present day, is a crucial period for understanding how states in this region initially formulated historical narratives and constructed national identities. Today, these states confront shifting political landscapes, connected closely with the rise of populism. By examining these dynamics, this paper aims to shed light on the intersection of democracy, memory politics and Russia's great power status in Eastern Europe and Russia. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how post-Soviet states, especially Russia, use history as a tool for political and ideological purposes, influencing their behaviour on the international stage.

The paper is structured as follows. After introducing research materials and the broader context, the section of Democracy and Democratic Backsliding encompasses discussions on the state of democracy globally. It also touches upon efforts to promote democracy, particularly in the context of the European Union. The following section on National Identity and Great Power Status of Russia examines self-perception of Russia as a great power, focusing on its political discourse, historical narrative and national identity. The subsequent section, Memory Politics and Memory Laws, revolves around the politics of memory and historical narratives, particularly in Eastern Europe and Russia. The next section, Grand Prince Vladimir and Thousand-year History of Russia, contributes by providing an extensive perspective to Russia's history. The concluding section summarises how memory laws, historical interpretations and national identity intersect in Eastern Europe and Russia.

2 Research Materials and the Broader Context

This paper originates from the seminar workshop "Kestävä kehitys ja oikeusvaltio: tutkiva työpaja tulevaisuuden juridiikasta", which focused on the future of jurisprudence by comparing the principles of the rule of law and sustainable development.

Using a social sciences case study method, I examine how memory politics and historical narratives influence historical interpretations and national identity in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia. At the outset of the seminar workshop, my research assignments were based on Lauri Mälksoo's article "International Law and the 2020 Amendments to the Russian Constitution". Mälksoo is a professor of international law at the University of Tartu. This article, along with the topic of memory politics, inspired further exploration of how historical perceptions can shape national identity and influence international relations.

Primary sources for this paper include journal articles on law, democracy, international relations, security, and Eastern European and Russian politics, representing both European and Russian perspectives. To better understand Russia's self-perception as a great power and its appreciation of historical continuity, Russia's thousand-year history, including the legacy of Grand Prince Vladimir, provides a foundational narrative that shapes contemporary national identity and informs political discourse. Consequently, this study is further supplemented by the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution, along with selected speeches and articles by President Putin and publications by scholars in history, theology and sociology.

The period under scrutiny spans from the fall of communism to the present day. The collapse of communism in 1991 marked a turning point in how Eastern European states and Russia confronted their pasts. This transition period saw a re-evaluation of historical narratives and national identities, which have been pivotal in shaping contemporary politics and international relations in the region. Initially, there was a movement towards acknowledging past crimes, particularly those associated with World War II, embodied by the implementation of laws against Holocaust denial. However, the political landscape evolved dramatically in the subsequent decades. The rise of national populism and authoritarian regimes globally has seen memory manipulation become a tool of populist politics.¹ In Central and Eastern Europe

¹ Kopusov 2022, p. 273. Kopusov also argues (ibid.) that the essential conceptual framework for comprehending politics of history today, particularly in Eastern Europe, is "populism and memory", contrasting with the 1990s

(CEE), this has manifested in the adoption of memory laws that serve political agendas, reflecting a broader trend of eroding democratic standards.²

Russia's approach to its Soviet past, particularly under President Vladimir Putin's leadership, demonstrates a strategic use of historical narratives. The emphasis on the heroic role of the Soviet Union in World War II serves to bolster national pride and legitimacy, reinforcing Russia's self-image as a great power. This selective memory, however, places less attention on the more controversial aspects of its history. By examining Russia's thousand-year history, this paper explores the era of Ancient Rus' and the transformation of the state and religion under Grand Prince Vladimir's reign. Consequently, the paper discusses contemporary reflections on this legacy within President Putin's administration. Russia thus provides a compelling case study of the tension between confronting a complex history and constructing a national identity centred on great power status. Alongside its Eastern European neighbours, Russia exemplifies how memory politics can shape historical narratives.

3 Democracy and Democratic Backsliding

Studies from the 2010s indicated that democracy, defined in this paper as political democracy in a liberal sense, was not experiencing a global crisis. Despite encountering certain setbacks worldwide, the overall levels of democracy remained close to their historical peaks and the majority of countries maintained stable democratic systems.³ However, subsequent global trends have emerged, including the rise of intolerance and right-wing populism in established democracies, alongside the erosion of democratic rights in newer democracies.⁴ Furthermore, as observed by Haggard & Kaufman, there is a phenomenon of countries regressing from democracy. Leaders with autocratic tendencies are gaining power through democratic

focus on "memory and democracy". He attributes this shift to the diminishing significance of the transition from communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe. This paper, however, does not adhere to this construct.

² Kopusov 2022, pp. 273, 275; Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, pp. 98, 101.

³ Haggard – Kaufman 2021, p. 27; Mechkova – Lührmann – Lindberg 2017, pp. 167–168.

⁴ Mechkova – Lührmann – Lindberg 2017, pp. 167–168. Some European post-communist states are particularly susceptible to the influence of populist parties, especially ethnopopulist ones, and can drift toward increasingly authoritarian governance due to their ethnic homogeneity. This homogeneity tends to foster prejudices against "foreigners". See Etnopopulismi ja demokratialaisu 2024.

processes and eroding democratic standards and institutions from within, often with support from segments of the population.⁵

Back in the mid-1990s, in Europe the European Union (EU), which initially focused on economic integration, began to systematically promote democracy.⁶ As observed by Dimitrova & Pridham, states aspiring to join the EU, as well as those already in the accession process, responded to these efforts with varying degrees of consistency and success.⁷ The preparation for the entry of post-communist Central and Eastern European states (CEE) led to the development of a functional model of EU's democracy promotion through integration. Despite being in transition when some of the countries applied for membership in 1992–1993, these states had to undergo a lengthy and demanding process before being recognized as consolidated democracies.⁸ Dimitrova & Pridham expected that “with time, CEE candidate states have become locked into a permanent integration process that makes it increasingly difficult to reverse democratization”.⁹ However, recent political changes have demonstrated that once acquired democracy might not be that stable.¹⁰

Democratic backsliding refers to gradual erosion of institutions, rules and norms resulting from actions taken by duly elected governments. Haggard & Kaufman have outlined three interconnected causal factors behind this concept. Firstly, they suggest that social and political polarisation contributes to governmental dysfunction and decreases trust in institutions. Secondly, the impact of this polarisation depends on whether potential autocrats can seize control of the executive branch and garner support from the legislature to concentrate their authority. Paradoxically, legislatures play a pivotal role in "collapse of the separation of powers", laying the political groundwork for undermining other democratic features. Lastly, Haggard & Kaufman state that democratic backsliding occurs incrementally. This slow

⁵ Haggard – Kaufman 2021, p. 27. Numerous far-right leaders, including Donald Trump in the United States, Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom and Matteo Salvini in Italy, have started to undermine democratic systems in their respective countries through various regulatory measures after gaining power democratically. See *Demokratialaisuus ympäristövastaisen politiikan kasvualustana* 2024.

⁶ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 95.

⁷ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 108.

⁸ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, pp. 95–96.

⁹ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 98.

¹⁰ For instance, the regime changes in Poland and Hungary from liberal to illiberal can be considered exceptional and unique. Despite their shift, Poland and Hungary remain members of the EU, which is founded on democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights. From the perspective of their membership, both states should still be regarded as constitutional democracies, even if their version is flawed or merely formal. Through their current illiberal governance systems, Hungary and Poland have been able to test the limits of the EU. See *Mikä muuttaa liberaalin demokratian epäliberaaliksi demokratiaksi?* 2024.

subversion of democratic institutions enables incumbents to gradually accumulate power, making it difficult to counteract until it is too late.¹¹

Sedelmeier argues that within the EU, the concern regarding democratic backsliding primarily revolves around a trend of democratic decline rather than merely lower initial levels of democracy in newer, post-communist member states.¹² For instance, Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán proposed illiberal democracy as an alternative to the Western liberal democratic model in his 2014 Tusnádfürdő speech.¹³ In this context, the term "illiberal" serves a dual purpose beyond justifying democratic backsliding by appealing to national or regional uniqueness. It also signifies an effort to challenge the Western European model of democracy, which has traditionally been regarded as the standard to imitate in East-European, post-communist countries.¹⁴ Besides Hungary, Sedelmeier has found that democracy faces the most serious threats in other Eastern member states as well. While Poland is frequently mentioned, Bulgaria has also experienced a steady decline in democracy since joining the EU, and Slovenia has seen backsliding due to recent government policies.¹⁵ However, there are reasons for optimism in other Eastern states, such as political changes in the Czech Republic after the 2021 parliamentary and 2023 presidential elections and Estonia surpassing many Western European states in democratic standards.¹⁶

Within the EU, according to Sedelmeier, it is noteworthy that the narratives surrounding an East-West dichotomy regarding democracy do not perfectly align with a regional divide. Moreover, generalisation of the East-West perception might foster a deterministic outlook on democracy in the Eastern member states. If these states are perceived as incapable of reaching the same democratic standards as their Western counterparts, it could be assumed that they will either regress or maintain a low level of democracy once the incentives of pre-accession conditionality are removed.¹⁷ The Western member states are not immune to backsliding as evidenced by the cases of Greece and Austria. Sedelmeier thus suggests that instead of a stark

¹¹ Haggard – Kaufman 2021, pp. 27–28.

¹² Sedelmeier 2024, p. 833.

¹³ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, p. 244.

¹⁴ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, p. 246.

¹⁵ Sedelmeier 2024, p. 845. To be noted that within the EU, adherence to the rule of law is mandatory; member states cannot redefine its core characteristics in opposition to EU law. See Oikeusvaltion modernit ideat – tarvitaanko niitä? 2024.

¹⁶ Sedelmeier 2024, p. 845.

¹⁷ Sedelmeier 2024, p. 829.

divide, the diversity of positions within the EU represents more of a continuum of democratic differences.¹⁸

The European Union's approach to promoting democracy varies notably for countries led by openly authoritarian or nationalistic regimes with no aspiration to join the EU. As highlighted by Dimitrova & Pridham, in cases of seriously defective democracies, such as Belarus, the EU has little recourse but to wait for internal or external dynamics to potentially instigate change.¹⁹ This approach stems from the perception of EU membership as the final goal.²⁰ Therefore, the EU's effectiveness in promoting democracy appears closely linked to the prospect of membership.²¹

In general, global efforts to promote and maintain democracy have met with adversity. As emphasised by Haggard & Kaufman, since the mid-2000s autocratic states, notably China and Russia, have gained prominence on the world stage and actively sought to reinforce authoritarian regimes, further complicating the global democratic landscape.²² In line with this, Kazharski & Macalová argue, that Russia has endeavoured to provide alternative interpretations of Western concepts, assimilating and subsequently re-exporting them. At times Russia has even challenged the West under the banner of its own ideologies.²³ Furthermore, the Kremlin has maintained ambiguity regarding Russia's belonging to Europe. Through skilful discursive tactics, it has positioned itself "with, within, and against the West", displaying flexibility in its rhetoric. For instance, as Kazharski & Macalová suggest, when the political and identity costs of openly rejecting Western norms were deemed too high, the Kremlin has resorted to subverting and diluting the notion of democracy.²⁴

Therefore, what underlies Russia's confidence in challenging Western ideals of democracy and the world order? The next chapter delves into Russia's national identity, followed by an investigation of its great power status, which has been emphasised as part of ideological changes within Putin's regime since his return to the presidency in 2012.

¹⁸ Sedelmeier 2024, pp. 844–845.

¹⁹ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 108.

²⁰ Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 95.

²¹ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, p. 251; Dimitrova – Pridham 2004, p. 98. The EU institutions appear to be ineffective in addressing the problem of the weakening rule of law among its member states. On the other hand, the European Court of Justice has proven to be the strongest actor in terms of safeguarding the rule of law and constitutional democracies. See EU:n keinoit oikeusvaltioperiaatteen suojelemiseksi 2024.

²² Haggard – Kaufman 2021, p. 39.

²³ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, pp. 237–238.

²⁴ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, p. 244.

4 National Identity and Great Power Status of Russia

National identity, as defined by Fukuyama, is rooted in a collective belief in the legitimacy of a country's political system, regardless of whether that system is democratic or not. This identity can be codified in formal laws and institutions that govern societal conduct. However, national identity also covers the cultural and value-oriented domains. It encompasses the narratives that citizens construct about themselves: their origins, celebrations, shared historical memories and the criteria for genuine membership within the community.²⁵

In 1993, shortly after the collapse of the communist regime, Russia had a relatively open political system.²⁶ Leaders of the party and state apparatus embraced liberal and democratic ideals, initiating reforms aimed at creating a new Russia.²⁷ Rejecting the Soviet past seemed acceptable to many Russians in the early 1990s, fuelled by the hope that the collapse of the Soviet Union would lead to a swift transition to prosperity and democracy.²⁸ Millions of individuals embraced the concepts of perestroika and democracy²⁹, viewing Western models of governance and economic development as appealing alternatives to traditional national historical myths, promising stability, justice and affluence.³⁰

The regime change in Russia was characterised by substantial, albeit incomplete, democratisation.³¹ Haggard & Kaufman argue that factors such as the weakness of the established legislature and inherently fragile Russian democratic institutions greatly influenced the country's path toward democratisation.³² Instead, Sherlock stresses the political chaos and economic hardship eroding confidence in the prospect of a prosperous and democratic future.³³ When Putin assumed the presidency in March 2000, Russian society was still divided over the legacy of the Soviet era, especially regarding Stalinism. During his first

²⁵ Fukuyama 2018, p. 8.

²⁶ Fish M. S. 2006, p. 11.

²⁷ Tatunts – Ponamareva 2021, p. 412. Cf. Casula 2013, p. 10.

²⁸ Sherlock 2011, p. 102.

²⁹ Tatunts – Ponamareva 2021, p. 412.

³⁰ Sherlock 2011, p. 102.

³¹ Fish M. S. 2006, p. 13.

³² Haggard – Kaufman 2021, pp. 29, 34.

³³ Sherlock 2011, p. 102.

term, Putin focused on reforming the foreign policy agenda and reducing the economic and political disorder the state had inherited from the preceding president.³⁴

It is noteworthy that Putin's regime does not adhere to any specific ideology.³⁵ The Russian Constitution explicitly prohibits proclaiming any ideology as the state ideology or making it obligatory.³⁶ At the beginning of his presidency, the political philosophy of Putin centred around the concept of "sovereign, and just, democracy for Russia". In 2006–2007 this perception was introduced and developed as "sovereign democracy", composing elements of sovereignty, understood as independence and non-interference, and a minimalist collective notion of democracy, contrasting with Western liberal democracy.³⁷ To a certain degree, this perspective aligns with the conventional understanding of sovereignty, which entails a state's authority to govern its population free from external interference. On the other hand, it also aims to protect the sovereignty of Russia against other states and transnational entities such as companies and non-governmental organisations. Additionally, defending sovereignty involves active participation in international affairs and preventing other states from establishing dominance in cultural, economic or political spheres globally.³⁸

In sovereign democracy the president of Russia serves as the linchpin of the governmental structure, ensuring the constitution's integrity and upholding the principle of separation of powers. Regardless of variations in the nature of political regimes, the existence of Russia as a free society within a sovereign state is dependent on the presence of a strong and well-coordinated central government.³⁹ Therefore, as Kortukov has noted, some measures during Putin's first period in office, such as tightening the state's control over the media, were necessary for centralising the power of the state and enforcing the rule of law.⁴⁰

By the end of Putin's second presidential term, a hybrid regime was established, selectively conforming to Western standards while employing "managed democracy" to control political

³⁴ Sherlock 2011, p. 94.

³⁵ Laruelle 2020, p. 348. Cf. Kiryukhin – Shcherbak 2022, pp. 22–28.

³⁶ Article 13, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

³⁷ Kortukov 2020, p. 82. The concept of "sovereign democracy" originated from the texts and speeches of Vladislav Surkov. Although the term itself was short-lived, the political practices and ideas it encompassed remained central to the discourse during Putin's presidencies, especially after 2004, and continued to shape policies under President Medvedev. Eventually, the term fell out of use, officially abandoned by the regime and deemed obsolete by President Medvedev. See Casula 2013, pp. 3–4. See also Kortukov *ibid*.

³⁸ Kortukov 2020, p. 89.

³⁹ Kortukov 2020, p. 92; Surkov 2008, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Kortukov 2020, p. 88.

competition.⁴¹ As a system, "managed democracy" enables the regime to evade democratic accountability while maintaining the appearance of democratic processes. The fundamental components of Putin's managed democracy included a strong presidential system, state-controlled public media and strict control over elections.⁴² The Kremlin, along with experts with ties to it, referred to managed democracy in response to a system in which Putin prioritised political stability and economic reforms for recovering from the negative legacy of the 1990s.⁴³

As Neumann summarises, these slogans of "managed democracy" and "sovereign democracy" stress the importance of a strong state as the guarantor of governance. He points out that this Russian model contrasts sharply with the liberal trend of minimising state intervention. Neumann continues that Putin's approach advocates direct state control over society, viewing law as a tool for the executive rather than a constraint. This perspective sees society as something to be managed and not allowed autonomy, directly opposing the liberal emphasis on limited government and indirect governance.⁴⁴

In contrast, the earlier non-ideological regime underwent changes following Putin's re-election as president in 2012, as observed by Laruelle, Kiryukhin and Shcherbak. They noted an evolution in the regime's approach to ideology, indicating a shift in its stance on ideological matters.⁴⁵ Upon Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Laruelle identified three notable ideological shifts in his regime. Firstly, the regime adopted a more structured and content-driven approach, based largely on anti-Western and anti-liberal sentiments, Russian greatness and the infallibility of Russian/Soviet leaders. Secondly, it intensified repression against liberal opposition and enacted new, selectively enforced laws to suppress undesirable behaviour. Lastly, the state-backed ideology remained vague, focusing on Soviet nostalgia and a state-centric vision of Russia, allowing for a broad, albeit controlled, historical narrative.⁴⁶

To analyse great power status, the polarity theory of international relations is functional for this paper. The theory posits that the determination of a state's status as a great power is contingent upon the systemic structure of the international system, whether it is bipolar,

⁴¹ Kazharski – Macalová 2020, p. 243.

⁴² Kortukov 2020, p. 88; Tsygankov – Parker 2015, p. 80.

⁴³ Tsygankov – Parker 2015, p. 80.

⁴⁴ Neumann 2008, p. 146.

⁴⁵ Laruelle 2020, p. 349; Kiryukhin – Shcherbak 2022, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Laruelle 2020, p. 349. See also Kuposov, p. 284.

unipolar or multipolar. In a unipolar or bipolar system, established great powers tend to limit the foreign policy options available to emerging great powers. A bipolar world order prevailed during the Cold War, with the Soviet Union standing as a superpower alongside the United States, possessing significant military, economic and political capacities, as well as ideological influence.⁴⁷

After the collapse of communism, Šćepanović and other researchers suggest that post-Soviet Russia aimed to portray itself as a "normal great power", seeking recognition of its values and institutions particularly from Western counterparts.⁴⁸ Despite Russia's material resources and military power, Neumann argues that its chosen governance model hindered aspirations for recognition as a great power equal to leading European nations and the United States.⁴⁹ The policy to "make Russia strong again" was based on an outdated understanding of strength, impeding its acknowledgment as a fully-fledged great power in a world increasingly shaped by liberal standards of civilization.⁵⁰ Similarly, for instance, Turkey has encountered challenges with expanding European states system. While Turkey asserted its distinct governing structures, such assertion conflicted with the European classification system emphasising the similarity of political systems.⁵¹

In a multipolar system, states can enhance their great power roles through a balance of power.⁵² According to Birinci, Sucu & Safranchuk, since assuming power in 2000, President Putin has sought to solidify the position of Russia as a sovereign great power within a multipolar world.⁵³ Moreover, the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation defines Russia's global position by its vast resources, permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council, participation in key international organisations, status as one of the two largest nuclear powers and its role as the successor to the Soviet Union. The policy highlights Russia's remarkable contributions to the victory in World War II and shaping international relations, asserting its role as a sovereign centre of global development. As stated in the Concept, Russia is committed to maintain the global balance of power, foster a multipolar international system and promote peaceful and progressive development

⁴⁷ Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, p. 520.

⁴⁸ Šćepanović 2024, pp. 81–82. See also Morozov – Rumelili 2012, p. 40; Neumann 2008, p. 129.

⁴⁹ Neumann 2008, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Neumann 2008, p. 148.

⁵¹ Morozov – Rumelili 2012, p. 40; Neumann 2008, p. 133.

⁵² Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, p. 519.

⁵³ Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, p. 520.

worldwide.⁵⁴ Consequently, President Putin has portrayed contemporary Russia as one of the central pillars of the emerging, more equitable multipolar world.⁵⁵

However, as Šćepanović and Neumann have noted, when soft power strategies have failed, Russia has resorted to confrontational tactics, such as military interventions in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. These actions have drawn criticism from other great powers for destabilising the region and reigniting conflict in Europe.⁵⁶ Šćepanović specifically claims that these aggressive tactics have led to damaging consequences for Russia's status as a great power, including diplomatic isolation, diminished global influence and military weaknesses.⁵⁷

Facing strained relations with the West and China's rise as a potential superpower, contemporary Russia has turned towards the East.⁵⁸ For instance, in his 2024 inauguration speech as President of Russia, President Putin emphasised Russia's commitment to build a multipolar world and an equitable, indivisible security system in collaboration with partners in Eurasian integration and other sovereign development centres.⁵⁹ Additionally, Russia has maintained pragmatic ties with traditional Western allies such as Turkey and Israel in the Middle East, strengthening its great power status through military and diplomatic achievements. Using the relationships developed during Putin's presidency, Birinci, Sucu & Safranchuk suggest that Russia has an opportunity to enhance its role as a great power in a multipolar world order and utilise these connections in its dealings with the West.⁶⁰

Requests for being recognised as a great power is not unique merely to Russia. Identity politics is a diversified phenomenon observed in nation-states, which seek recognition externally by the international community. For instance, the Chinese government under Xi Jinping has extensively discussed China's "century of humiliation", highlighting attempts by the United States, Japan and other nations to hinder its return to the great power status it historically held for millennia.⁶¹

⁵⁴ 5th provision of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

⁵⁵ Gala concert devoted to the 1160th anniversary of Russian statehood 2022.

⁵⁶ Šćepanović 2024, p. 82; Neumann 2008, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Šćepanović 2024, p. 90.

⁵⁸ Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, p. 518. For further details on regional foreign policies of Russia, see the chapter “V. Regional tracks of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation” of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.

⁵⁹ Vladimir Putin has been sworn in as President of Russia 2024.

⁶⁰ Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, pp. 526–527.

⁶¹ Fukuyama 2018, p. 6.

Viewed comprehensively, the status of Russia as a great power is a multifaceted concept, comprising both tangible and intangible dimensions. Within Russian political discourse, this great power status is frequently associated with tangible factors such as the expansive territory, military strength and nuclear capabilities. Moreover, from an intangible perspective, it plays a crucial role in Russian national identity, representing a historical continuum that has evolved alongside a complex historical relationship with the Western world.⁶² As Malinova discusses, constructing and maintaining national identity involves central elements of public remembering and forgetting.⁶³ This reconstruction of the past and engagement with memory can occur through diverse channels.⁶⁴ In Eastern Europe and Russia, for example, certain historical interpretations and narratives have been consolidated through memory politics and memory laws.

5 Memory Politics and Memory Laws

In the 1980s and 1990s in Europe, memory laws, perceived in this paper as laws that promote or enforce a state's official narrative of past events, aimed to foster a transnational and cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust and to consider memories of World War II as a cornerstone for overcoming nationalist impulses that led to the war.⁶⁵ These laws in Western European countries, as well as in some in Eastern Europe, are addressed to safeguard the memory of victims of state-sponsored crimes.⁶⁶ Yeltsin, the former president of Russia, adopted these memory politics influenced by the West, blending Holocaust commemoration with anti-communism and national heritage celebration.⁶⁷ Under his administration in 1991–1999, the memory of the Holocaust was promoted with caution.⁶⁸

In response to popular belief and the importance of positive representations of the Great Patriotic War⁶⁹, President Medvedev, holding office in 2008–2012, took decisive action to safeguard Russia's dominant memory of the war. In 2009, Medvedev established the Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's

⁶² Birinci – Sucu – Safranchuk 2021, p. 518.

⁶³ Malinova 2021, p. 1004.

⁶⁴ Tatunts – Ponamareva 2021, p. 414.

⁶⁵ Malinova 2021, p. 1002. See also Fish E. 2021, p. 326; Belavusau – Gliszczyńska-Grabias 2020, p. 337.

⁶⁶ Kopusov 2022, p. 285.

⁶⁷ Kopusov 2022, p. 283.

⁶⁸ Kopusov 2022, p. 285.

⁶⁹ In Russia, World War II is primarily regarded as the Great Patriotic War.

Interests. This commission was tasked with combating both domestic as well as foreign "falsifiers" regarding the Soviet victory in World War II.⁷⁰

Since 2012, President Putin crafted a clear narrative, presenting the Great Patriotic War as a heroic chapter in modern history of Russia. According to Kopusov, central to this myth of the Great Patriotic War were assertions that the triumph of the Soviet Union over fascism was momentous, overshadowing any negative aspects. Compared to the atrocities committed by other nations, these negative aspects were deemed historically inevitable and insignificant, reinforcing a non-negotiable pride in Russia's past.⁷¹ Furthermore, the recent amendments to the Russian Constitution in 2020 stipulate that Russia honours the memory of its defenders and ensures defence of historical truth.⁷² On the contrary, the Eastern European memory discourses clash with the official narrative of Russia, prioritising the loss of national statehoods and sufferings from the Soviet occupation.⁷³ Mälksoo L. thus assumes that the ongoing debate over history in public discourse between Russia and Central and East European governments will continue.⁷⁴

Memory politics in the East are shaped by the integration to the EU.⁷⁵ Kopusov regards that since the 1990s, and particularly in the 2000s, the EU has strongly endorsed a memory law approach which prohibits Holocaust denial, as well as denial of crimes against humanity.⁷⁶ Within the EU integration processes, Holocaust-centred memory policies of the EU expanded eastwards. However, as Baranowska & Castellanos-Jankiewicz noticed, the new member states incorporated their own unique features into adapted EU policies, sometimes hampering the EU's politics aiming to create a common European historical memory.⁷⁷

Mälksoo M. addresses that Eastern European nations have been asserting their right to remember and interpret the events of World War II according to their own narratives with greater assertiveness. For instance, Poland and Baltic nations seek to shed light on the historical truths of World War II's impact in Eastern Europe. Their foreign policies aim to

⁷⁰ Fish E. 2021, pp. 327–328; Sherlock 2011, p. 104.

⁷¹ Kopusov 2022, p. 283; Tatunts – Ponamareva 2021, pp. 418–419.

⁷² Article 67¹, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

⁷³ Malinova 2021, p. 1002.

⁷⁴ Mälksoo L. 2021, p. 86. As enacted by the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution, it is the duty of the Russian Federation to defend the "historical truth". Mälksoo L. argues that this constitutional obligation takes on a highly contested context and meaning. See *ibid.*

⁷⁵ Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, p. 97.

⁷⁶ Kopusov 2022, p. 278. See also Malinova 2021, p. 1002.

⁷⁷ Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, pp. 97–98.

challenge Western European narratives of the immediate past by advocating for the incorporation of their unique World War II experiences into the broader European historical consciousness.⁷⁸ Furthermore, this effort has also aimed to garner the EU backing in pressuring Russia to acknowledge its culpability for the crimes of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet occupation in the Baltic states.⁷⁹

Contrary to the EU's proactive involvement in the legal governance of historical memory, Russia and Ukraine have implemented a series of punitive laws. According to Baranowska & Castellanos-Jankiewicz, these laws intend to suppress criticism or reinterpretation of the role of their respective countries in World War II.⁸⁰ A comparable legislation exists in Turkey as well, notably the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes insults to the Turkish state and is often utilized against individuals acknowledging the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire.⁸¹

Moreover, when nationalist leaders assumed power in Ukraine and Poland, the countries sought to solidify their backing by employing progressively nationalistic rhetoric. This led to the eruption of memory conflicts within the Russian-Ukrainian-Polish sphere.⁸² Memory laws enacted in Russia in 2014, Ukraine in 2015 and Poland in 2018 are claimed to promote populist agendas, by prioritising the protection of national narratives over transnational memory regarding state-sponsored crimes.⁸³ In this context, as Kuposov argues, the politics of history, including the enactment of memory laws, emerged as a favoured tool consciously utilised by all three regimes in their political propaganda endeavours.⁸⁴

Eventually, the external environment, mainly the post-communist states in Europe, addressed highly politicised criticism of the Soviet past, in particular the period of World War II and the Soviet victory.⁸⁵ In 2020, amendments to the Russian Constitution confirmed that Russia is the state successor of the Soviet Union.⁸⁶ According to Mälksoo L. this constitutional

⁷⁸ Mälksoo M. 2009, p. 660.

⁷⁹ Mälksoo M. 2009, p. 655.

⁸⁰ Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, p. 99.

⁸¹ Kuposov 2022, p. 285.

⁸² Kuposov 2022, p. 279.

⁸³ Kuposov 2022, p. 289.

⁸⁴ Kuposov 2022, p. 279.

⁸⁵ Sherlock 2011, p. 103.

⁸⁶ Article 67¹, paragraph 1 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation. The exact expression in the article prescribes Russian to be "the legal successor of the Union of SSR within its territory, and a legal successor (legal continuator) of the Union of SSR as regards membership in international organisations and their bodies, participation in international treaties, and as regards obligations of the Union of SSR foreseen by international treaties and its active assets outside the territory of the Russian Federation". See *ibid.*

commitment clearly embraces the Soviet Union's legacy, focusing on its heroic aspects of strength and glory, while Russia is reluctant to accept the negative aspects of Soviet history, particularly the responsibility for crimes committed during the Stalinist period. He noted, that the interchangeable use of the concepts of state succession and state continuity in the Constitution thus enables Russia to pragmatically and strategically present itself as a continuation of the Soviet Union when beneficial, and conversely, claim to be a state successor, arguing for the discontinuity of certain Soviet obligations or responsibilities when detrimental.⁸⁷

As Baranowska and Castellanos-Jankiewicz succinctly note, throughout the 2000s, post-communist states have adopted memory laws to further their political agendas. These state-approved interpretations of historical events often clash with democratic values by perpetuating official narratives and using exclusionary tactics. In extreme cases, memory laws even facilitate transnational memory wars and emphasise ethno-national identity, reminiscent of interwar crises and democratic backsliding.⁸⁸ Moreover, Baranowska and Castellanos-Jankiewicz suggest that historical memory has emerged as a crucial factor in the post-communist transition of Eastern European countries as they grapple with their past. While the 1990s were marked by a sense of optimism, there has been a subsequent realisation that communist legacies, spanning historical, political and legal dimensions, are deeply intertwined with national politics to a greater extent than previously acknowledged.⁸⁹

In the context of Russia, the 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution aim to recognize and honour not only its recent past but also its thousand-year history. As demonstrated in the following chapter, the era of Prince Vladimir's reign a millennium ago stands as one of the most important events in early Russian history.

6 Grand Prince Vladimir and Thousand-year History of Russia

The 2020 amendments to the Russian Constitution declare that Russia recognizes the unanimity of the State that was established historically. Basis of this stands on a thousand-

⁸⁷ Mälksoo L. 2021, pp. 83–85. In general, it has been claimed that the historical policy of modern Russia appears defensive and reactive, with power elites showing little readiness for critically examining the past and acknowledging shared responsibility for historical tragedies. See Tatunts – Ponamareva 2021, p. 416.

⁸⁸ Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, pp. 98–99.

⁸⁹ Baranowska – Castellanos-Jankiewicz 2020, p. 96.

year history, the memory of ancestors who passed on ideals and a belief in God, and continuity in the development of the Russian state.⁹⁰ According to Mälksoo L., this indicates that President Putin and the other drafters of the constitutional amendments aimed to address the challenges inherited from Russia's history, particularly the legacy and fate of the Russian Empire.⁹¹

In his inauguration speech 2024, after being sworn in as President of Russia, President Putin emphasised the importance of honouring Russia's thousand-year history and the legacy of their predecessors. He stated that these predecessors achieved remarkable heights by always prioritising the country and recognised that truly challenging goals could only be realised through unity with the nation and its people. The predecessors built Russia into a great power and left behind a legacy of glorious achievements that continue to inspire contemporary Russia.⁹²

Moreover, in 2021, when asked about Russian-Ukrainian relations, President Putin stated that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, a single whole. He underlined that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians all descend from Ancient Rus', which was the largest land⁹³ in Europe. This land united a vast territory with one language, economic ties and, after the baptism, the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still determines the shared affinity today.⁹⁴

In history, Ancient Rus' was a unique political phenomenon.⁹⁵ The "land of Rus'" functioned as a loose federation of largely autonomous, commercial city-states, each with its own identity and mutual obligations.⁹⁶ By the time Vladimir solidified his rule as prince of Kiev around 980, it was evident that Rus' was becoming increasingly isolated politically and culturally by remaining pagan. Surrounding regions had already embraced Christianity: Mieszko I of Poland accepted Christianity under Roman jurisdiction in 965, Khan Boris of Bulgaria was baptised in 864 and the Byzantine Empire had been Christian for centuries and engaged in evangelistic efforts among its pagan neighbours.⁹⁷ Hosking considers that Prince Vladimir

⁹⁰ Article 671, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation.

⁹¹ Mälksoo L. 2021, p. 79.

⁹² Vladimir Putin has been sworn in as President of Russia 2024.

⁹³ The term "land" is used here to denote a nation or state, reflecting its common usage for "state" throughout the Kievan period. See Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 173.

⁹⁴ Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" 2021.

⁹⁵ Heppell 1987, p. 250.

⁹⁶ Shepard 2007, p. 404. See also Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, pp. 173–175.

⁹⁷ Heppell 1987, p. 250. See also Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 61.

made a deliberate decision regarding religion, influenced by the geopolitical landscape of the time. The main motive was his desire to cultivate strong diplomatic ties with Byzantium, a realm which was the primary trading partner of Rus'. Prince Vladimir perceived Byzantium as possessing greater prestige and authority as an established earthly empire, in contrast to the semi-nomadic khaganates and the nascent and fragmented kingdoms of Western Europe.⁹⁸

The conversion to Christianity marked a significant milestone in Russian history, symbolising the integration of Russians into the Byzantine world. This event holds immense importance, not only from a religious standpoint but also in terms of broader civilization. The Byzantine Empire, as a dominant political and cultural force in the mediaeval era, represented a pinnacle of civilization to both Russia and Western Europe. According to Vernadsky & Karpovich, the impact of Byzantine civilization on Russia surpassed that of any other European country. It led Russia to become a part of the Greek Orthodox world, thereby aligning with the cultural and religious ethos of the Byzantine world.⁹⁹

When it comes to Prince Vladimir, the Russian Primary Chronicle, a historical manuscript from the early mediaeval period, is a central source for examining his historiographical portrayal. The Chronicle begins describing Vladimir as a lustful, deceitful and marauding pagan warrior, transforming the picture of him into a holy prince, even “new Constantine”, who baptised his people into the Byzantine faith.¹⁰⁰ The darker aspects of the ruler's character might be attributed to the chronicler being a monk. Consequently, the narrative in the Primary Chronicle is regarded as subjective in its depiction of Vladimir's pagan era.¹⁰¹

In 970, Sviatoslav appointed his son Vladimir to rule in Novgorod, the most ancient city in the land of Rus'.¹⁰² After Sviatoslav's death, the supreme rank among Rus' princes fell to Iaropolk, the eldest son of Sviatoslav and brother to Vladimir, who began ruling in Kiev. In 976, a hunting dispute led to a skirmish that resulted in the death of their younger brother Oleg. Fearing for his life, after Oleg's death at the hands of Iaropolk, Vladimir fled to Scandinavia, where he assembled an army of Varangians. Two years later, he returned to Rus', retook Novgorod and prepared to march against Iaropolk in Kiev.¹⁰³ Eventually, Iaropolk met Vladimir in Kiev, but as Iaropolk entered the door, two Varangians stabbed him

⁹⁸ Hosking 2001, p. 38.

⁹⁹ Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 348.

¹⁰⁰ Griffin 2019, p. 173.

¹⁰¹ Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 71.

¹⁰² Cross 1930, p. 174; Griffin 2019, p. 135.

¹⁰³ Cross 1930, pp. 177–178; Griffin 2019, p. 135.

in the chest, murdering him. With both of his brothers dead, Vladimir became the sole ruler of Kiev.¹⁰⁴

Prince Vladimir unrivalled political and military dominance over Rus', with no considerable internal or external challengers, granted him the autonomy to dictate the structure of public worship and the level of involvement expected from his subjects.¹⁰⁵ He lived a prodigal lifestyle, having extreme lust for women with hundreds of concubines in various cities.¹⁰⁶ Vladimir was engaged in war and collected tribute, but in 986 he showed a sudden interest in the doctrines and worship practices of other lands.¹⁰⁷

A year later, in 987, Prince Vladimir began a religious investigation by consulting his boyars, who advised him to test the services of different lands and see how they worship God. He sent ten wise men to observe the religious rituals of the Muslim Bulgars, the Germans loyal to Rome and the Greeks in Constantinople.¹⁰⁸ The emissaries returned and belittled the practices of the Bulgars and Germans but spoke with awe about the splendour and beauty they witnessed in Constantinople, feeling as if they were in heaven. They declared that God dwells among the Greeks and their service surpasses all others. The boyars unanimously endorsed the Byzantine faith. When Vladimir asked where he should be baptised, his boyars left the decision to him.¹⁰⁹

Prince Vladimir, still unbaptized, resumed his military campaigns, this time targeting Cherson, a Byzantine outpost on the Black Sea. His army faced a prolonged siege, growing impatient until a Cherson man named Anastasius shot an arrow into the Rus camp with a message revealing the location of the city's water supply. Vladimir vowed to be baptised if this information proved true. Indeed, it was. After cutting off the water, the city surrendered and Vladimir entered Cherson.¹¹⁰ He then threatened the Byzantine emperors Basil and Constantine with a similar siege of Constantinople unless they gave him their sister, Princess Anna of Byzantine, in marriage. The emperors agreed on the condition that Vladimir will be

¹⁰⁴ Cross 1930, p. 180; Griffin 2019, p. 136. In the pre-Christian era, princes such as Vladimir, consolidated power by eliminating rivals and even members of their own kin. The term "sole ruler" was not widely used in the 11th century and the periods of sole rule were relatively short-lived, with Vladimir (c. 978–1015) and his son Iaroslav (1036–1054) serving as notable examples. See Shepard 2007, p. 393.

¹⁰⁵ Shepard 2007, pp. 380–381.

¹⁰⁶ Griffin 2019, p. 136. See also Cross 1930, p. 181.

¹⁰⁷ Griffin 2019, p. 137. For details on conquests and wars, see Cross 1930, pp. 182–183.

¹⁰⁸ Griffin 2019, p. 138; Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 62.

¹⁰⁹ Cross 1930, pp. 197–199; Griffin 2019, p. 139. See also Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 62.

¹¹⁰ Cross 1930, pp. 199–200; Griffin 2019, p. 139. See also Zernov 1949, p. 133.

baptised. Vladimir consented and emperors Basil and Constantine sent Princess Anna and priests to Cherson for the baptism. Though reluctant, Princess Anna was persuaded by her brothers to comply for the sake of converting Rus' and preventing war.¹¹¹ The marriage alliance as well as religious mission signalled a departure from previous Byzantine policy and reflected a shift in the balance of power between Constantinople and Kiev.¹¹²

After his baptism and marriage, Prince Vladimir settled in the capital and set in motion the conversion of his realm by destroying pagan idols and ordering the statue of Perun¹¹³ to be thrown into the river. He summoned the inhabitants of the city to the Dnieper River for a mass baptism, conducted by priests from Cherson and the princess's entourage. In the mass baptism the priests recited prayers and "there was joy in heaven and upon earth to behold so many souls saved". Prince Vladimir instructed the construction of churches where pagan idols once stood and promoted education for children of the best families.¹¹⁴

In 989, Prince Vladimir decided to build a church dedicated to the Holy Virgin, bringing in Greek craftsmen and adorning the church with icons and religious artefacts from Cherson. The completed church was entrusted to Anastasius of Cherson, a man who had shot the arrow into the Rus camp.¹¹⁵ Prince Vladimir was noted for his generosity to the poor and compassion for criminals, hesitant for instance to inflict a death penalty upon anybody. He was even criticised for his leniency towards the perpetrators by the church leaders.¹¹⁶

Vladimir fostered peaceful relations with rulers of the Poles and Hungarians through the exchange of letters, greetings and gifts. In addition, relations with newly Christian neighbours

¹¹¹ Cross 1930, p. 200; Griffin 2019, p. 140.

¹¹² Shepard 2007, p. 382. The Byzantine court ceremonially prohibited marriage alliances between members of its imperial household and individuals from foreign backgrounds. See Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 63.

¹¹³ Perun, the Slavic god of thunder, held a prominent place in the pantheon. Casting his statue into a river symbolised a public act of humiliation towards the deity. See Heppell 1987, p. 253.

¹¹⁴ Cross 1930, pp. 204–205; Griffin 2019, p. 141. See also Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 66. With unchallengeable military power and his willingness to use strength, Vladimir's order for the mass baptism encountered no resistance. The citizens of Kiev obeyed the command, whether "out of love or fear" of Prince Vladimir's authority. See Shepard 2007, p. 383.

¹¹⁵ Cross 1930, p. 207; Griffin 2019, p. 142; Zernov 1949, p. 133. Zernov observes that Anastasius of Cherson provides an important insight into Prince Vladimir's ecclesiastical strategy. Despite being labelled a traitor to his city, Anastasius risked his life to help Vladimir capture the Byzantine stronghold. This incident suggests that Prince Vladimir rewarded Anastasius with high ecclesiastical honours for his loyalty. This portrays Prince Vladimir as a ruler keen on maintaining control over the church, not merely in political and military realms but also in ecclesiastical matters. By appointing his trusted ally as chief bishop, Prince Vladimir ensured unwavering obedience and solidified his autocratic rule over both secular and religious domains. See Zernov 1949, pp. 135–136.

¹¹⁶ Griffin 2019, p. 142; Zernov 1949, pp. 131–132. See also Cross 1930, p. 210; Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, pp. 72–73.

were maintained by diplomatically skilled emissaries. Aiming to enhance divine favour and political unity, Vladimir promoted educating his elite to reinforce his leadership and their shared faith.¹¹⁷ Despite his good relations with neighbours, as well as piety and charity towards his own people, Vladimir's life remained intertwined with violence. In 1015, he died while preparing for armed conflict with his son Iaroslav, the viceroy of Novgorod, who, under pressure from the Novgorodians, had refused to pay tribute to Kiev.¹¹⁸

Prince Vladimir's death was mourned by all and he was buried in the Church of the Virgin, which he had built himself.¹¹⁹ As Hosking outlines, at the time of his death, Vladimir had made remarkable strides in uniting a previously fragmented realm. He successfully converted it to a single faith, established an administrative and fiscal system, allied it with a powerful ally and defended it against its most formidable adversaries.¹²⁰

Today, the statue of Grand Prince Vladimir, erected in 2016 near the ancient Kremlin walls in central Moscow, symbolises for Russians the enduring legacy of a leader who played a pivotal role in shaping the history and identity of Russia and its people. During the statue's unveiling ceremony, President Putin emphasised Grand Prince Vladimir's significance as a revered saint, national leader and warrior, highlighting his profound influence on Russian history. According to Putin, St. Vladimir's efforts in unifying and defending Russian lands, along with his leadership in establishing a strong, centralised state, laid the foundation for the diverse peoples of Russia to unite as one cohesive entity. President Putin also called for the preservation of the thousand-year historical continuity and the building of a future that honours Russia's rich heritage while strengthening its greatness.¹²¹

In conclusion, honouring Russia's thousand-year history involves recognizing and valuing the long and complex heritage that has shaped the nation and created the Russian identity. The roots of Russian history are deeply embedded in the establishment of Kievan Rus, which laid the foundation for what would eventually become the Russian state. Among the figures and events that have influenced Russia's development, President Putin has underlined how Grand Prince Vladimir laid the groundwork which enhanced the power and influence of Rus',

¹¹⁷ Shepard 2007, p. 401.

¹¹⁸ Vernadsky – Karpovich 1959, p. 74; Griffin 2019, p. 142.

¹¹⁹ Cross 1930, pp. 212–213; Griffin 2019, p. 142.

¹²⁰ Hosking 2001, p. 42.

¹²¹ Monument to Vladimir the Great opened in Moscow on Unity Day 2016.

fostering equitable relations with both Eastern and Western nations and solidifying its status among neighbouring entities.¹²²

7 Conclusion

This paper has explored the interconnected themes of democracy and its recent challenges, the self-perception of contemporary Russia as a great power and memory politics in Eastern Europe and Russia. These investigations reveal a complex interplay between political dynamics, historical narratives and national identities.

Firstly, I underscored the growing global concerns over democratic backsliding. This phenomenon is not confined to certain Eastern European states but is also observed among liberal democracies worldwide. Particularly, the issue concerns the rise of leaders advocating autocratic tendencies. Furthermore, I assessed the efforts of the EU to promote democracy, noting that the practice of promoting democracy through the accession process leaves states uninterested in joining outside the influence of the EU.

Secondly, I examined the evolving self-perception of Russia as a great power, its transition from the concept of "sovereign democracy" to a narrative accentuating historical continuity of Russia. These narratives are mainly established and maintained by leaders, such as President Putin. Accordingly, Moscow's efforts to assert its status amid shifting global power structures aim to position Russia as a sovereign great power within a multipolar world.

Thirdly, I discussed memory politics in Eastern Europe and Russia, highlighting the emergence of memory laws and their implications for historical narratives and national identities. Memory laws can promote nationalist historiography and safeguard national narratives, as seen in certain post-communist states. Moreover, these laws are perceived to challenge democratic principles and the European project of fostering a shared historical memory, especially regarding World War II.

Finally, the paper delves into Russia's thousand-year history, highlighting its implications for both domestic policy and international relations. This historical perspective strengthens portraying Russia as a great power with a prominent role in global history, serving Russia to

¹²² Reception to mark 1000 years since the death of St. Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles 2015. See also 1030th anniversary of Baptism of Rus celebrations 2018.

legitimise current political leadership and policies by drawing on the achievements and lessons of history.

Essentially, this paper aims to address two key research questions related to Russia's great power status and the role of memory politics in Eastern Europe and Russia. The first research question examines how Russia perceives its status as a great power and identifies the key elements that shape this self-perception. Russia's self-image as a great power is built upon its material capabilities, historical continuity and national identity. It emphasises an unbroken lineage of statehood from Ancient Rus' to contemporary Russia. Key elements of Russia's self-perception include its vast territory, military and nuclear power as well as a narrative of historical greatness. Additionally, Russia's emphasis on a multipolar world order reflects its desire to counterbalance Western dominance and assert its sovereignty and influence, despite strained relations with the West.

The second question considers how memory politics and memory laws influence historical interpretations and narratives in Eastern Europe and Russia. These politics and laws are indispensable in shaping historical narratives in the region, often prioritising national over transnational memories and promoting specific ideological viewpoints. In Russia, selective historical remembrance serves current political interests, while in Eastern Europe, memory laws reinforce certain narratives and challenge perceptions of World War II and the Soviet era. These dynamics can lead to the manipulation of historical memory, significantly affecting how historical events are perceived and understood.

In conclusion, the contemporary political landscapes in Eastern Europe and Russia are characterised by an intricate interaction between democracy, national identity and historical memory. The issues elucidated in this paper raise a question of the compatibility between memory politics and memory laws with democratic principles. Furthermore, given the rise of populism and nationalism on a global scale, there is a need to explore whether memory politics can serve as a countervailing force. These inquiries underscore the necessity for further investigation into the influence of memory politics and historical narratives, particularly within the contexts of Eastern Europe and Russia.