



Policy Brief

WWII COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ITS POLITICS IN A REAL WAR CONTEXT, IN BELARUS: WHAT EDUCATION POLICIES ARE NEEDED FOR THE NEXT GENERATION?

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Contributors:

OST Research Centre: OST Research Centre is a department of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST). The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

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- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

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Visit us / Contact us:

W: <https://tsikhanouskaya.org/en/> E: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org T: @Tsikhanouskaya

W: <https://obo.web.ox.ac.uk/> E: obo@area.ox.ac.uk T: @OxfordBelarus

W: <http://www.globsec.org/> E: info@globsec.org T: @GLOBSEC

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Executive Summary

This policy brief offers a recap of the discussion held on 5 May 2022, at the webinar conjointly organised by the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO), the Research Centre of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST) and GLOBSEC. The discussion focused on how historical events and memories are used in the official discourse of the Belarusian authorities to legitimise the regime and suppress opposition. The policy brief also points out that ideological narrative over the collective memory regarding World War II is reproduced through different mechanisms, including the education system. The policy brief finally develops **three policy recommendations** related to education and cultural policy for the next generations in Belarus.

Background

World War II is one of the historical events that is most actively used in the official discourse of the Belarusian authorities. Since Lukashenka came to power, pro-governmental ideologists, politicians, and historians have been trying to construct collective memory and national identity around this event, oscillating between the hatred of the West and affinity with brotherly Russia. May 9 (Victory Day) is one of the main official holidays in Belarus and the key reference for the construction of the ideology of “us against them” in school textbooks. The national education policy in Belarus actively reproduces these ideological guidelines. In the context of the political crisis in the country, which began in 2020, the Belarusian authorities are trying to increasingly use images of World War II and, in particular, the concept of "Nazism" as a platform for the stigmatisation of political opponents. In 2021, the rehabilitation of Nazism was made into a separate article in the Criminal Code of Belarus. Now that Russia is waging a real war against Ukraine and Lukashenka is supporting Putin in it, the notions of "Victory Day," "World War II," and "Nazism" in official discourse have become even more controversial.

How is the collective memory of World War II constructed in Belarus and how does it influence education policy today? How is the image of World War II and the concept of "Nazism" politically used in official discourse in Belarus and Russia today to entice hatred? How is the criminal responsibility for the "rehabilitation of Nazism" used by the authorities to combat political opponents? How does the war in Ukraine affect the image of World War II in the collective memory of Belarusians? What needs to be done in and via education to allow people to make more informed choices?

These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) and GLOBSEC think tank. The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by Dr Anastasia Kudlenko, OBO Research Fellow and the

speakers of the event included **Andrei Yahorau**, analyst of the Centre for European Transformation and adviser to Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's on development aid; **Dr Ulad Belavusau**, Senior Researcher in European Law at the T.M.C. Asser Institute (the Hague), University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands); **Dr Aliaksei Lastouski**, IRES, Uppsala University (Sweden), "Political Sphere" Institute (Lithuania), European Humanities University (Lithuania); and **Dr Felix Ackermann**, Research Fellow German Historical Institute Warsaw (Poland).

Analysis of the issue

The concept of memory loss proves particularly important for Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The concept is mostly associated with Holocaust denial, or genocide denial more generally, in social legal studies because of its criminal consequences and is framed in terms of punitive measures in many European countries. Yet, the scope of memory loss today is wider than just prohibition of genocide. By memory loss, scholars also mean or address soft regulation, administrative regulations, ministerial degrees, governing the way we teach history, the way we erect monuments, the way we name or rather rename streets, especially in the context of democratization or decolonization. Therefore, the scope of memory loss is broad and encompassing.

The classic memory loss, in comparative constitutional law, can be traced back to the late 1980's and early 1990s with Strauss cassettes in Germany, with Germany introducing the Holocaust denial beyond the pure hate speech regulation.¹ While the period of the 1990s and 2000s mostly deals with the legislation of Western Europe —and to a lesser extent countries beyond Europe – the 2010s can be regarded as a period where activation of memory loss in Central and Eastern Europe became visible. The reason behind this is Putin's aggressive policies of collective memory and use of historical events exemplified with the events of 2014 in Ukraine and Russia's attempts to regulate the memory of what is still notoriously termed in Russia "the Great Patriotic War" (Великая Отечественная война). In 2014, with the amendments to the Criminal Code, Russia introduced punitive measures including up to five years of imprisonment that outlaws denial of the positive role the Soviet Army (or Red Army) played in the so-called liberation of Europe.² Poland is another example. The 2018 amendment to the Law on the Institute of National Remembrance offered criminal punitive measures for those who publicly attribute responsibility to Poland or the Polish people in the crimes committed by the Third Reich.³

¹ Please see a discussion on the legislation: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/germanys-laws-antisemitic-hate-speech-nazi-propaganda-holocaust-denial/>; and the law itself: https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_stgb/englisch_stgb.html

² https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/04/140404_nazism_duma_punishment

³ <https://www.culawreview.org/journal/polands-memory-wars-the-legal-governance-of-history>

How does Belarus fit into the discussions and recent trends on re-writing historic memories and their denial? First, Lukashenka's regime advocated the pro-Soviet and pro-Russian interpretation of the Belarusian history and tried to construct collective memory and national identity around World War II, oscillating between hatred of the West and affinity with brotherly Russia. In the 1995 referendum, when Lukashenka consolidated his power following a series of regulations, the white-red-white flag was also prohibited, which is associated with the Belarusian National Republic in 1918. Lukashenka tried to revitalise Soviet symbolism by returning to the green-red flag still used by the regime and to stigmatise the opposition as "Nazi collaborators."⁴ The memory politics was recently reactivated and heavily used by the Lukashenka regime. In December 2020, a change to the Criminal Code was introduced, reminiscent of the Russian criminal provision for interpretation of the "Great Patriotic War."⁵ It is another example of the legal governance of history, as the law added new provisions (in particular, Article 113) with 5-8 years of imprisonment for the denial and trivialization of the genocide of the Belarusian people during the Second World War up until December 1951.

The way Lukashenka misrepresents World War II and historical events for legitimising his regime deserves further scrutiny, especially within the context of the mass protests in 2020. The regime uses this to delegitimise its political opponents. For example, opposition figures are portrayed as descendants of Nazi collaborators during the Second World War. The same tactic is used to discredit other countries that criticise Lukashenka when they refuse to extradite Belarusian opposition figures residing in their territories. It is also important to note that Belarussian laws about rehabilitation of Nazism and denial of genocide of Belarusian people are vague, a fact which could be used by the courts. However, probably due to lack of resources, the Lukashenka regime does not actively follow this policy.

On a broader scale, for a long time, the essence of the ideological apparatus of the Belarusian state is not that pro-regime forces believe in the ideological truth—including the truth about WWII—but it functions as a mechanism for raising the loyal citizenry in Belarus. The key question at this point is whether the propaganda of the regime on building a historical narrative and linking it to contemporary debates, especially targeting school children and the younger population in Belarus, has been effective. The mass protests in 2020 give us some indication of this. According to data from the Center for East European International Studies (ZOiS), people aged 18-29 were substantially represented at the mass protests in 2020⁶. These young people, who attended schools in the early 2000s when pro-regime propaganda had been intense, made up 28% of protesters. While the protesters were led by private sector workers, a significant number of people employed in state service sectors in which ideological control was dense (like health care, education, and culture) were also involved. Students were almost

⁴ For further information on "The standoff between the two flags", see Shaun Walker, "How the two flags of Belarus became symbols of confrontation", *The Guardian*, August 22, 2020.

⁵ In fact, Belarusian state didn't come up with the idea to create this law, they used a Russian idea where they had a group of historians working on the legislation for genocide against Soviet people.

⁶ <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/belarus-at-a-crossroads-attitudes-on-social-and-political-change>

40% more likely than non-students to be strong critics of the regime and 60% less likely to strongly support it. In summary, despite the state propaganda displaying the national symbols of Belarus, the white-red-white flag, as a symbol of Nazi collaborators, the protestors widely used it during the protests in 2020.⁷ They continue to use it as a symbol of protest against the regime in Belarus. This suggests the historical narrative aggressively built over years by the Lukashenka regime to align with Putin's narrative in Russia was rejected by the people.

Conclusions

This policy brief focused on a set of critical questions: How is the collective memory of World War II constructed in Belarus and how does it influence education policy today? How is the image of World War II and the concept of "Nazism" politically used in official discourse in Belarus and Russia today to entice hatred? How is the criminal responsibility for the "rehabilitation of Nazism" used by the authorities to combat political opponents? How does the war in Ukraine affect the image of World War II in the collective memory of Belarusians? What needs to be done in and via education to allow people to make more informed choices?

Lukashenka in Belarus heavily draws on historical narratives to justify his oppressive regime. By doing so, first, he develops closer ties with Russia in re-writing historical memories in favour of the incumbent regimes. Second, he tries to legitimise his regime in the international arena by stigmatising the opposition as followers of Nazism. The education system is heavily used by the regime to build a collective narrative for this purpose. The recent mass protests and high representation of young Belarussians in those protests, however, showed that the pro-regime propaganda attempting to build an alternative collective memory has certain limits, despite the regime's heavy control over domestic institutions, including mass media, the education system, and public discourse. Based on the analysis in this policy brief, **three related policy recommendations** stand out.

Policy recommendations

1. Education plays an important role in determining which narrative dominates public debates around historical events. It is the right time to rethink Belarusian history at large and to think of new narratives for schools, to be prepared for a post-Lukashenka Belarus.
2. When it comes to changing the system of education it is critical to look at the existing humanitarian traditions developed in Belarusian literature. This will help Belarusian people to be raised in something other than the prevailing military spirit.
3. Building a Holocaust Museum in Belarus is an important step to be taken.

⁷ <https://www.zois-berlin.de/publikationen/belarus-at-a-crossroads-attitudes-on-social-and-political-change>

Contacts

Oxford Belarus Observatory, Oxford School of Global and Area Studies:

Email: obo@area.ox.ac.uk

Twitter: [@OxfordBelarus](https://twitter.com/OxfordBelarus)

GLOBSEC

Email: comms@globsec.org info@globsec.org

FB: <https://www.facebook.com/GLOBSECforum/>

Twitter: [@GLOBSEC](https://twitter.com/GLOBSEC)

Research Center of the Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya (OST RESEARCH CENTER)

Email: researchcenter@tsikhanouskaya.org

YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyEEXOn_QtIrmPfCHaajsdQ/videos

