The Past as Present: Foreign Relations and Russia’s Politics of History

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The past influences everyone, for sure. But it offers so many options that we have to view current decisions and political choices as exactly what they are—choices, with alternatives, and choices that have been made by people who want things to work out their way.1

The question about the extent to which collective memory and historical narratives influence Russia’s international conduct is obviously part of a larger problem, which is the relationship of Russia’s history to its present and future. Basically, the issue that has been hotly debated for quite some time by foreign and local scholars is whether Russia is truly unique in its constant striving to (ab)use and manipulate history, being, as many claim, a country with a proverbially “unpredictable past” whose authoritarian present and (likely equally bleak) future are essentially predetermined by its thoroughly undemocratic historical legacy. But from the broader comparative perspective, however, Russia doesn’t appear to be that exceptional—after all, many societies use history to forge nation-states, foster social cohesion and patriotic sentiment, and to legitimate the rule of the powers that be.

And yet some aspects of Russia’s historical process arguably make its case somewhat special indeed. Two features of Russia’s historical development in particular appear to stand out. First, the country’s history is characterized by dramatic political discontinuity. In the past century “Russia” changed its (historical) skin three times: following the disintegration of the dynastic Russian Empire accompanied by violent civil war, it was reconstituted as the communist USSR whose breakup 20 years ago led to the emergence of the present-day Russian Federation. Each of the 20th century dramatic transformations powerfully affected the notions of what “Russia” is and what it meant to be Russian. These very upheavals and disruptions make turning to the “treasure trove” of Russian history in search of appropriate symbols, images and meanings—what

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has come to be known as the “usable past”—quite problematic. Indeed, which of the recent Russian pasts one is to choose as a resource as these pasts seem to be so radically different? Second, alongside Russia’s political instability there is, paradoxically, a striking picture of geopolitical stability, meaning Russia’s quite remarkable longevity as a geopolitical entity. At least since the beginning of the 18th century, “Russia” has been a permanent geopolitical fixture on Europe’s north-eastern margins with its persistent pretence to the status of a great (European) power.2

But whatever Russia’s “special features,” the relationship of its history to its present and future is not principally different from that of other countries. Russia’s current policies (both domestic and foreign) are certainly made under the influence of the past. As Marx famously put it, people act not “under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”3 But he opened this important paragraph by forcefully stating that “[M]en make their own history,” which is very true—they make it while pursuing their specific interests, weighing up various options and facing multiple alternatives.

Against this backdrop, I intend to investigate what kind of link there is between Russia’s foreign policy and what is nowadays called the “memory politics” or the “politics of history.” I will start off by briefly looking into the issue of the specifics of the Russian governing elites’ understanding of the importance of the past. The discussion of Russia’s deployment of history politics within a broader framework of its foreign policy will follow. The analysis of the crucial link between history politics and Russia’s (international) identity will come next. I will conclude by summing up the key arguments advanced in this study.

My main thesis is that post-Soviet Russia, like many other countries, does instrumentalize history to achieve certain political objectives, including in the sphere of international relations. However, Russia’s wariness of any political philosophy, its reluctance to be associated with any clearly defined ideological position, and its intention to avoid meaningful ideological debates compel it to opt for the kind of history politics that is characterized by a high degree of ambivalence.