



NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

Olga Yu. Malinova

**MEMORIES ABOUT “THE HARD
1990S” AS A RESOURCE FOR
ADAPTATION TO THE NEW
TURBULENCE: THE ANALYSIS OF
THE RUSSIAN MEDIA**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM
WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: POLITICAL SCIENCE
WP BRP 90/PS/2023

MEMORIES ABOUT “THE HARD 1990S” AS A RESOURCE FOR ADAPTATION TO THE NEW TURBULENCE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIAN MEDIA²

The paper contributes to better understanding of public perceptions of the new reality emerging after the entry of Russia’s troops in Ukraine on February 24, 2022 and the unprecedented retaliatory sanctions from the West. It focuses on how the memories about the traumatic experience of the 1990s were activated to manage the new turbulence and uncertainty. Based on publications of the printed and electronic media in February-August, 2022, through the qualitative content analysis conducted in the MAXQDA app, the paper reveals typical patterns of framing the connections between “then” and “now”. The author argues that memories turned to be an essential symbolic resource for making sense of the new reality, as soon as the latter displayed many analogies with the past traumatic experience. It finds that the activation of memories about the 1990s was largely based on the established frames of remembrance that became re-interpreted in the new context. In particular, the past experience of “hard times” that had been overcome provides confidence that the current situation is manageable. At the same time, a dangerous proliferation of a xenophobic discourse proposing the eradication of a liberal “fifth column” was detected.

Keywords: Collective memory, frames of remembrance, the hard 1990s, public discourse.

JEL Classification: Z

¹ National Research University Higher School of Economics. Department of Politics and Government. E-mail: omalinova@hse.ru

² The research was conducted with financial support from the Department of Social Sciences of the HSE University.

Introduction

In contemporary Russia, framing the 1990s as a hard time that should never be repeated is a dominant pattern. According to the survey taken by Levada Center³ in March 2020, 62 % of the respondents believed that the 1990s had brought more bad things than good ones, and only 19 % thought that good things prevailed. The answers varied remarkably depending on the age: among those who entered the 1990s being 30 years old or younger, the share of respondents believing that bad things prevailed was 65%, among the elder cohort it was 70%, while among those who in 1990 were under 6, it was 53% (Greben' and Agapeeva 2020). Anyhow, negative perceptions of the early period of post-Soviet transformations obviously prevail. This is both mirrored and supported by the popular trop *likhie devianostye* (the troubled, or hard, or dash 1990s) that is often contrasted with the “stable 2000s” (Bonch-Osmolovskaia 2018).

Of course, negative memories about the 1990s largely reflect a real experience of millions of people. Nobody could deny the hardships that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet economic and political systems, and dramatic market reforms. However, the reality was more complicated insofar as many people, though definitely not a majority, actually benefited from the reforms (Sharafutdinova 2020: 113). New opportunities for social mobility emerged, the Soviet practices of consumption based on a shortage of consumer goods and informal exchange (*blat*) were left in the past, higher education became more available. In the mid-1990s, computerization and development of digital communication gradually started to affect everyday life. One should not forget that the economic stabilization in the 2000s was based on the institutions that were created mostly in the 1990s, and on the growth of oil prices. So, there are fair grounds for narrating the two phases of Russia's post-Soviet transformations in terms of both continuity and contrast. As Gulnaz Sharafutdinova importantly remarked, theoretically it was possible to represent the “economic miracle” of the 2000s as a long-expected result of the painful reforms of the 1990s (2020: 8). However contrasting these two decades became a dominant pattern in public and private discourses.

Theories of collective memory consider selective remembrance and forgetting as an outcome of social construction of shared ideas about the past (Halbwachs, 1992; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Wertsch, 2002; Müller 2004; Olick, 2007 etc.). With such an approach, to explain the vagaries of shared memories about the early stages of Russia's post-Soviet transition, one needs to study how they were constructed in various public discourses and practices. According to the literature, the negative framing of the 1990s was actively promoted by the Russian authorities (Sharafutdinova,

³ The ANO Levada Center has been included in the registry of non-commercial organizations acting as foreign agents.

2020; 2022; Malinova, 2021), as well as the communists and the national-patriots (Malinova 2019; 2020). It also was maintained by films, novels, TV talk-shows (Sharafutdinova, 2020) and proliferated in social media communications (Merzlyakova, 2019; Utekhin, 2021; Makhortykh, 2021). Being widely shared, the myth about “the hard 1990s” and “the stable 2000s” became a key element of narratives legitimizing Putin’s regime, as well as specific political decisions (Malinova 2021).

The entry of Russia’s troops in Ukraine on 24 February, 2022 that is officially labelled as “the special military operation” (SMO)⁴, and the unprecedented retaliatory sanctions from the West affected this legitimizing myth in two ways. On the one hand, these new conditions made irrelevant the idea of stability that for many years was presented as Putin’s main achievement. As a result, the official narrative about Russia’s post-Soviet transition that used to be a story of building national unity out of the divisive chaos inherited from the Yeltsin years (Bacon, 2012) evidently changed. In the new context, restoring Russia’s great power international status appeared a goal for which stability and people’s wellbeing, which previously were presented as Putin’s priorities (Malinova 2022), could be bargained away. In the context of the unfolding crisis, it became irrelevant to boast of stability that is undermined, even if the official propaganda presented the worsening condition of the Russian economy as a conspiracy of the hostile West. On the other hand, as this paper argues, with the rise of turbulence and uncertainty about the future, the memories about the 1990s turned to be an important symbolic resource for grasping the new reality.

This paper contributes to better understanding of public perceptions of this reality by scrutinizing the patterns of framing remembrances about the experiences of the 1990s in the public discourses after 24 February, 2022. It is based on publications of the printed and electronic media (N 192) during the first 6 months of the SMO. The materials for analysis were mainly retrieved from the collection “The Central Press” of the EastView database. It contains publications from about 40 major printed and electronic media outlets that present various parts of the ideological spectrum, including some of those that have been banned by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Communications (Roskomnadzor) after 24 February, 2022. This measure affected many opposition media outlets, which brought a large part of Russian political discourse beyond the legal public sphere. Yet, some of the banned media continue functioning, and their publications are still accessible inside Russia with VPN services. Currently, this practice is not

⁴ In the Russian Federation, using alternative terms for naming this process is prosecuted under laws against discrediting the armed forces or spreading false news about them, passed in May, 2022.

considered illegal⁵. It is hard to estimate how many people use VPN services, but taking into account a share of those who draw information from the internet⁶ it might be suggested that the number of Russians who read the opposition media is quite sizable. To cover various ideological segments of the Russian media discourse, the analysis presented in this paper particularly focuses on publications of *Moskovsky Komsomolets (MK)* and *Argumenty i Fakty (AiF)*, as media with the broadest readership, *Zavtra*, *Moskovskaia Pravda (MP)* and *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, as media expressing ideas of the national-patriots and anti-Westernists, and online media platform *Republic* (former named *Slon*), as a sample of media with liberal and pro-Western orientation. On 15 October, 2021, the Russian Ministry of Justice added *Republic* to the list of “foreign agents”. In March 2022, its website was banned by Roskomnadzor. For the purposes of this research, its publications were accessed in the EastView database.

The fragments of media publications that mentioned the 1990s were coded in the MAXQDA app, focusing on how “then” and “now” were represented and either connected or opposed to each other. It helped to detect distinctive patterns of connecting the experience of the early period of post-Soviet transformations to the present situation and expected future that are discussed below.

After a short analysis of changes in patterns of representation the 1990s in the official discourse, the paper focuses on media discourses. It tries to reveal how the memories about the 1990s were activated and (re)framed during the first months of the SMO and Western sanctions, when there was much uncertainty about the sustainability of the Russian economy, and huge negative changes in everyday life were expected. The paper argues that memories about the early years of post-Soviet transformations turned to be an essential symbolic resource for making sense of the new reality, as soon as the latter displayed many analogies with the past traumatic experience. It finds that the activation of memories about the 1990s was largely based on the established frames of remembrance that became re-interpreted in the new context. Representations of the 1990s in the public discourse remained essentially prone to ideological polarization. However, some attempts to reconsider conventional narratives also became visible.

Changing the representations of the 1990s in Putin’s rhetoric

The most radical changes were detected in Putin’s discourse. According to the previous research, appealing to the memory of the 1990s was an essential element of Putin’s strategy of

⁵ E.g., In April 2022, Dmitry Peskov, press secretary for president Putin confirmed publicly that using VPN is not illegal (Peskov soobschil... 2022).

⁶ According to the survey of VCIOM, the internet is the main source of information for 29 % of the respondents, and 53 % use both TV and Internet (VCIOM 2022).

legitimization since the 2000s (Sharafutdinova 2020; Malinova 2021). Referring to the “hard past” to emphasize the achieved stability and/or to warn against thoughtless reforms became a habitual way of argumentation in his rhetoric. The previous research found that since 2004, the share of references to the 1990s in the transcripts of Putin’s interviews and public meetings appeared larger than that in speeches based on pre-prepared texts, which suggests that this way of argumentation was deeply interiorized (Malinova, 2021: 430, 432). After February 24, 2022, it virtually disappeared from Putin’s rhetoric. In the transcripts of his speeches in February-August, 2022, only five cases of mentioning the 1990s were detected. None of them framed the 1990s in terms of binary opposition to Putin’s time that was typical for his rhetoric before.

In four cases, Putin denounced the hostile intentions of “the collective West” that as early as in the 1990s and early 2000s, “was actively supporting separatism and gangs of mercenaries in southern Russia” (Putin, 2022a). Although it was not a totally new idea, the fact that it was included in Putin’s main addresses on the occasion of the SMO, i.e. on February 24, when he informed about its beginning (Putin, 2022a), and on September 21, when he declared a limited military mobilization (Putin 2022c), signaled about its centrality for the new legitimizing narrative.

The fifth case was the Video address on National Flag Day, in which Putin presented the 1990s as an integral part of the history of the Russian state by emphasizing that the three-coloured flag “remained Russia’s symbol in difficult, challenging periods of its history – under Peter the Great when the Russian Empire was still forming, on the battlefields of World War I, and amid the dramatic changes of the contradictory, arduous 1990s” (Putin 2022b). By putting it this way, Putin framed the 1990s as an episode of the repeating story about Russia as a phoenix, who rises “from the ashes every time” after “dark periods and challenges”, and achieves “heights that seem unattainable to others” (Putin 2018). Such framing proliferated in Putin’s speeches in the 2010s, as Russia’s relationships with the West worsened (Malinova 2022).

While presenting the 1990s as a part of the “long” historical narrative and reminding about unfriendly behavior of the West were not totally new ideas, avoiding statements about the domestic hardships associated with this period signified an essential shift in Putin’s rhetoric.

Re-framing memories about the 1990s in public discourses

Coding the fragments of media publications mentioning the 1990s revealed several distinctive patterns of connecting “then” and “now” that emphasize either similarities or differences with the post-February 24 situation. Most often the revealed patterns were derived from the repertoire of meanings associated with the narrative about “the hard 1990s” that was established long before. Yet,

connecting the stereotype ideas about the 1990s with the changing context augmented the established narrative with new continuations. The following sections present the most salient patterns of grasping the dramatic changes brought by the SMO and sanctions imposed by the West by appealing to memories of the 1990s. Some of these patterns are peculiar for specific ideological segments of the Russian public discourse, while others are present across its whole spectrum.

“Back to the 1990s”

The extended sanctions that the Western states have been imposing on Russia after February 24, 2022 caused much anxiety about the sustainability of the Russian economy. The sanctions that targeted banks, businesses, monetary exchanges, bank transfers, exports, and imports significantly worsened economic conditions inside Russia, provoking expectations of a deep social crisis comparable to that of the 1990s. While the official discourse avoided making parallels between “then” and “now”, they became widely discussed in the media. The memories about the past traumatic experience appeared a meaningful resource for a search of perspectives in the situation of uncertainty. Comparing “then” and “now” led to different conclusions depending on what specific myths about the 1990s were activated.

After February 24, the idea that Russia is either swiftly or gradually getting “back to the 1990s” permeated public discussions about the future. Remarkably, along with an expectable despair, it also brought some confidence for navigating in the deteriorating economic circumstances. In March – May 2022, *MK* published series of materials based on interviews with ordinary people, who were asked to share their experience of shuttle trade, the artisan refurbishment of spare parts for cars (as the original ones became unavailable), financing small business in the context of galloping inflation, barter trade, growing vegetables at *dachas* to feed their families etc. Some of these interviews were pessimistic. As one of the interviewees, a former shuttle trader, put it: “Honestly, even if it was somewhat amusing, I remember the 1990s with a shudder, I wouldn’t like this to be repeated” (Razmakhnin, 2022b). Yet, many interviewees expressed a confidence that while they “have done it once”, they “can do it again” (Razmakhnin, 2022a,b). This way of connecting “then” and “now” was particularly typical for people engaged in private business. An apt example is the interview of the publisher Irina Prokhorova. While discussing the current difficulties with printing paper that resulted from the exit of some Western companies from the Russian market, she reminded that in the 1990s the book market also suffered from the shortage of paper supply. So, “if we managed then, we shall manage now” (Ishkov 2022). For many people memories about the past hardships provided a horizon of expectations that made the current situation more predictable. In this context, the focus of the

narrative about “the hard 1990s” shifted from the horrors of the early post-Soviet period to the fact that they were manageable.

Of course, it did not mean that the 1990s stopped to be represented as a terribly bad time. Appealing to negative images of this period retained an often used rhetorical strategy. For example, in the open letter of gardeners to president Putin, published in *AiF*, the contribution of private households to Russia’s national food security was emphasized by putting the vegetable gardens “that rescued us in the 1990s” on equal footage with those that were cultivated during the siege of Leningrad, “right on Isaak Square”. Such framing raised the symbolic significance of the hardships experienced in the 1990s and, at the same time, presented it as something that “happened to us”, thus bracketing the issue of reasons and consequences of these adversities. While confirming their support of Putin’s policy, the gardeners did not hesitate to remind him about the problems of transportation and the availability of electricity and gas for private households “that haven’t been resolved for years” (“Otkrytoie pis’mo...”, 2022). So, the memories about the dramatic experience of the 1990s appeared as an element of the claim for the state’s support traded for patriotic loyalty.

Not only ordinary people, but also public experts who tried to predict further developments looked to the 1990s in a search of economic solutions for preventing the financial crisis, compensating for the ruptured supply chains, easing unemployment etc. (Sen’shin 2022a; Ozerova 2022). So, the memories of the 1990s provided a basis for both profane expectations and expert analysis.

In the post-February 24 context, the narrative opposing “the hard 1990s” to “the stability” associated with Putin’s period evidently lost its relevance. Yet, only the liberal/oppositional media do not hesitate to stress the discrepancy between Putin’s former legitimizing discourse and his current policy (e.g. Karasyuk 2022). In the legal part of the ideological spectrum, such arguments were absent. However, the transformation of the narrative about “the hard 1990s” was visible in the media addressing mass public too. From the symbol of mass suffering it was transformed to a source of useful experience that should help manage the hard future. Remarkably, such framing smoothly correlates with Putin’s Russia-phoenix narrative.

“Yet, now it is not the 1990s”

Of course, for the decades that passed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many things have largely changed. So, quite often a comparison between “now” and “then” revealed essential differences that urged the claim that, fortunately or unfortunately, a complete return to the 1990s is impossible. In this way, any discussion on the perspectives of the renaissance of shuttle trade ran into the fact that in the 1990s such businesses were profitable due to a lack of proper state control. While

expressing a readiness to do it again, the experienced shuttle traders asked, “will they return the legislation back to the 1990s? Because if not, then a private business of that kind is not profitable – with current customs, taxes, and without counterfeit” (Razmakhnin, 2022b). It was often found that the practices of state regulation that have been imposed in “the stable 2000s” prevent resorting to the solutions that were helpful in the 1990s. For example, to improve the situation with a supply of equipment and reagents necessary for the research institutes that worsened due to the anti-war sanctions the member of the Russian Academy of Sciences proposed to remove the bureaucratic obstacles for reliable companies. He recalled: “We had passed through it in the 1990s. At that time we did not have financing, but there also were no limitations” (Vedeneeva, 2022). So, strengthening the state and establishing legal order that were considered as Putin’s major achievements, have turned into obstacles for relying on the experience of the 1990s for countering the current crisis.

Revealing important differences that make the expectations of getting “back to the 1990s” unrealistic, was sometimes used to show the benefit of being in “now” rather than “then”. The experience of dealing with a market economy that was totally absent in the 1990s, was properly considered the most important of such advantages. It was emphasized both in interviews with ordinary people and in expert analytics. For instance, while telling about the Russian shuttle traders who came back to the Istanbul marketplaces for purchasing wholesale lots, the article in *MK* negates an apparent *deja vu* by noticing that the professional profile of the traders has changed. In the 1990s there were many unemployed teachers, doctors and engineers, and now there are mostly professional buyers who purchase for stores (Golubitskaia, 2022). However, the rise of professionalization in one sphere was accompanied by a reduction in the number of employees in other spheres. So, a lack of people with technical and engineer education that were present in great numbers in the 1990s was properly pointed out as an obstacle for effective *importozameshchenie*, i.e., substituting the import products that became unavailable due to sanctions by the domestic production (Sen’shin, 2022).

A comparison between “then” and “now” could also be in favor of the 1990s. For example, in the context of the wave of restrictions on media that started after February 24, 2022 *MK* dared to publish the article that reminded about “the blessed times when newspapers were published in millions of copies and were considered ‘the fourth authority’” to argue that “the press was the aide of authority”. Its author retold the story of how the oligarch Boris Berezovsky came to the editor of *Izvestia* three times in one day to halt a publication of the material with criticism against him, and did not succeed (Bitsoev, 2022). Evidently, such an argument for a decline of freedom of speech was chosen as the less dangerous, because struggling against the dictatorship of oligarchs was a part of Putin’s program of “establishing the order” in the 2000s.

While discussing “then” and “now” people quite often remembered some good things that took place in the 1990s. The people of art recalled this period as “the time of opportunities”. As the producer and film director Yury Grymov put it, “there was a lot of creativity everywhere, in journalism, TV, theatre, cinema. There was an aspiration for expressing yourself... So, there was a dialogue”..., and “now nobody needs it. Everyone is locked in themselves” (Alionushkina 2022). The farmer, who started his business in the 1990s, remembered how he traded his products to the state in accordance with the fixed prices settled in the contract, and used the profit to buy machinery for his farm, which is impossible now, when “everyone is ripping off the peasants” (Chuprin 2022). Pointing to evident contrasts in elites’ consumption patterns, *AiF* compared luxury palaces of contemporary elite at Rublevskoe highway with the modest wooden dachas of the political establishment of the 1990s, some of which could be found in the same neighborhood (Kostikov, 2022).

So, arguing that “now it’s not the 1990s” could function in two ways. While favoring the past conditions over the present nourished a nostalgia, then pointing to advantages of a contemporary situation maintained an elusive hope that in spite of the fact that “the economy is falling to the crisis, which depth is going to be comparable” to that of the 1990s, the inevitable descend starts “from a higher level” (Nikolaev, 2022).

This kind of arguing was typical for the media outlets presenting various parts of the ideological spectrum. However, some topics that were actively discussed in the banned oppositional media were absent in the legal press. In particular, in *Republic* it was possible to argue that a crucial difference between the past and current crisis was conditioned by the hostile international context that has dramatically deteriorated because of the SMO. While in the 1990s, Russia’s improved relations with the West facilitated the recovering of the economy as far as it has become possible to get necessary products, technologies and investments on external markets, then now the dramatic cutting of economic ties with the West has become a major driver of economic crisis (Sen’shin 2022).

In the legal press, this evident rupture was framed differently. Apart from the loyalist enthusiasm about Russia’s “gaining a real sovereignty”, discussed in the next section, there were some reserved interpretations arguing that while “then” collaboration with the West was needed, “now” it is not that crucial. For example, discussing the decision of the American company “OTIS” to leave the Russian market, *MK* published the interview with the expert who remembered how the competition with the Western company changed the situation with the elevators supply in Moscow. He argued: “Can we leave without “OTIS”? Now – yes, of course, yet in the beginning of the 1990s it would be a real loss” (Razmakhnin & Tiukova, 2022). In the context of the ongoing conflict, there is little opportunity for praising former collaboration with the West in legal media.

“Thanks God, the 1990s are finally over”

On the contrary, interpreting the post-Cold War relationships with the West as unwanted dependency, which undermined Russia’s sovereignty in the 1990s, became an often used framing. Not only in the niche of national-patriotic media, like the newspaper *Zavtra*, but also in the mass press, like *MK*, there were many publications praising “the end of the long 1990s, that started in 1987” (Krotov, 2022). The occasions were provided not only by the start of SMO that was presented as a sign of Russia’s sovereignty, but also by the quick breakdown of the established economic relations with Western countries and companies. In particular, the decision to close McDonald’s restaurants in Russia was presented as a symbol of the end of the long period of Russia’s following the path suggested by the West, just as in the 1990s their opening was considered the beginning of the new era. According to *MK*,

“Our 35-years journey through the economic desert is coming to an end... The collective Gaidar, with Yeltsin’s approval, led the Soviet-Russian people following the market’s invisible hand, tattooed with the letters “IMF”. It could not be denied that the driven were not notified that not everybody will be destined for a bright future. It was honestly said that “not everybody will adapt to the market”. But everybody decided that it did not concern them... Now, we have arrived... It is not clear if we shall get better conditions in the new historical period, as it mostly depends on us. But everything will definitely be in a different way...” (Krotov, 2022).

Importantly, this narrative included the years of Putin’s rule to the epoch of Russia’s economic dependency from the West. According to it,

“at first, the authorities exchanged civic freedoms of the population to some stability (and it is possible to understand why fellow citizens who got through the 1990s accepted this). But then... it exchanged the technological sovereignty of the country to Western achievements: machinery, planes, cars, clothes, food” (Krotov, 2022).

This narrative about “the end of the long 1990s” was expressed particularly strongly in the national-patriotic media. The publicists of *Zavtra* praised Russia’s allegedly obtained “independence” from the West, who “cannot realize that Russia which they mocked and flouted in the 1990s and 2000s does not exist any longer” (Sorokin, 2022). The anti-war sanctions, that the opposition media discussed in terms of the expected economic collapse, were welcome in the patriotic camp as an opportunity to turn Russia to the correct path. As it was said in the editorial of *Zavtra*, “our economists are ready to create a new Russian economy, they are restoring the industries that were destroyed by Gaidar. The patriotic Russian intelligentsia that for years languished in the liberal prison, is becoming free” (Prokhanov, 2022). The national-patriots praise their victory over “the liberal-fascists in various images” and wish to make it irreversible. According to one of their leaders, Vitaly Averianov, “our

task is finally to get out of the state of the Troubled Times of the 1990s and to overcome its consequences with minimal losses. Today we are paying for Gorbachev's betrayal, the uselessness of the 1990s and the 2000s, and presumptuous and stupid desire to fit into the fairway of the West" (Averianov, 2022). In the post-February 24 context, demonstrating anti-Western attitudes and praising the forced *importozameshchenie* (import substitution) became typical for all legal media.

"Now it's time to eradicate the fifth column"

Quite often the pattern of praising the end of the long 1990s was aggravated by ingrained hostility against the liberal "fifth column". Since the 1990s, the dream to get even with the liberals, who were considered responsible for Russia's compliance to the West and pernicious economic and social policy, was peculiar for the discourses articulated by the communists and national-patriots. In the post-February 24 context, the idea of a revenge against "the pro-Western elements", who occupied leading positions in various spheres, ranging from administration to cultural production, visibly proliferated. The assumption that "the war...will lead to inevitable cleansing of the elites" and "sanitation of traitors, who stay at banks, corporations, state offices, show business, theaters" (Prokhanov, 2022) has got support well beyond the niche national-patriotic media. *MK* published articles proposing "to sweep out university halls and auditoriums of all this contagion that calls to apologize and cultivates a complex of guilt and inferiority" (Popov, 2022). In the same vein, *Literaturnaia gazeta (LG)* argued that the most important obstacle before the development of native traditions and supporting colleagues who promote patriotic values in literature and arts, are "deeply rooted agents of influence, liberals, who control culture, education and economy" (Orlov, 2022). So, the most radical version of the narrative about "the final end of the long 1990s" proposed a large-scale displacement of professional elites who were declared "pro-Western".

Such invectives were related not only to "cleansing" particular people "at ministerial chairs" and university departments, but also to abolishing institutions that promoted a positive memory about the 1990s. In such a way, the nationalist intellectual Andrey Fursov considered the shutting down of Memorial, the NGO that for three decades worked to expose the abuses and atrocities of the Stalinist era, a symbolic but still insufficient step towards uprooting "the fifth column". He argued that

"There are even more harmful organizations, like the Gorbachev Fund or Yeltsin Center, who by the way unambiguously argued against the special military operation. For me, a sign of a real turn to revival of historical Russia would be shutting down of this Fund and Center, and abolition of the forum named by the man who killed our economy in the 1990s, and closing of the research institute named after Gaydar" (Titov, 2022).

In a similar way, the publicist of *LG* proposed to open “the Museum of Betrayal of Russia” in the Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg and “to display there documents describing how ‘progressive’ public actors betrayed our country during several centuries” (Orlov, 2022).

These plans of eradication of the few public institutions that support a positive memory about the early post-Soviet period manifested an extremely aggressive memory politics. In terms of the typology proposed by Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, people who developed the narrative about “the final end of the long 1990s” behaved as mnemonic warriors, who were eager “to make others accept their ‘true’ vision of the past” by all means (2014: 12). Of course, the idea of revenge against “the liberal fifth column” was not new for the national-patriotic discourses. Yet, in the post-February 24 context it appeared more achievable.

Transforming the narrative about “the democratic 1990s”

While the national-patriotic narrative about the 1990s shifted to mainstream positions, then its liberal counterpart became extremely marginal. It was not only because of the difficulties created by banning opposition media outlets, but also because main concerns of the liberals’ discourse about the 1990s became irrelevant in the post-February 24 context. As it was revealed in the previous research, in the 2000-2010s the liberals focused more on justifying (in the case of “the right forces”) or challenging (in the case of Yabloko Party) the economic reforms of the 1990s, than on a construction of a general narrative about Russia’s hard way to freedom. Because the liberals were initially critical of Yeltsin’s policies, they never praised “the democratic 1990s”. The leaders of both liberal wings were more concerned with vindication of “the difficult decisions” than on the analysis of their consequences for the ordinary people. In their discourses, the latter appeared as a passive object of elite’s care than as a mnemonic community that shared the experience of hard but necessary reforms (Malinova, 2019). Even in the 2000-2010s, such an approach for constructing a justifying, positive myth about the 1990s could not be successful.

After February 24, 2022 there were some sporadic attempts to reconsider the narrative about the 1990s as a failed attempt to make Russia a free democratic country. In particular, on the occasion of the anniversary of the August 1991 failed coup d’état, *Republic* published a couple of articles remarking that the recent events had changed the commemorative calendar making remembering about the victory of the democratic forces in 1991 irrelevant (Rubinshtein, 2022; Malkina, 2022; Kashin, 2022). In this context, Tatiana Malkina proposed a narrative of the “lost civil war”. According to her idea, the bloodless revolution from above in 1991 and the start of the reforms de-facto led to invisible civil war that resulted in splitting the country into many losers, who had lost access to resources, status, meaning, and predictability of the life trajectory, and few winners, who had got new

opportunities for development, meanings, hopes. While those who belonged to the second group neglected this split, the resentment of the losers raised future avengers and guerillas, thus facilitating mass support of Putin's SMO. So, now the winners of the 1990s have lost this civil war (Malkina, 2022). This interpretation clearly breaks with the patterns dominating in the liberal discourses before, as it focuses on the neglected difference in the perspectives of winners and losers. However, currently there is no evidence that this narrative will be further developed and become shared in the liberal camp.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper demonstrates that the memories about the 1990s have evolved into an essential symbolic resource for making sense of the radical changes caused by Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine and the Western sanctions. While the topics associated with the opposition between "the hard 1990s" and "the stable 2000s" virtually disappeared from Putin's rhetoric after February 24, they evidently proliferated in the media. In the context of the current economic and social crisis, the past traumatic experience provided a horizon of expectations for the present and future. The revealed frames of arguing about the 1990s are spread unevenly (see Table 1), which confirmed that memories about the early period of post-Soviet transformations remain ideologically split. While praising the end of "the long 1990s" and attacking "the fifth column" were most salient in national-patriotic media, blaming Putin for bringing Russia "back to the 1990s" was revealed only in the opposition media. However, it is remarkable that in the media with the broadest readership all frames, except the last one, have been detected.

This paper finds that, in spite of the fact that the observed activation of memory largely relies on the myth of "the hard 1990s", being fused into the narratives about the new Times of Troubles, the meaning of the established patterns of remembrance has reshaped. The past experience of "the hard times" that had been overcome provides a confidence that the current situation is manageable. This tendency probably indicates a beginning of transformations of public memories about the 1990s. Taking into account limited the range of materials taken for analysis, the picture presented in this paper is probably incomplete. More research is needed to test how enduring these tendencies are, and reveal further transformations of public memories about the 1990s more research is needed.

Tab. 1. The typical patterns of framing the 1990s in the post-24 February context

| Frames | Media with the broadest readership | National Patriotic / Communist media | “Liberal” oppositional media |
|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| “Back to the 1990s” | X | | X |
| “Yet, now it’s not the 1990s” | X | X | X |
| “Thanks God, the 1990s are finally over” | X | XX | |
| “Now it’s time to eradicate the fifth column, as the legacy of the 1990s | X | XX | |

References

- Alionushkina, Vera. 2022. Yury Grymov: “V kino možno byt’ izvestnoi shvabroi, a v teatre tak ne poluchitsia”, *Kul’tura*, 31 March, no. 3, 26.
- Averianov, Vitaly. 2022. “Vesna jchistitel’naia”, *Zavtra*, 30 March, no. 12, 5.
- Bacon, Edwin. 2012. “Public Political Narratives: Developing a Neglected Source through the Exploratory Case of Russia in the Putin-Medvedev Era.” *Political Studies*, 60, 768-786.
- Bitsoev, Said. 2022. “Ruki proch of zhurnalistov”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, April 20, no. 70, 3.
- Bonch-Osmolovskaia, Anastasia. 2018. “Imena vremeni: epitety desiatiletii v Natsional’nom korpuse russkogo iazyka kak proektsiia kul’turnoi pamiati”, *Shagi – Steps*, 4 (3-4): 115-146.
- Chuprin, Vladimir. 2022. “Poshlinoi po ziornyshky”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 5 July. no. 119, 4.
- Golubitskaia, Zhanna. 2022. “Russkie chelnoki vozvrashchajutsia”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, May 24, no. 90, 2.
- Greben’, Oksana, and Ksenia Agapeeva. 2020. “Vosprijatie ‘devianostykh’”, Levada Center press release⁷, April, 6, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/04/06/vosprijatie-devyanostyh/>
- Halbwachs, Maurice. 1992. *On Collective Memory*. Chicago Il.: University of Chicago Press.
- Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. 1994. *Frames of Remembrance. The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. New Brunswick etc.: Transaction Publishers.
- Ishkov, Sergei. 2022. “Knizhnyi rynek vyzhivaet v neprostrykh usloviyakh”, *Moskovskaia pradva*, September 13, no. 69, 1.

⁷ The ANO Levada Center has been included in the registry of non-commercial organizations acting as foreign agents.

- Karasyuk, Eugeny. 2022. “Choby Rossiia bol’she nikogda v takuiu zasadu ne popala”, *Republic / Slon*⁸, March 21.
- Kashin, Oleg. 2022. “Otchaianie-2022. Istorija razedelennogo naroda zakonchilas’”, *Republic / Slon*⁹, March 2.
- Kostikov, Viacheslav. 2022. “Kak spitsia pod loskutnym odeialom?”, *Argumenty i fakty*, 22 June, no. 25, 5.
- Krotov, Nikolai. 2022. “Obratnaia storona nerusskoi dushi”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 18 March, no. 47, 3.
- Kubik, Jan & Michael Bernhard. 2014. “A Theory of the Politics of Memory”, in Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik (eds.) *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 7-30.
- Malkina, Tatiana. 2022. “Proschai, Avgust 1991-go”, *Republic / Slon*¹⁰, 22 August.
- Merzlyakova, Victoria N. 2019. “Mediatization of the collective memory of the 1990s in RuNet”, *Vestnik RGGU. Seriiia “Literaturovedenie. Yazykoznanie. Kul’turologiya”*, № 8, pp. 289–302.
- Makhortykh, Mykola. 2021. “#givemebackmy90s: memories of the first post-Soviet decade in Russia on Instagram and TikTok”, Cultures on History Forum, 28 Jun 2021, available at: <https://www.cultures-of-history.uni-jena.de/exhibitions/givemebackmy90s-memories-of-the-first-post-soviet-decade> (assessed 19.05.2022).
- Malinova, Olga. 2019. “Konstruirovaniie Smyslovykh Ramok Pamjati o Reformah 1990-h gg. v Liberal’nom Diskurse 2000-h Gg (The Construction of the Semantic Framework of Memory of the Reforms of the 1990s in the Liberal Discourse of the 2000s).” *Juzhno-Rossiiskij Zhurnal Social’nyh Nauk*, (3), 91-105.
- Malinova, Olga. 2020. “Tema ‘likhikh devianostykh’ v diskursakh rossiiskikh kommunistov i national-patriotov (The issue of “the hard 1990s” in discourses of Russian Communists and National-Patriots).” *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta. Politologia*. 14 (2), 53-63.
- Malinova, Olga. 2021. “Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin’s Regime.” *Problems of Post-Communism*. 68 (5), 429-441.
- Malinova, Olga. 2022. “Legitimizing Putin’s Regime: The Transformations of the Narrative of Russia’s Post-Soviet Transition.” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 55(1), 52-75.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. 2004. Introduction: The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory. In *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe. Studies in the Presence of the Past*, edited by Jan-Werner Müller, 1-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nikolaev, Igor. 2022. “Ekonomika Rossii: est’ li svet v kontse tunnelia?”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, April 11, no. 63, 3.
- Olick, Jeffrey K. 2007. *The Politics of Regret. On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility*. London, tec.: Routledge.

⁸ The website of the *Republic/Slon* (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

⁹ The website of the *Republic/Slon* (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

¹⁰ The website of the *Republic/Slon* (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

- Orlov, Boris. 2022. "Ochistitel'nyi ogon' SVO", *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, 1 June, no. 22, 17.
- "Otkrytoie pis'mo prezidentu RF V.V.Putinu ot obscherossijskoi obschestvennoi organizatsii 'Soyuz sadovodov Rossii'". 2022, *Argumenty i fakty*, 16 March, no. 10, 14.
- Ozerova, M. 2022. "Krizis 'kak v 90-e'", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 4 May, no. 78, 5.
- Popov, Dmitry. 2022. "Putin ne ostavil vykhoda", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 14 March, no. 43, 2.
- "Peskov soobshchil chto ustanovil VPN", RIA Novosti, 2.04.2022, <https://ria.ru/20220402/peskov-1781488588.html> (assessed 6.10.2022)
- Prokhanov, Aleksander. 2022. "Za nashu Rodinu!", *Zavtra*, 9 March, no. 9, 1.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2018. "Speech at the inauguration ceremony as President of Russia", 7 May, at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57416> (accessed 1 March 2019).
- Putin, Vladimir. 2022a. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", 24 Feb., <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>
- Putin, Vladimir. 2022b. "Video address on National Flag Day", 22 Aug., <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69189>
- Putin, Vladimir. 2022c. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", 21 Sept., <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/69390>
- Razmakhnin, Anton. 2022a. "Sam sebe stroibat", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 1 March, no. 36, 5.
- Razmakhnin, Anton. 2022b. "Chelnokam vezde u nas doroga", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 20 April, no. 70, 5.
- Razmakhnin, Anton, and Daria Tiukova. 2022. "'Otis' obryvaet trosy", *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, July 28, no. 136, 4.
- Rubinstein, Lev. 2022. "Istorija styda. Pochemu pamiat' ob avguste 1968-go segodnia aktual'nee, chemo b avguste 1991-go", *Republic / Slon*¹¹, 22 August.
- Sen'shin, Eugeny. 2022a. "'My nakhodimsia na etape likvidatsii nepa'. Ekonomist Igor Lipsits – o stsenariyakh krizisa v Rossii", *Republic / Slon*¹², 28 April.
- Sen'shin, Eugeny. 2022b. "Gotovit'sia nuzhno k trudnym vremenam, kotorye pridut nadolgo", *Republic / Slon*¹³, September 1.
- Sharafutdinova, Gulnaz. 2020. *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sharafutdinova, Gulnaz. 2022. "Public Opinion Formation and Group Identity: The Politics of National Identity Saliency in Post-Crimea Russia." *Problems of Post-Communism*, 69 (30), 219-231.
- Sorokin, Nikolay. 2022. "Sokrushim pregrady!", *Zavtra*, 9 March, no. 9, 4.
- Titov, Ilya. 2022. "V kotlakh gibridnykh voin", *Zavtra*, 11 May, no. 18, 4.

¹¹ The website of the Republic publication (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

¹² The website of the Republic publication (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

¹³ The website of the *Republic/Slon* (added to the foreign-agent media register by the Russian Justice Ministry) has been blocked by the order of the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor).

- VCIOM. 2022. “Trendy mediapotreblenia”, 6 Oct., <https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/trendy-mediapotreblenija-2022>
- Utekhin, Ilyia V. 2021. “The visual images of the 1990s in Instagram: a commercialization of nostalgia”, *Tempus et Memoria*, 2, № 3, pp. 60–72.
- Vedeneeva, Natalia. 2022. “Nam by goszadaniya vziat’ i otmenit’”, *Moskovsky Komsomolets*, 17 March, no. 46, 17.
- Wertsch, James V. 2002. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Contact details and disclaimer:

Olga Yu. Malinova

National Research University Higher School of Economics (Moscow, Russia). Department of Politics and Government. Professor.

E-mail: omalinova@hse.ru

Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.

© Malinova, 2023