

The thematic triangle of the politics of memory in new post-Soviet democracies

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The article is aimed at building a theoretical framework for an empirical analysis of the politics of memory in a new post-Soviet democracy. We elaborate on the concept of *new democracy* and highlight that in late post-Soviet countries it might be defined through three interrelated variables of trustworthy institution building, promotion of civil rights, and consistent foreign policy. We refine the concept of the *politics of memory* underlining the electoral origins of public policies addressing the painful issues of the past. To find out how the politics of memory evolves in the new post-Soviet democracy, we distinguish three memory issues of highly contentious nature: lustration, ban on public display of Soviet symbols, and compensation from Russia for Soviet occupation.

Keywords: the politics of memory, a new post-Soviet democracy, lustration, soviet symbols, Russian compensation for Soviet occupation

INTRODUCTION

The politics of memory has shaped national and international politics throughout history. Lustration, a ban on the symbols of the fallen regime, and the compensation claims for colonisation or dictatorship are traditional instruments of historical justice.

In Ancient Athens, the overthrow of democracy in 411 B. C. brought harsh lustration of former oligarchs; its restoration in 403 was more indulgent (Elster 2004). In France, the initial clemency of 1814 towards defeated bonapartists was replaced by harshness of winners ultra-royalists. The post-Nazi policies of truth and justice, including the ban of symbols, helped to consolidate the German democracy.

Spain's transition from authoritarianism in 1975 was based on the decision to leave aside its painful past and only in 2000–2007 it adopted legislation extending compensations for the victims of Civil War, Franco regime and transition (Aguilar 2008). The reconciliation of Japan and South Korea regarding the Japanese rule in 1910–1945 and the Korean comfort women during World War II is important for bilateral relations of both countries and the region.

The politics of memory in the new post-Soviet democracy is at the centre of this article. Our goal is to establish a framework for analysing how the politics of memory evolves along

the three dimensions that characterise a new democracy: trustworthy institution-building, promotion of civil liberties and rights, and sovereign and consistent foreign and security policy.

The article draws from the research on post-Communist transition and democracy (Offe 1991, Kuzio 2001) the politics of memory (Palonen 2008; Rufer 2012; Mink, Neumayer 2013, Elster 2004) and its post-Communist peculiarities (Klumbytė 2009; David 2012; Bernhard, Kubik 2014; Horne 2014; Ravaityte 2015; Pettai, Pettai 2015; Matonytė, Šumskas 2016).

The novelty of our article lies in its emphasis on the applicability of the revised concept of *new democracy* to the analysis of the politics of memory in late post-Soviet countries. We underline that these democracies possess not only the classical three dimensions of post-communist transition. They exhibit the fourth dimension, i. e. the challenge of nationhood, enhancing their sensitivity to geopolitical uncertainty, hardly reduced by their European Union (EU) membership.

NEW DEMOCRACY

The issues defining the politics of memory in new democracies are sensitive due to a relatively short time distance since the transition. A *new democracy* is a valuable concept, used to describe a newly emerging democracy (Pridham 2000). As such, democracy is defined through the subsequent stages of democratic transition, consolidation and maturing (Shin 1994: 143), decision-making methods (competition of political elites, fair and free elections, etc.) and complex inter-related processes of social change.

South European and Latin American cases were analysed as double transitions: democratisation and marketisation (O'Donnell et al. 1986). The studies on post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) suggested the concept of triple transition, along with the democratisation (civil society development) and marketisation underlying the third dimension of state-building and statehood (Offe 1991).

Kuzio (2001: 170–174) proposed a notion of quadruple transition with the fourth dimension of *nationhood* (national unity, process of civic nation-building). It generates the collective power, creates a *we* (unity, legitimacy, permanence), enables the political mobilisation and represents the political community that is both modern (civic identity based) and enriched by common ethnocultural and historical factors. Such quadruple transition, when the fundamental questions of stateness, nationality, the relationship to former ruling Other and national minorities have to be resolved, occurs in any post-colonial circumstances.

Scholars vary in the assessment of post-Communist success in multiple transition, but many agree that market liberalisation in CEE was successful as confirmed by their entry into the EU. Their judgement on the quality of new post-Communist democracies generates a weaker consensus. Some authors claim that entrance into the EU sealed their consolidation (Norkus 2008). Other researchers underline that the CEE countries neither achieved a high quality of democracy nor succeeded in creating reliable institutions (Matonytė, Varnagy 2009; Maniokas 2015).

Regarding the post-Soviet countries, the national idea remains their most fragile dimension. Its deficiencies explain a failure of democracy in Belarus (Kuzio 2001: 169). We argue that the dimension of *nationhood* conceals high tensions in the apparently consolidated post-Soviet Baltic democracies for almost thirty years after transition. They became more prominent with the lasting or renewed geo-political uncertainties after the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument in Estonia in 2007, the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014. The ultimate return of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to Europe via EU membership adds a challenge to their national sovereignty and identity.

In this article, we employ the concept of *new democracy*, which underlines temporality, i. e. the *newness* of post-Communist CEE nation-state democracies, and differentiates them from the time-wise old(er) and more mature democracies. We focus on new post-Soviet democracies because of their specifically strong nationhood dimension.

The overview provided above allows us to deduce three dimensions of a new democracy, which are prone to the effect of the post-Soviet politics of memory. Leaving an economic dimension aside, we relate state-building, civil society development and nationhood, respectively, with trustworthy public institution building, promotion of civil liberties and rights as well as consistency of foreign and security policy (Matonytė, Šumskas 2016).

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

The concept of the *politics of memory* is twofold as it comprises *politics* and *memory*. *Politics* stresses dynamics and contestation and reminds about the distinction of *polity* as a metaphorical space of power relations with specific agencies and understandings; *politics* as processes and activities of contestation, formulation and application of policies; *policies* as decisions and results expressed in laws, regulations, guidelines, etc. *Politics* encompasses *politicking* (performative aspects) and *politization* (opening and playing of the issue as political, important in power contestation) (Palonen 2008: 171).

Memory brings into the semantic field of memory studies the understanding that the past and its memories are laden with ambivalence, which might generate a political conflict. Such concept contrasts the notions of collective memory, social frames of memory, cultural and communicative memories, etc., brought up by Halbwachs and others, reminiscent of the Durkheimian tradition, which highlights cohesive, reproductive, stabilising forces of memory (Erlil et al. 2008).

The inter-related, yet semantically different terms of the *political in memory*, the *politics of memory* and the *policies of truth and justice* are employed in memory studies (see Fig. 1).

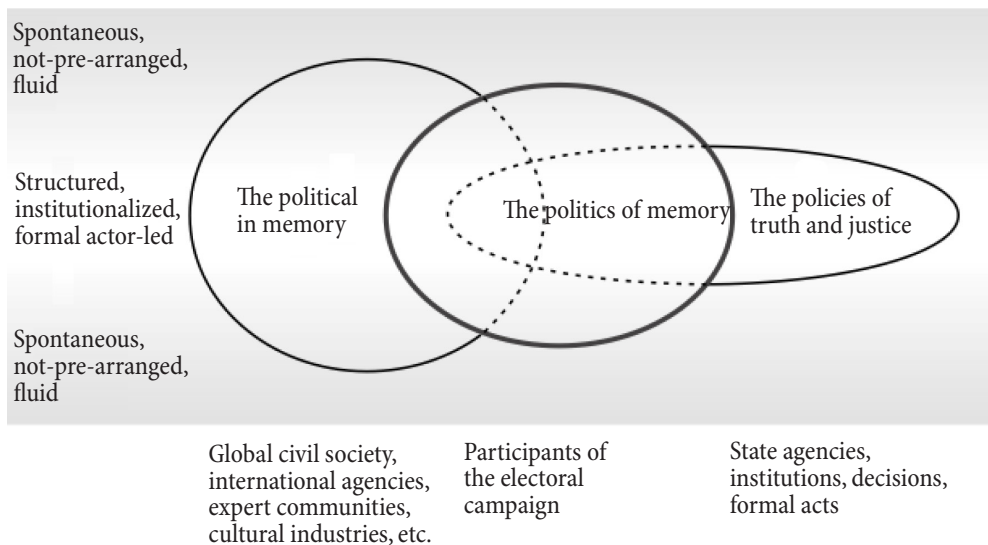


Fig. 1. The conceptual space of the political in memory, the politics of memory and the policies of truth and justice
Source: made by authors, graphic design by Juozas Granskas.

The political in memory is the widest, content-oriented concept, indicating social and political struggles for revelation of the (excluded, distorted or concealed) past and involving a broad range of diverse mnemonic actors: elected and appointed leaders, dissidents and opponents of mainstream politics, representatives of national and international social and professional groups such as journalists, historians, public intellectuals, artists and religious leaders, mass media and cultural industries, etc. (Rufer 2012).

The *political in memory* separates the state-led versus non-governmental politics of memory (Rufer 2012). It views the social memory as a perennial socio-cultural phenomenon, characteristic for any human community or political regime. The concept underlines that the social memory abounds with controversies, subversive moments, insubordinate dimensions, which add disturbance to the social order in place (Klumbytė 2009; Verovšek 2014).

The *politics of memory* is the intermediary process-oriented concept, referring to the political elite-led management of social memory in a given society and mostly involving political agents, who speak and act on behalf of the state. It refers to a wide range of socio-political mechanisms, means and processes, by which public perceptions and shared meanings of the past are being shaped and imposed, and through which the certain past-related visions of collective values are publicly articulated and displayed (Rufer 2012).

The repertoire of the *politics of memory* ranges from the candidates and politicians' speeches and political declarations to the legislative initiatives that substantiate particular interpretations of past events. The activation and directions of the *politics of memory* depend on the specificities of nation-state institutions, electoral calendar, political contenders and international environment. In new democracies, the saliency of the *politics of memory* is higher.

The *policies of truth and justice* is the narrowest measures-oriented concept, related to both, the management and contents of social memories and their normative assessment. Its practical purpose is to identify and serve justice for particular individuals or groups defined by legislation as either perpetrators or victims of the past wrong (Pettai, Pettai 2015).

The *policies of truth and justice* strive to institutionalise and make irreversible the certain patterns of reckoning with the past. They attempt to suppress the virulent *political in memory* and reduce the range of the *politics of memory*, thriving on multi-dimensional mnemonic struggles and a plethora of democratically viable actors. Early democracies focus on institutional measures, which mark significant transformations from preceding regimes.

In this article, we use the term of the *politics of memory*, pointing to its open, dynamic, interactive and purposeful activities in the field of memory in a given polity and involving political actors, contesting existing and eventually proposing new policies of truth and justice.

The *politics of memory* captures the engagement of new democracy into the principled and transparent building of public institutions and the conscientious allocation of decision-making positions; the overt, candid and forward-looking discussion and display of traumatic past; and the coherent construction and affirmation of liberal democratic identity through foreign and security policies.

The attitudes of political contenders towards the *politics of memory* relate concrete public policies, dealing with the previous repressive regime, to temporal exigencies of the new regime and its democratic reflexivity, contesting the existing and emerging public policy decisions, structured by political urgencies and competition (Mink, Neumayer 2013).

Three temporalities guide the politics of memory: *transitional* backward looking, when coping with traumatic past, *partisan* here and now oriented development of democratic contestation and *post-transitional* projection into liberal democratic future (Matonytė, Šumskas 2016).

The need and opportunity of new democracies to reassert themselves in their post-colonial geo-political environments make these three vectors of the *politics of memory* strongly convergent.

THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN NEW POST-SOVIET DEMOCRACY

After long years of Communist brain-washing and ideologically distorted accounts of social memory, making public the truth is itself a form of justice. The culture of forgetting is destructive and threatens democracy, which requires a self-critical reflection, working through its own painful past (Misztal 2003: 145).

The remainder of the article is based on the empirical insights from the Lithuanian post-Soviet experience, which relation to the Soviet past remains traumatic, however, ambivalent. We derive three issues from the post-Soviet politics of memory to observe their evolution in a new democracy: determination to implement lustration, prohibition on the public display of Soviet symbols and claim that Russia has to compensate the damage incurred by the Soviet occupation.

The three selected indicators apparently affect (strengthen or weaken) three dimensions of the new post-Soviet democracy: trustworthy institution-building, civil liberties and rights, and foreign and security (see Fig. 2).

A rationale for such an analytical framework is quite self-evident. As a result of a geopolitically ambiguous environment, these issues of the politics of memory cover the yet and

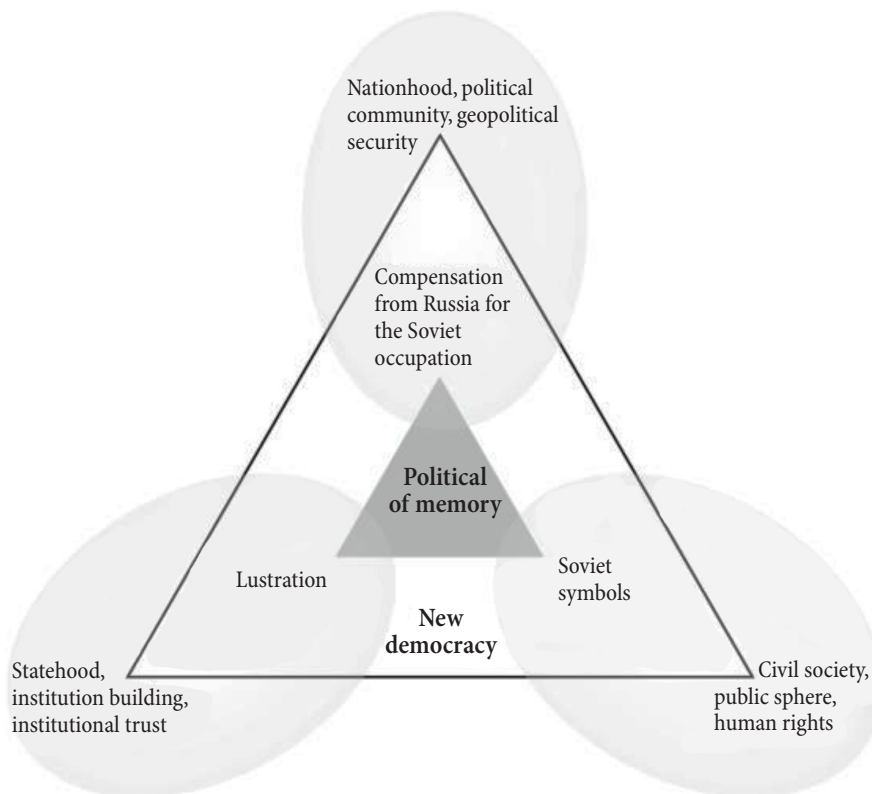


Fig. 2. The thematic triangle of the politics of memory in new post-Soviet democracies
Source: made by authors, graphic design by Juozas Grankas.

again sensitive transition dimension of nationhood. They are applicable for the analysis of elites, groups and society's attitudes and can assist to establish which logics the actors use to assess the politics of memory. Three memory's issues are relevant for other post-Communist countries and can provide a basis for a comparative analysis.

Lustration and trustworthy institution building

Various forms of lustration were carried out in post-Communist countries (Horne 2014; Ravaitytė 2015). Lustration, i. e., banning of former Communist officials and secret police officers from decision-making positions, is a sign of rupture from the previous regime, a message about the importance of justice, transparency and accountability in a new value-system.

Such transitional justice provides a ritual purification, restores the social order and changes the moral culture of citizens; it is intentionally designed to restore trust in public institutions and interpersonal trust (Horne 2014: 228). Lustration aims at boosting an effective performance of newly established institutions and demonstrate willingness to respond to citizen's expectations and claims (Mühr 2012: 11).

Lustration incurs significant private losses of jobs, income, prestige, etc. for former collaborators and disadvantages for the public service under the reform through a decrease in competence and experience. But it provides gains for aspirants and newcomers to vacant positions and for public service through an increase in its openness and competitiveness.

Yet, the newly emerging liberal democracy should also cherish the personal merit, civic peace and tolerance, incompatible with overtly punitive and prohibitory actions, inspired by the examination of former political loyalties and sympathies. The research shows that measures centred at wrongdoers are less efficient in expressing the message of transitional justice if compared with victim-centred measures (David 2012: 781).

Lustration might serve as a source of blackmail in the formation of multi-party coalition governments and keeping loyal rebellious coalition partners. The Polish, Czech and Romanian elites blatantly used the politics of memory for their own narrow interests (Kiss 2006: 927). In extreme cases, political elites manipulate the issues of transitional justice, so they become a quasi-autonomous sphere of the elite action, disconnected from public concerns.

Lustration may also be understood as the violation of human rights (right to work and gain living by work of free choice) and the extension of illegitimate retrospective justice. If it is post-transitional lustration, then settling accounts of longer past is even more damaging.

Soviet symbols and civil liberties and rights

Post-Soviet Baltic democracies adopted rather tough laws banning the public display of Soviet symbols. They serve as a policy instrument intervening into minds and communication of people and not requiring any substantial material and organisational back-up.

Their transitional logic is about authoritative willingness to clean-up the public space (and mass consciousness) from symbols and propaganda of the fallen regime. The ban transmits the politicians' deliberate willingness to increase the immunity of people from false consciousness, to resist the propaganda and mask the fundamental distrust of political leadership in the loyalty of population to the values and visions of new democracy.

The ban affirms the newness of the state, as it underscores its Western aspirations and rejects Communist values. It offers an innovative nation-branding, as a country becomes different from other post-Soviet areas, where Soviet symbols are allowed and cherished.

The Soviet symbols related legislation in post-Soviet countries was passed relatively late (in 2007–2013). It hardly fits the transitional ‘sanitary’ logic and rather reflects partisan calculations. There might be good post-transitional reasons to revise the ban, which ultimately can lead to a renewed search of ‘publicly hidden’ forbidden symbols and keep a high level of the political and civic vigilance.

Liberals argue that any ban to some extent incapacitates creative energies and social actions of civil society and it is better to encourage critical thinking instead of imposing what and how is ‘thinkable’. In a short-time perspective, the conservative narrow prohibitive pedagogical attitude can work as an efficient means of resocialisation and Western persuasion. The support of further ban can hide a fear for sympathies towards or a return of the Soviet rule. Revoking the ban might be psychotherapeutical for the society as it would demonstrate overcoming the fear and accepting the past.

A reduction of freedom of expression is anti-democratic, while opening up the space for discussion is a way to achieve mutual understanding among various mnemonic groups with different past experiences. The argument of equating the ban of Soviet and Nazi symbols can be defied by the argument of the two regimes’ different nature.

Russian compensation for Soviet occupation and foreign policy

The Baltic claims that Russia has to compensate the damages incurred by Soviet occupation, initiated in Lithuania and Estonia in 1992 (in Latvia in 1998), culminating in 2000–2005 with the estimations of direct and indirect damages, were transitional by nature (Grigas 2009: 156–174).

The claim is expressed in monetary terms, but its essence is utmost politically symbolic. It means awaiting a recognition from Russia that the Baltic States were occupied by USSR, the Soviet regime had a negative impact, and Russia, the USSR legal successor, should acknowledge wrongdoings. The realisation of Russia’s historical responsibility is the basic precondition for regional stability. Without it, it would be impossible to create an atmosphere of mutual trust between the countries and their peoples. The law on compensation claim (in Lithuania) is regarded as the program law in the foreign policy of the state (Zalimas 2003: 162–163).

The interpretation of history and the standpoint on closure of historical disputes often differ between the former imperial centre and its colonies. The bilateral commissions of historians between Russia and post-communist countries illustrate challenging tasks of the reconciliation and interpretation of diverging historical facts and narratives.

The arguments against the laws on compensation claim may point to the Baltic state-interest not to irritate and provoke Russia, especially under an uncertain geo-political environment. It can be a convenient manipulation tool for politicians in electoral competition and domestic politics.

CONCLUSIONS

This article provides a theoretical framework devised to assess the contents and scope of the politics of memory in new post-Soviet democracies, liable on three dimensions of trustworthy institution building, civil liberties and rights, and consistent foreign and security policy.

The well-known proverb “Forget the past and lose an eye; dwell on the past and lose both eyes!” can help to explain how the politics of memory evolve in new democracies. The proposed research strategy can be usefully applied, and help to better understand the place and meaning of the issues of lustration, Soviet symbols and Soviet occupation damage in the politics of memory of new democracies after almost thirty years since the collapse of the Communist regime.

The intermediate place and open-ended character of the *politics of memory* is emphasised as it brings together *the political in memory* and *the policies of truth and justice*. The selective and reductionary politics of memory (vis-à-vis the political in memory) contests and regularly defeats itself as the fair and free elections open new opportunities to bring new issues or revise established discourses. The proactive and reactive politics of memory (vis-à-vis the policies of truth and justice) evaluates and challenges the institutionalised patterns of dealing with the traumatic past.

The role of political elite and political parties as elite-led organisations is very important. The politics of memory may be considered as a by-product of elites' competition. Yet, our analytical framework is valid for other actors in new post-Soviet democracies as it highlights the potential and roles of representatives of national, transnational and global civil society, expert communities, special mnemonic actors and interest groups.

As the notion of the politics of memory underscores, the elites are unable to fully control the public's sensitivity and stabilise the scope of the politics of memory in any democracy. Yet, even less they are prone to do that in new post-Soviet democracies, which are vulnerable to such crucial dimensions as institutional trust, civil liberties and post-colonial self-confidence. Paradoxically, these liabilities of new post-Soviet democracies emerge as catalysts of the politics of memory, eventually leading to higher quality of democracy.

The proposed research scheme highlights that in new post-Soviet democracies the theoretically plausible sequence establishing transitional, partisan and post-transitional logics as one by one replacing each other in the politics of memory does not generate empirical evidence. It rather invites to study the politics of memory as a phenomenon and as a process intimately related and dependent on broad geo-political, institutional and social contingencies.

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Teminis atminties politikos trikampis naujosiose posovietinėse demokratijose

Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – išgryninti teorinius pagrindus empirinei atminties politikos naujojoje posovietinėje demokratijoje analizei. Plėtojama *naujosios demokratijos* sąvoka, kuri posovietinių šalių atveju apibrėžiama per tris tarpusavyje susijusius kintamuosius: patikimų institucijų kūrimą, pilietinių teisių pripažinimą ir plėtrą bei nuoseklią užsienio politiką. *Atminties politikos* samprata pabrėžiame rinkiminę viešosios politikos, nukreiptos į skausmingus praeities klausimus, kilmę. Analizuojant atminties politikos raišką naujosiose posovietinėse demokratijose, išskirtini trys aštrūs atminties klausimai: liustracija, sovietinių simbolių draudimas ir reikalavimas, kad Rusija sumokėtų kompensaciją už sovietinės okupacijos žalą.

Raktažodžiai: atminties politika, naujoji posovietinė demokratija, liustracija, sovietiniai simboliai, Rusijos kompensacija už sovietinę okupaciją