

Challenging Europe's Memory Regime: The Far-Right's Narratives on Russia in the Shadow of War

Avrupa'nın Hafıza Rejimine Meydan Okumak: Savaşın Gölgesinde Aşırı Sağın Rusya Anlatıları

Veli ÖZDEMİR* 

Abstract

The European Union's (EU) "never again" rhetoric, rooted in historical memory, entered a crisis with the war in Ukraine; the EU's vision of unity based on its values and shared historical narrative has been shattered. The research question of this article is how far-right political actors in Europe responded to the EU's official memory and security narrative toward Russia and how they shaped their alternative historical narratives about Russia. This article aims to reveal the current effects of memory-based security concerns in European politics. In this context, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Rassemblement National (RN), and the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) were selected for analysis. Data were collected from the parties' official websites, parliamentary transcripts, the official social media accounts of political parties and party leaders, the official YouTube channels of party leaders, and published interviews and media statements. The article employs the concept of mnemonic security to analyze how political actors link their historical narratives to the construction of identity and security. Finally, the study's findings are discussed in relation to the future political implications of mnemonic security.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, Far-Right, European Union, Memory Regime, Narratives

Öz

Avrupa Birliği (AB) için tarihsel hafızaya dayanan "bir daha asla savaş" söylemi, Ukrayna Savaşı'yla bir krize girmiş, AB'nin kendi değerlerine ve ortak tarihi anlatısına dayalı birlik vizyonu parçalanmıştır. Makalenin araştırma sorusu, AB'nin Rusya'ya yönelik resmi hafıza/güvenlik anlatısına karşı Avrupadaki aşırı sağ siyaset aktörlerinin nasıl tepki verdiği ve Rusya'ya dair kendi alternatif tarihi anlatılarını nasıl şekillendirdiğidir. Makalenin amacı, Avrupa siyasetinde hafıza temelli güvenlik kaygılarının güncel etkilerini ortaya koymaktır. Bu bağlamda, Alternative for Germany (AfD), Rassemblement National (RN) ve Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) adlı siyasi partiler analiz için seçilmiştir. Veriler partilerin resmi web sitelerinden, parlamento tutanaklarından, siyasi partilerin ve parti liderlerinin resmi sosyal medya hesaplarından, parti liderlerinin resmi YouTube kanallarından ve yayınlanmış röportaj ve medya açıklamalarından toplanmıştır. Makalede, hafıza güvenliği kavramı kullanılarak siyasi

* Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Isik University, veliozdemir@gmail.com

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aktörlerin tarih anlatıları ile kimlik/güvenlik inşasını nasıl bağlantılandırırdıkları analiz edilmiştir. Son olarak, çalışmanın bulguları ışığında hafıza güvenliğinin gelecekteki siyasi yansımaları tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, Aşırı Sağ, Avrupa Birliği, Hafıza Rejimi, Anlatılar

1. Introduction

The rise of right-wing populism has intensified debates about the European Union's (EU) ability to address international crises and ensure its security, thereby increasing uncertainty and future risks. Although the far-right does not hold power in many countries, its discourse on EU integration and foreign policy has increasingly shaped the current debate. This influence has led to internal political competition, the formation of new groups in the European Parliament, early elections in certain countries, and significant shifts in foreign policy discourse. This debate has also opened up discussions on memory policies, identity, and narratives (Gustafsson, 2014; Bell, 2016; Berenskoetter, 2014). The far-right has begun to produce alternative memories and identity politics in opposition to the EU's official collective memory. This situation, coupled with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has not only overturned Europe's security assumptions but also taken debates on history and memory in Europe to another level. Far-right political struggles in the EU have increasingly shifted to the field of historical memory politics, constructing narratives that counter the official EU memory, expressed as "never again,"¹ in order to legitimize themselves (Mälksoo, 2015). The far-right, which opposes the official EU narrative of memory, has also repositioned Russia in its counter-narratives of memory. These parties have argued that the EU's approach to history is a unilateral "politically correct" vision that insults their nations and undermines national sovereignty (Petrović, 2019, p. 381).

Instead of the official narrative, the far-right has constructed an alternative vision of Europe based on what it sees as the "true" national and civilizational memory. In this process, unlike the official EU narratives, Russia has been redefined not as an existential historical threat but as a natural ally or an integral part of European heritage (European Parliament, 2019). They supported the annexation of Crimea in 2014 but were forced to change their pro-Russian stance after the war in Ukraine. The war highlighted the fragility of relations between Russia and the far-right, as well as its susceptibility to contextual factors such as geographical proximity and historical background. However, as the war has dragged on, the far-right has begun to develop new and ambiguous rhetorical strategies to legitimize its repositioning toward Russia. They have developed a new narrative of Russia that is compatible with European visions or political interests. By reinterpreting historical narratives and collective memories, they have constructed a narrative of Russia as a non-enemy and combined it with existing anti-EU sentiments.

Studies on this subject have analyzed the role of identity – and memory-based approaches in the foreign policy-making process (Chacko, 2014; Gustafsson, 2014; Rumelili, 2015; Subotić, 2016).

1 This discourse, in the context of Mälksoo's (2018) concept of "memory security," is used by the EU to sanctify the lessons learned from World War II and the Cold War; to express genocide or totalitarianism, reconciliation between former enemies, and the victory of liberal democracy over fascism and communism.

It has also been demonstrated that challenges to a nation's or group's identity can trigger feelings of ontological insecurity, ultimately leading to political crises (Kinnvall, 2004; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2005, 2008; Zarakol, 2010; Croft, 2012; Kay, 2012, p. 238; Lupovici, 2012). Theoretical approaches that address the traumatic dimensions of memory and identity have revealed that these elements do not merely carry traces of the past; they also provide a robust foundation that legitimizes politics and enables positions in foreign policy (Edkins, 2003; Zehfuss, 2007). Theoretical research on identity and collective political action has shown how the past shapes contemporary politics (Bell, 2016; Langenbacher & Shain, 2010). Studies on memory politics in the European and Russian contexts have focused on how competing or suppressed collective narratives influence identity construction in foreign policy processes (Koposov, 2018; Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015; Nuzov, 2017; Subotić, 2018). Finally, some studies have revealed that political leaders have leveraged their country's repressed traumatic past as a strategic tool in foreign policy, basing their positions toward other states on this memory (Bachleitner, 2021). This article analyzes the memory narratives of the far-right in Europe to reveal how Russia is positioned after the invasion of Ukraine and the context of the support provided.

Grounded in these premises, the article examines how European far-right parties respond to the EU's securitized memory framework and how they shape their alternative historical narratives about Russia. The article aims to explain how the far-right continues to support Russia despite the invasion of Ukraine and the threat to European security. It will also reveal the current impact of memory-based security concerns in European politics. The main argument of this article is that the far-right continues to support Russia by engaging in "memory populism" and legitimizing itself in opposition to the EU through selective historical memories. In this context, the article explains the concept of memory security and the EU's official framework for memory security. It analyzes how the far-right links its historical narratives to identity and security construction and how it positions Russia. Finally, the study's findings are discussed in terms of the future political implications of memory security.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This article develops a theoretical framework grounded in the concepts of collective memory, memory security, agonistic memory, and narrative to examine how far-right actors in Europe construct alternative historical accounts and navigate their contextual dynamics. Informed by international relations and security studies, memory is conceptualized as a contested political space with direct security implications (Mälksoo, 2015; Subotić, 2016). Collective memory refers to the shared representations of the past held by individuals and communities, while narratives refer to the organizing frameworks through which these representations acquire meaning and significance. According to Halbwachs (1992), social memory is formed through the reconstruction of the past by individuals according to their position within the community. Assmann (2010, pp. 99–101) defines collective memory as the level of "cultural memory" that is transmitted between generations and concretized through cultural tools (ceremonies, rituals, symbols); this level

perpetuates the historical experiences of communities through institutions and carries them into the present. Narratives sustain these forms of memory while establishing both identity and a sense of spatial-temporal belonging; thus, social groups strengthen their ontological sense of security regarding historical continuity and reinforce their sense of belonging (Berenskoetter, 2014). The concept of “memory security” refers to a situation in which a community’s fundamental narratives about the past are stable and uncontested enough to provide its members with a sense of ontological security (Mälksoo, 2015; Mitzen, 2006).

States, especially during times of crisis or in contexts of increased identity uncertainty, construct historical narratives intertwined with historical memory. These narratives do not merely offer communities a chronological representation of the past; they also position them in a specific spatial and temporal plane, enabling them to make sense of their existence within an experienced and imagined space (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 282). However, these narratives are inevitably selective, simplistic, and political; they render some memories invisible while centralizing others. This situation makes alternative memory discourses and conflicts visible. Such counter-narratives can undermine the internal consistency of official biographical constructions and give rise to new areas of uncertainty (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 280). In this context, narratives often become the subject of struggles that manifest themselves in the form of counter-memory entrepreneurship. In this struggle, the state actor typically adopts a position defending the continuity of the existing historical framework (Jelin, 2003). In such conflicts, the question of which myths, symbols, norms, and historical narratives will be used to revive collective memory is of critical importance. Historical memory is not merely a representation of the past but also the legitimizing foundation of national identity and the guiding source of political action. Therefore, drawing on Michel Foucault’s (2003) statement that “society must be defended,” Maria Mälksoo (2015) asserts that “memory must be defended.”

In this context, memory security does not merely protect the forms in which the past is remembered; it also transforms historical narratives into a security framework that limits debate by preparing them for political use (Strukov & Apryshchenko, 2018; Makhortykh, 2018; Gaufman, 2017). This security framework is intertwined with the securitization approach, providing powerful actors with the opportunity to present certain historical events or symbols as a “security” issue and legitimize counter-memory narratives (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; Wæver, 1995; Balzacq, 2011). Security strategies implemented through memory narratives associate historical ruptures and traumas with representations of threats, thereby further consolidating collective identity through images of internal and external enemies. In this way, crisis discourse gains legitimacy and becomes central to the political agenda (Mitzen, 2006). Indeed, memory politics is not a politically neutral phenomenon. Building on Mouffe’s (2013) theory of agonistic democracy (which views political conflict as a normal and productive element of democratic life), Bull and Hansen (2016) extend this logic to the field of memory politics. In their formulation, “agonistic memory” offers an alternative to the securitization of memory by resisting the closure of hegemonic narratives and instead creating space for multiple, even conflicting, interpretations of the past. The European far-right presents this alternative through memory populism.

Memory populism refers to the strategic use of collective memory in populist discourse, in which the past is reframed through a moral dichotomy between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.” Rather than promoting plural engagement with history, populist actors instrumentalize memory to construct identity and mobilize emotion. Drawing on insights from populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) and memory politics (Assmann, 2010; Bernhard & Kubik, 2014), the concept captures how national traumas, heroic myths, and victimhood narratives are selectively invoked to legitimize claims to represent the authentic will of the people. In contrast to agonistic memory (Mouffe, 2013; Bull & Hansen, 2016), memory populism tends to securitize the past (Mälksoo, 2015), protecting dominant narratives as sacred while casting alternative interpretations as threats to national or cultural integrity. Through nostalgia, pride, and resentment, populist leaders perform memory as a moral and emotional resource for sustaining political identification (Moffitt, 2016; Wüstenberg, 2015). As recent studies note (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015; Bull & Hansen, 2016), memory populism thus reduces the plurality of historical narratives to a singular “people’s memory,” transforming remembrance into an exclusionary act aligned with the core dualism of populist discourse.

In conclusion, memory security strategies transform the normal field of politics while preserving the ideological continuity of social narratives, creating a permanent ontological emphasis on security. In this way, communities reinforce their sense of security constructed through collective memory and establish a more resilient identity framework against potential internal or external threats. In this context, populist and far-right actors, in particular, securitize memory by presenting mainstream historical narratives as a threat to national identity (Wodak, 2015). In other words, they defend their nations’ memories against official EU narratives and view official narratives as security threats.

3. Methodology

In this study, three far-right parties were examined in depth using the purposive sampling method: Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Germany, Rassemblement National (RN) in France, and the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) in Hungary. Germany, France, and Hungary offer different historical contexts: a Western European state grappling with its legacy of the past (Germany), a Western European state with a mixed legacy of victory and collaboration in World War II and a colonial history (France), and a Central-Eastern European state with a strong narrative of victimization against foreign domination (Hungary). The selected parties were chosen for their challenge to the mainstream memory discourse in Europe and their unconventional positions on Russia. The term “far-right” is used as an umbrella concept, drawing on the categorization presented in the European Populism Studies Center Report (Ivaldi & Zankina, 2023). While each case is unique within its national context, all parties share a right-wing populist identity and adopt a critical stance toward European integration and the liberal order, challenging the EU’s shared memory framework. The study period covers the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022–2024 period of the Russia-Ukraine war. Data were collected from the parties’ official websites, parliamentary transcripts (both national and European), the official social media

accounts of political parties and party leaders (including Facebook and Twitter), leaders' official YouTube channels, and published interviews and media statements. Using a purposive sample, relevant speeches were selected based on keywords such as Russia, Ukraine, European Union, and foreign policy (in the original language). Speeches by Alexander Gauland, Tino Chrupalla, and Björn Höcke from the AfD; Marine Le Pen and the new party leader Jordan Bardella from the RN; as well as Viktor Orbán from Fidesz, were compiled, along with speeches by the Hungarian government on the war in Ukraine and the EU's memory.

The study uses a combination of compilation-based discourse analysis and critical narrative analysis techniques. In the first stage, the parties' discourses were qualitatively examined, with a critical first reading focusing on historical references, collective memory emphases, and ways of positioning Russia. Subsequently, the narratives to which the parties refer (including themselves, the EU, the past, and the future) were identified. The compilation analyzed the context, frequency, and co-occurrence patterns of key words, including "history," "memory," "Russia," "Europe," "security," and "sovereignty." Through critical narrative analysis, the patterns of each party were compared to examine how they (re)imagined Russia and its relations in historical narratives and European visions, and how these narratives were (re)constructed. Finally, deliberate attempts to reshape memory security and discussions on memory policies were evaluated.

4. The EU's Official Memory Regime and the Counter-Narratives of the Far-Right

The EU integration process has required the creation of a common memory framework as part of identity construction. This process has aimed to construct a shared memory, with the rejection of fascism, the remembrance of the Holocaust, and a normative reading of the past based on human rights coming to the fore. With the accession of Eastern European countries, communist oppression and struggles for freedom have also been included in this common memory (Troebst, 2010). This shared memory regime, referred to by Mälksoo (2015) as "memory security" (the idea that a consistent collective memory is an integral part of a community's stability and identity), has been deemed necessary for the security of the EU. The EU has addressed collective memory as an integral part of its normative foundation and even as an ontological security issue for the European project (Sierp & Wüstenberg, 2015). However, nationalist and far-right actors who propose alternative narratives of the past in Europe have objected to the EU's common memory consensus. The far-right in Europe has emphasized the historical grievances, heroes, and traumas of their nations. They have claimed that their countries have been neglected and misrepresented in the EU's shared narrative of memory. They have "securitized" the EU's established memory narratives, framing specific interpretations of history as existential threats to national identity or sovereignty (Mälksoo, 2015).

The ideological profiles of the far-right, which combine nationalism, populism, and often revisionist history, have paved the way for their challenges to the transnational, self-critical memory culture promoted by the EU (Mudde, 2007; Risse, 2010). The far-right has developed

revisionist discourses against the transnational and self-critical EU memory regime and, within the framework of Chiara Bottici's (2007) concept of "political myth," has produced narratives that glorify past national glory. Criticism of Holocaust remembrance has been central to this myth. In Germany, the AfD's "monument of shame" rhetoric regarding the Holocaust memorial (Oltermann, 2017) and the RN's stance in France, which avoids acknowledging responsibility for the Vichy regime and colonialism, are examples of this (Shields, 2013). In Hungary, the Fidesz government has rebuilt memory through monuments that minimize Hungarian complicity in the Holocaust and narratives that emphasize anti-Soviet resistance (Laczó, 2019; Mörner, 2020, p. 1643). These revisionist approaches have not only reimagined the national past but also challenged Europe's cosmopolitan memory regime. By opposing liberal values, they have equated the EU with past totalitarian regimes. At this point, Russia's role in European memory debates, particularly before 2022, has been significant. The Putin administration has pursued a memory policy that emphasizes the Soviet victory and rejects critical narratives of the communist era, a stance that has resonated with many European far-right parties (Laruelle, 2018; Tumarkin, 2011). This parallelism, which began after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, went through a critical period with the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 but has continued in the subsequent period.

4.1. Alternative for Germany (AfD)

In Germany, the AfD emerged in 2013 as a Eurosceptic movement opposed to the Eurozone bailout packages but quickly transformed into a broader far-right force that rejects the official post-World War II narrative (Arzheimer, 2015). The AfD has characterized established memory practices, which it defines as a "culture of guilt" or "politics of remembrance," as excesses that weaken German national pride and sovereignty (AfD, 2016). Instead, the AfD has constructed a "normal" national narrative that focuses on the suffering endured by Germans during and after World War II, as well as the achievements of German culture (Betz & Habersack, 2019). This stance contrasts with the EU's official narrative, which emphasizes Germany's ongoing reckoning with its past (Müller, 2019). Björn Höcke's (2017) description of the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a "monument of shame" and his call for a "180-degree turn" in Germany's Erinnerungskultur are the most concrete examples of the AfD's revisionism of memory. Höcke and other AfD leaders have redefined Germans as both perpetrators and victims by emphasizing events such as the Allied bombing of German cities (Dresden) and the mass expulsions from Central and Eastern Europe after the war (Munz, 2019, p. 6). With these narratives, they have deliberately opposed the narratives of regret and reconciliation that have dominated the EU era. Indeed, the AfD has redefined German history by stating that "our nation also endured great suffering that deserves to be remembered and honored" (AfD, 2019). At the heart of the AfD's identity politics lies a reinterpretation of Cold War memory and Germany's divided past. In particular, party members with roots in the former East Germany have equated the EU with a Soviet-style form of external control, comparing Brussels' influence over Germany to Moscow's domination during the Cold War (AfD, 2016, 2021). The AfD has characterized the EU as a "superstate" lacking democratic legitimacy and presented it as a structure that undermines national sovereignty, employing concepts such as "EUSSR" (AfD, 2016, 2021, 2022). By securitizing

the memory of the communist past, the AfD has framed resistance to the EU as a continuation of the German struggle for freedom (Petrović, 2019).

This counter-narrative has enabled the party to reconfigure its stance toward Russia. The AfD has advocated closer relations with Russia, legitimizing this position based on historical pragmatism and cultural affinity (Weiss, 2020). Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, the party also viewed NATO's eastward expansion as provocative and assessed Russia's reactions in terms of historical legitimacy (AfD, 2016; Shekhovtsov, 2017). Instead of constant self-criticism, the AfD has promised to build a national identity based on the years 1945 and 1989, as well as the historical resistance of ordinary Germans (Patel, 2020). In foreign policy, the AfD has constructed a narrative of a European civilization with traditional values using the concept of "we." Within this framework, it has repositioned Russia as part of "Christian Europe" against secular liberalism and Islamic radicalism (Kalbhenn, 2021). Thus, the AfD has presented Russia not as an atheist threat but as a partner in a common civilizational project, challenging the memory regime established by the EU based on liberal values. The party's framing of the EU and NATO as neo-imperial structures reflects the Soviet hegemony that resonated particularly strongly in East Germany (Petrović, 2019). The AfD's closeness to Russia stems from its cultural conservatism and strategic skepticism toward European integration, and it generally views Russia as a bulwark against liberal globalization (Brubaker, 2017). Even after the 2022 invasion, the AfD condemned the violence but accused NATO and the West of provocation and supported Putin. Using "peace" rhetoric, the AfD has opposed sanctions and aid to Ukraine and characterized Germany's intervention as a historical mistake that risks repeating past disasters (AfD, 2022).

4.2. Rassemblement National (RN)

RN, founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen as the Front National, emerged from France's far-right tradition rooted in nationalism, anti-immigration sentiment, and post-colonial resentment (Shields, 2013). Under Marine Le Pen's leadership, the party underwent a strategic transformation from her father's overt Holocaust denial to an electorally palatable form of "sterile nationalism," marking both a generational shift and a redefinition of the RN's approach to national identity, sovereignty, and historical memory (Shields, 2013; Stockemer & Barisione, 2017). Le Pen has centered her political discourse on the restoration of France's national grandeur, rejecting what she describes as the European Union's "masochistic" interpretation of history and instead reconstructing a proud, heroic narrative of the nation (Rosanvallon, 2020). Drawing inspiration from Charles de Gaulle's notion of a "Europe of nations" (Europe des patries), she envisions a Europe composed of sovereign states cooperating as equals rather than subordinating themselves to supranational authority (Le Pen & von Rohr, 2014). Within this framework, the RN downplays the crimes of colonialism and Vichy collaboration while glorifying France's military legacy, advancing a revisionist yet non-denialist account of the past that privileges national pride over repentance (Stockton, 2019). By portraying the EU as a "totalitarian" or ancien régime structure, Le Pen has further instrumentalized memory politics to legitimize her Euroskeptic stance (Le Pen, 2014; Mudde, 2019).

In foreign policy, Le Pen's discourse mirrors her approach to national memory. She has called for France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command and revived de Gaulle's legacy of viewing Russia as a strategic partner (Reuters, 2022). Referring to the nineteenth-century Franco-Russian alliance, she has advocated for Moscow's reintegration into Europe's security architecture (Le Pen, 2017; M  r  , 2019). This position challenges the EU's normative consensus, placing national sovereignty and strategic autonomy at the center of French foreign policy. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the RN was compelled to distance itself from Vladimir Putin, yet it continued to oppose EU sanctions and anti-Russian narratives, framing them as expressions of historical vengeance reminiscent of the humiliation of Versailles (Irish, 2022). Consequently, the RN has adopted a form of strategic ambiguity that prioritizes French national interest while rejecting what it perceives as Europe's guilt-based memory politics. Under Marine Le Pen, the party has evolved from a marginal extremist movement into a normalized populist actor that weaves together identity politics, historical revisionism, and foreign policy discourse, portraying France as a proud yet independent nation attached to its historical grandeur but resistant to the EU's normative order (Rosanvallon, 2020; Mudde, 2019).

4.3. Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz)

Founded in 1988 as the Alliance of Young Democrats, Fidesz began as a liberal, pro-European youth movement opposing Hungary's communist regime. Over time, it transformed into a conservative nationalist party and, under Viktor Orb  n's leadership, became the dominant force in Hungarian politics (Krek   & Enyedi, 2018). Through its "non-liberal memory policy" introduced after 2010, Fidesz challenged the European Union's dominant narrative and redefined the Hungarian nation as both victim and hero. Orb  n's rhetoric intertwines national suffering and heroism, merging historical traumas such as Moh  cs (1526), the 1848–49 Revolution, the Treaty of Trianon (1920), and the 1956 Revolution into a unifying narrative of resilience and freedom (Orb  n, 2018, 2022; Behr, 2019). He argues that the EU disregards Central Europe's distinct historical experience, portraying it as a "narrative of encirclement" that marginalizes Hungary's past (Hankiss, 2006; Orb  n, 2018). Rejecting certain narratives of World War II, Orb  n has portrayed Hungarians as innocent victims of Nazi occupation through the "German Occupation Monument" in Budapest, ignoring the role of local collaborators (Meyer, 2015; M  ller, 2019). By incorporating Holocaust commemorations into the national tragedy narrative, Orb  n has established a dynamic balance between guilt and innocence, placing the suffering of Hungarian Jews within the shared tragedy of the entire nation. He has used the same narrative as a basis for legitimacy against communism, Soviet oppression, liberals, and EU bureaucrats (Orb  n, 2014, 2018, 2022, 2025). Orb  n, like the AfD and RN, has likened the EU to an authoritarian regime and defined it as the "new Brezhnev Doctrine" (Kov  cs, 2022).

Fidesz has reshaped historical narratives to legitimize strategic rapprochement with Russia and the East. Orb  n emphasizes both the "betrayals" of the West and Soviet imperialism through anti-communist memory, presenting energy and nuclear cooperation with Moscow as a pragmatic alliance of interests (Foxall, 2020). Within this framework, Orb  n has positioned Hungary as a

sovereign actor in a multipolar world through the Paks II nuclear power plant, references to its Central Asian origins, and narratives of an “Eastern Opening” (Mérő & Juhász, 2020; Orbán, 2018, 2022). Thus, Fidesz has formulated a new narrative based on national autonomy and respect for historical experience, in opposition to liberal-democratic impositions, under the banner of a “Europe of nations” (Orbán, 2016; Dobbs, 2020, p. 62). Orbán has reinterpreted Russia’s role, distinguishing modern Russia from Soviet tyranny and framing it as a Christian, conservative ally against liberal Western hegemony (Dobbs, 2020; Krekó & Győri, 2021). Orbán officially condemned the invasion of Ukraine but, like Le Pen, resisted sanctions and military support, framing the war as a tragedy rather than a national obligation (Than, 2022). These parties have redefined Russia by blending memory with geopolitical strategies, drawing on different historical and ideological backgrounds. Below, narratives about Russia before and after the 2022 Ukraine War are analyzed in the context of memory security.

5. The Ukraine War and the Far-Right in Narratives on Russia

The leaders of the AfD, RN, and Fidesz, who openly challenge the EU’s dominant memory regime and its impact on national identity and foreign policy, have also reworked their rhetoric, particularly in light of the invasion. In other words, the far-right has inverted the “memory must be defended” approach traditionally used for marginalized and oppressed communities within states. Below, the historical narratives constructed by the AfD, RN, and Fidesz are compared in terms of how they position themselves within the context of memory politics and Russia policies. In addition, their attitudes in the context of the 2022 war in Ukraine and how these attitudes are linked to the search for ontological security are highlighted.

Table 1. Far-Right Memory Politics and Russia Positioning

Dimension	AfD	RN	Fidesz
Target of guilt narrative	Holocaust centrality	Vichy & colonial record	WWII collaboration, Trianon trauma
Revisionist move	Downplay Nazi crimes; emphasize German victimhood	Separate “true France” from Vichy; stress national pride	Portray Hungary solely as victim of foreign powers
Securitizing frame	Guilt regime endangers nation	“Repentance” weakens sovereignty	Liberal cosmopolitanism equals new empire
Russia positioning	Cultural ally against NATO, energy partner	Future strategic partner vs. US hegemony	Illiberal ally; economic lifeline
Post-2022 stance	Oppose sanctions & arms, blame NATO	Condemn invasion but oppose escalation, keep rapprochement vision	Condemn invasion rhetorically, undermine EU action
Ontological logic	Restore “normal” German pride	Restore French grandeur & autonomy	Defend national unity vs. Brussels

Through selective commemoration, historical revisionism, and strategic positioning, the AfD, RN, and Fidesz have reshaped national narratives and positioned Russia in different ways. The

strategic forms of alignment in the far-right's memory politics, both before and after the invasion of Ukraine, as well as the ongoing conflicts with the European "memory security" regime and the narratives surrounding Russia, are analyzed comparatively below.

5.1. Narratives on Russia before the Invasion of Ukraine: From Alliance to Civilizational Approach

During the pre-war period, all three parties recalibrated their traditionally threat-based perceptions of Russia, recasting it as either a counterweight to the West or a partner grounded in shared values. The AfD portrayed Russia as an anti-liberal and anti-American power, positioning it as a culturally proximate conservative ally against transatlantic structures such as the EU and NATO. Certain actors within the party emphasized the Soviet Union's role in defeating Nazism during the Second World War, implying that Germany bears a historical debt to Russia (Brubaker, 2017). Among segments of its electorate (particularly in the former East Germany), a dual memory of the Soviet era persists, combining recollections of authoritarian rule with nostalgia for the social security and stability associated with that period, alongside a more critical view of the West.

The RN, by contrast, has framed Russia as an integral component of European civilization and embedded Franco-Russian historical relations within a broader, sovereignty-centered foreign policy discourse. Marine Le Pen has described Europe's exclusion of Russia as a historical mistake, arguing that France and Russia are natural allies united by a shared commitment to national sovereignty.

Fidesz's approach has relied on a more selective and historically layered construction. While preserving negative memories of Soviet domination, Orbán has simultaneously distanced contemporary Russia from that legacy, presenting it instead as a renewed "civilizational partner." In this narrative, references to nineteenth-century diplomatic ties and a shared Christian heritage have been instrumentalized to establish a positive sense of historical continuity in Hungarian–Russian relations (Krekó & Győri, 2021).

5.2. Russian Narratives after the Invasion of Ukraine: Discursive Adaptations and Political Flexibility

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted a discursive turning point for all three parties; yet it did not result in a wholesale abandonment of their previously positive narratives about Russia. Rather, each recalibrated its rhetoric, adopting more cautious, indirect, and strategically ambiguous positions.

After an initial phase of relative silence, the AfD moved away from explicit praise of Russia and instead advanced a discourse that shifted responsibility for the war onto the West. Russia was no longer framed as a "victim," but as a "provoked" actor reacting to NATO's enlargement policies.

In articulating this stance, the AfD largely avoided analogies with the Second World War, turning instead to historical references such as the alliance systems preceding the First World War or the proxy confrontations of the Cold War. This shift allowed the party to maintain its critique of transatlantic structures without overtly endorsing Moscow's actions.

The RN recalibrated its rhetoric with particular sensitivity to electoral considerations. Marine Le Pen emphasized the necessity of maintaining dialogue with Russia, while continuing to distinguish between the Putin regime and the Russian people. At the same time, she persisted in portraying NATO as a destabilizing force in European security. Nevertheless, she avoided an openly pro-Russian posture, foregrounding instead France's longstanding principle of strategic independence (Le Pen, 2022).

Fidesz's position has been more complex, shaped by its incumbency and Hungary's economic and political embeddedness within the EU. Constrained from fully rupturing ties with the Union, Orbán's government refrained from directly condemning Russia, characterizing the war as a "regional" conflict and emphasizing that Hungary's national interest lay in staying out of it. This stance has been reinforced through a historical narrative depicting Hungary as a nation repeatedly victimized by great-power conflicts, thereby legitimizing a policy of distance and non-involvement (Orbán, 2022, 2025).

5.3. Legitimization, Mobilization and Boundaries

Across Europe, right-wing populist parties have utilized historical memory not merely as a narrative resource but as a mechanism for producing political legitimacy. In contemporary Europe, memory politics functions as a key arena in which identities and power relations are constantly reconstructed (Tota & Hagen, 2016). The AfD and RN invert the West's self-proclaimed capacity to "learn lessons" from history, exposing what they portray as its latent propensity for extremism and moral hypocrisy. Fidesz, in contrast, transforms Hungary's national traumas (from the Treaty of Trianon to the 1956 Revolution) into a symbolic framework that legitimizes neutrality and sovereignty in foreign policy. As Brubaker (2017) observes, this reinterpretation of the past not only constructs an embattled national identity but also converts historical grievances and insecurities into political capital. These narratives resonate deeply among party constituencies by activating emotions of pride, loss, humiliation, and belonging. Among AfD supporters (particularly those from the former GDR), historical distrust of NATO and Western institutions aligns with the party's anti-liberal and anti-Atlanticist discourse (Zick et al., 2019). RN voters are mobilized through nationalist rhetoric portraying the party as the defender of France's independence and moral integrity, while Fidesz voters (socialized for over a decade through nationalist historical narratives) have internalized an uncritical stance toward Russia consistent with Orbán's sovereigntist discourse (Pytlas & Krekó, 2023). As Berezin (2019) argues, this affective mobilization reflects the "return of emotions" in European politics, where nostalgia and resentment have become central organizing principles of identity.

Nevertheless, these mnemonic strategies face both internal contradictions and external constraints. Within the AfD, generational memories of Soviet domination generate divisions over relations with Moscow; within the RN, Le Pen's prior proximity to the Kremlin remains a target of criticism; and Fidesz, due to its pro-Russian stance, has faced growing isolation within the European Union and heightened scrutiny over democratic backsliding and the rule of law. As Wodak (2015) notes, this emotional governance of memory simultaneously strengthens collective cohesion and exposes the fragility of populist legitimacy, as such narratives struggle to sustain credibility once subjected to moral and geopolitical contestation. The instrumentalization of historical memory and affective mobilization has thus given rise to "memory populism" as a distinctive form of populist discourse, directly challenging the dominant memory regime of the European Union.

5.4. Asymmetric Challenge in European Memory

Far-right parties such as the AfD, RN, and Fidesz have mobilized collective memory not merely as an interpretation of the past but as a political instrument for defining "who we are" and "who the other is," thereby transforming memory into a matter of security (Mälksoo, 2015; Subotić, 2016). In this context, memory populism suppresses narrative pluralism and replaces it with a singular, morally charged "public memory" structured around the binary logic of populist discourse.

The rise of memory-based populism is closely linked to what might be described as discursive vacuums. Mouffe (2005, 2013) and Wodak (2015) argue that liberal democracies have weakened ideological contestation through processes of depoliticization and technocratization. As centrist parties converge and the traditional left-right divide fades, citizens' emotional and identity-based demands increasingly find no clear channel of representation within mainstream politics. Tota and Hagen (2016) similarly contend that contemporary Europe suffers from an imbalance between remembering and forgetting, producing zones of silence in which populist movements can thrive. Leaders such as Orbán, Le Pen, and Wilders have capitalized on this void by constructing new antagonisms between "the people" and "the elites," thereby re-legitimizing conflict as an essential dimension of political life. In this sense, memory populism functions both as a reaction to and a mechanism for filling the discursive gap.

By fusing memory with narratives of security, sovereignty, and identity, these parties convert the past into political capital. In doing so, they cultivate what Wodak (2015) terms an emotional politics of fear and pride, an affective register that privileges resonance over deliberation. Memory thus becomes a terrain where history, emotion, and power intersect, reshaping the boundaries of democratic politics and redefining the language of European populism. Non-liberal actors have carried out this securitization primarily through narratives that depict liberal memory norms as threats to the symbolic unity of the nation and, by extension, of the EU. As a result, foundational elements of European integration (such as Franco-German reconciliation and Holocaust remembrance) have been challenged by alternative national narratives. In Germany,

the AfD's questioning of historical responsibility risks undermining memory-based solidarity in Europe, while Hungary's state-sponsored historical reinterpretations have generated tensions with Ukraine, the United States, and Israel. These developments raise a broader question: can the EU accommodate historical pluralism, or does its cohesion depend on a shared normative memory framework?

The memory policies of the AfD, RN, and Fidesz point to the emergence of a transnational form of "memory populism," grounded in the claim that defining historical truth is the exclusive prerogative of the nation-state—what may be described as "memory sovereignty" (Mudde, 2007). This stance constitutes a direct challenge to the EU's liberal-democratic memory regime. Yet the impact of this challenge varies. While the AfD and RN, operating largely outside executive power, have influenced discourse more than institutions, Fidesz (through its control of the Hungarian state) has been able to institutionalize an alternative national memory regime. This divergence illustrates the different dimensions of Europe's memory security crisis and underscores the decisive role of political authority in shaping mnemonic governance.

The temporal dimension is equally significant. The trajectory of the war in Ukraine may alter far-right narratives in unpredictable ways. At the same time, generational change could reshape memory politics more fundamentally. As the lived memory of World War II fades, space may open for revisionist reinterpretations; yet it may also create opportunities for constructing a more inclusive and plural European memory. What remains clear is that these debates are not merely symbolic. Hungary's reluctance regarding Ukraine, the RN's anti-NATO stance, and similar positions demonstrate how fragmentation in shared historical narratives can weaken collective security mechanisms. Memory security, therefore, is not only a question of identity, it is a strategic issue with tangible implications for Europe's foreign and security policy.

6. Conclusion

The examples of AfD, RN, and Fidesz show that the far-right is challenging the existing order by reshaping historical narratives in Europe. These parties have instrumentalized collective memory by targeting the normative foundations of the EU to strengthen their national identities, legitimize their foreign policy orientations, and create an alternative narrative of continuity in the face of crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In doing so, they have directly targeted "Europe's memory security," i.e., the historical consensus on which integration and shared values are based.

Each case has demonstrated unique and distinct national contexts shaped by the relationship between national history and current geopolitical developments. With its discourse questioning historical responsibility, the AfD has challenged Germany's central role in the memory consensus from within; the RN has reframed its discourse to revise France's position in Europe. Fidesz, meanwhile, has systematically rebuilt national memory using state power and continues to

use this framework to resist EU policies. What these parties have in common is that they have established memory and identity as fields of contestation against hegemonic narratives in Europe.

Selective memory, distortion, and exclusionary narratives fuel crises of representation and belonging in European societies, underscoring the need for inclusive memory practices. However, the solutions offered by these parties often carry the risk of reviving the exclusionary identity politics that Europe has faced in the past.

In terms of theoretical contribution, this study is significant for understanding polarization in European politics and foreign policy differences by bridging the gap between security and memory studies and introducing the concept of “memory security.” Furthermore, the far-right has appropriated the “memory must be defended” approach from disadvantaged groups. It has been shown that competition over historical narratives affects not only identities but also collective action capacity and security cooperation.

Ultimately, the 2022 Ukraine War has not eliminated these parties' memory-based discourses; instead, it has demonstrated that these discourses can be adapted and sustained. These parties, which center national interests and historical identity, are important actors with the potential to transform Europe's shared memory politics from within. Therefore, the struggle for memory security should be seen as a battleground not only for the past but also for the normative future of Europe.

The war in Ukraine has strengthened the sense of partnership while making memory conflicts more visible. In this context, the electoral success of the far-right will determine the future direction of memory politics. Indeed, they have managed to revise memory narratives even during the occupation of Ukraine. The war in Ukraine has reminded us of the transformative power of memory in politics. How Europe manages this narrative diversity will determine not only the fate of a common identity but also that of strategic alignment. Indeed, states with similar cultures have entered into crisis and have seen their relations affected by the construction of new memories.

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