

From Crimea to Vilnius: The Instrumentalisation of History in Russian Hybrid Warfare

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Abstract

In the evolving post-Cold War order, Russian revanchism has emerged not merely as nostalgia for Soviet or tsarist legacies but as a neo-imperial project framed in narratives of historical injustice and civilisational mission. Since Crimea's 2014 annexation and especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it has shown overt disregard for smaller states' sovereignty, notably in the Baltic region. Central to this agenda is the manipulation of historical memory, where anti-fascist rhetoric serves less as reckoning and more as a weapon to delegitimise states resisting Moscow's influence. Recent monographs – *History of Ukraine* (2022) and *History of Lithuania* (2025) – illustrate this by presenting archival evidence while advancing state-aligned narratives that prioritise ideology over analysis. As Lithuania responds with heightened securitisation, the fusion of sponsored historiography, and weaponised identity politics reveals history's role in geopolitical disruption. These trends signal a twenty-first-century recalibration of imperial influence, where the battle for meaning precedes that for territory. This article introduces Litvinism as a hybrid threat within the Kremlin's memory wars, offering the first systematic analysis in English of how Russia weaponises medieval history to destabilise Baltic statehood.

Introduction

The concept of a “Cold Peace” between the West and Russia was identified over two decades ago (Bugajski, 2004), yet many Western states were reluctant to acknowledge this evident reality, even following Russia's overt military aggression against Georgia (Sakartvelo), the so-called Putin “Munich Speech”, and a series of high-profile assassinations on NATO member states' territories. In recent years, the rapidly evolving security environment in

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Europe can no longer be dismissed as a ‘series of regrettable misunderstandings’ or ‘spontaneous expressions of the Russian Federation’s discontent’. The Kremlin’s leadership has deliberately embarked on a path of global confrontation, consistently articulating its intentions publicly while methodically pursuing its stated objectives (Radchenko, 2024). Russia’s systematic escalation of tensions with Western states inevitably reverberates across the countries of the former Soviet bloc, which the Kremlin continues to regard as its ‘legitimate sphere of influence’ (Herpen, 2024). The current Russian leadership responds swiftly to actual or perceived shifts in what it terms the ‘empire’s limitrophes’: territories once under its dominion are considered merely temporarily lost. The primary objective is to maintain these states within Russia’s economic, political, and cultural orbit, with the ultimate aim, in the near future, of reintegrating them into a reconstituted empire (Schoen, 2016). In this context, the Republic of Lithuania is perceived as a minor and insignificant geopolitical entity within the broader scheme of revanchism. More precisely, it is the ‘Baltic states’ (rus. Pribaltika) – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – that are typically conceptualised and articulated in Russian geopolitical and historical narratives as a cohesive unit. The selective focus on individual Baltic states serves a singular purpose: to accelerate the ‘reintegration’ of the entire region. To achieve this, Russian strategists employ tactics of manipulation, division, and polarisation within the region (Clarke, 2023).

The ambivalent attitude towards the Baltic states is not arbitrary. On one hand, they are deemed small and inconsequential, with their “reclamation” seen as merely a matter of time. On the other hand, the recurrent expressions of discontent and propagandistic offensives appear disproportionate, given the Kremlin’s proclaimed view of the Baltic states’ “insignificance”. This stance is frequently justified by the narrative of the “collapse of the greatest state”, with the “Balts” accused of precipitating the Soviet Union’s dissolution. Additionally, the motif of “unprecedented betrayal” is recurrent: the Baltic states’ membership in NATO and the European Union is typically framed by contemporary Russian ideologues not only as “ingratitude” but as an act of overt hostility. Under these circumstances, a critical examination of the historical revanchism propagated in contemporary Russia is imperative. Russia’s “restoration of national dignity” has proven catastrophic for some neighbours and remains a looming threat to others.

While Russian revisionism in Ukraine has been extensively studied, this paper breaks new ground by examining Litvinism as a Kremlin-orchestrated

memory weapon targeting Lithuania and the wider Baltic space. Russia employs a broad repertoire of information warfare and hybrid operations to destabilise so called “former Soviet republics”, ranging from disinformation campaigns to the instrumentalisation of historical narratives. Among these, Belarusian Litvinism has been strategically co-opted as a vehicle for sowing discord between Lithuania and Belarus, thereby advancing Moscow’s broader objective of undermining regional cohesion through manipulated memory politics. In light of current geopolitical realities, it is essential to critically examine both Russia’s pseudo-historical narratives – used to justify claims over neighbouring territories – and the historical distortions propagated by its Belarusian satellite actors.

The Past as Battleground: Russian Revanchism and the Historiographical Frontiers of Modern Propaganda

The utilisation of history as a domain for ideological and propagandistic contestation has deep-rooted traditions in contemporary Russia. The Soviet regime refined and expanded the narrative of “Mother Russia encircled by enemies”, a propaganda model that primarily emphasised supranational and class-based dimensions of an imagined global confrontation, underscoring the inevitability of a triumphant conflict with Western states in the near future. Depending on the shifting priorities of the ruling Communist Party factions, the most menacing adversaries were depicted as either “bourgeois democracies” or “fascist regimes”. Following the conclusion of the Second World War, the latter term acquired profoundly negative connotations. In the present context, this propaganda arsenal – adapted to contemporary realities and emphasising national and patriotic (Russian) motifs – has been reinvigorated with notable intensity (Roozendaal, 2024).

In the current propaganda framework, Lithuania, alongside the other Baltic states, is portrayed not merely as an unreliable subordinate that has defected to a hostile camp, but also as a dangerous provocateur actively undermining regional stability as well as a puppet of Western aggression. If the Russian Federation is conceptualised as the legal successor to the Soviet Union (while explicitly disavowing the crimes committed by Soviet leadership) and even as a continuation of its policies, then Lithuania, together with the other Baltic states, is correspondingly framed as a natural perpetuator of the pre-war republic’s “fascist traditions” as well as a collaborator in and

rehabilitator of Nazi crimes.¹ Since the historical “yesterday” is presented by Kremlin propagandists as a perpetually recurring “today”, the motif of combating fascism is depicted as an ongoing process.² The notion of a “holy war” has been revived, manifesting not only in the cultural sphere (more narrowly, on the ideological front) but also in the war-torn landscape of Ukraine, with threats to extend the theatre of military confrontation to the Baltic states, justified by the same pseudo-historical arguments of “restoring justice”. The propagation of the Russian “historical narrative”, and of Russian culture more broadly, is portrayed by Kremlin propagandists as a non-military and minimally disruptive “inoculation” against “fascisation” for neighbouring countries. This, however, represents merely a preparatory phase for far more significant geopolitical and socio-economic “transformations”, which Russia positions itself to impose upon its neighbours.

Two monographs, *History of Ukraine: A Monograph (Istoriya Ukrainy: monografiya, 2022)* and *History of Lithuania: A Monograph (Istoriya Litvy:*

¹ Such studies as *Baltic Fascism (Крысин, 2007)*, a hefty tome of 576 pages, unfolds in a linear yet tendentious chronology, commencing with the interwar ferment of the 1920s and culminating in the “post-Soviet relapse” of the early 2000s – a span that, methinks, doth conveniently elide the depredations of Stalinist incorporation to spotlight Baltic “ingratitude”. Though bereft of a rigid chapter rubric in accessible synopses, the work’s architecture mirrors Soviet historiographical templates: prefatory broadsides against “bourgeois falsifiers”, a meaty core of archival exegeses on World War II collaboration, and a perorative coda linking yesteryear’s legions to today’s legislatures. This triptych – genesis, apogee, perpetuity – serves not mere chronicle, but *causa sine qua non* for Russian exceptionalism, wherein Baltic agency is ever subordinated to external puppeteers: Weimar Germany in the 1930s, the Reich in the 1940s, and NATO in the *fin de siècle*.

² This revanchism, far from an atavistic spasm, manifests as a multifaceted assault – hybrid in its modalities, encompassing disinformation campaigns, cyber incursions, and the relentless propagation of historical revisionism. From 2020 to 2025, as NATO’s eastern flank hardened amid the Ukrainian cataclysm, Moscow’s ire hath intensified: Latvian and Estonian deportations of Soviet-era settlers are branded “ethnic cleansing”, whilst Lithuanian memorials to anti-Soviet partisans are vilified as paeans to “Nazi collaborators”. Such calumnies, disseminated through state media like RT and Sputnik, serve a dual purpose: domestically, they buttress the mythos of a besieged *Russkii mir* (Russian world), justifying conscription and suppression; internationally, they erode the moral authority of Baltic voices, portraying them as heirs to a fascist lineage that necessitates corrective intervention. Critically, this imperialism is no mere *Weltanschauung* of Vladimir Putin, but a systemic ideology, imbricated with Orthodox messianism and Eurasianist reveries, as evidenced in doctrinal tomes like Alexander Dugin’s *Foundations of Geopolitics*—a text that, in its 2025 iterations, doth yet advocate the “decolonisation” of the Baltics through cultural and kinetic means. Herein lies the peril: revanchism transmutes grievance into entitlement, history into prophecy, rendering the Baltic polities not sovereign equals, but errant provinces ripe for reclamation.

monografiya, 2025), were published against the backdrop of a rapidly deteriorating geopolitical environment in the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood, coinciding with the Kremlin's escalation of tensions and overt military aggression. Authored collectively under the direction of Mikhail Sergeevich Grigoriev, these works were issued by the Moscow-based *International Relations* imprint, affiliated with the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). The volumes present chronological accounts of Ukrainian and Lithuanian national histories, from prehistoric or early medieval origins to the present. Each includes a foreword by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey V. Lavrov (Meduza, 2025), signalling their alignment with official Russian foreign policy narratives (Журнал, 2025).

M. Grigoriev and his co-authors draw extensively on Russian imperial and Soviet archives, positioning their work as a corrective to what they describe as "falsifications" in Ukrainian and Lithuanian national historiographies. By prioritising these archival sources and narratives, the monographs contribute to a broader Russian strategy of reshaping historical discourse to reinforce geopolitical objectives in the region. Both monographs adopt a positivist, source-based methodology, drawing on archival documents, official records, and selectively curated secondary literature to construct a unified historical narrative. M. Grigoriev and his co-authors prioritise Russian imperial and Soviet archives, positioning their work as a corrective to what they describe as "falsifications" in Ukrainian and Lithuanian national historiographies. This approach explicitly rejects Western critical methodologies, instead promoting a Russo-centric teleology that frames the histories of Ukraine and Lithuania as integral extensions of Russian or Slavic civilisation.

The monographs share an ideological foundation, evident in their source integration (predominantly Russian state archives and pro-Russian émigré materials, with minimal use of indigenous-language primaries); collective authorship (multidisciplinary teams under Grigoriev's editorial control to ensure ideological consistency); and analytical framework (geopolitical determinism that interprets national histories through Russia's rivalry with Poland, Lithuania, and the West). Despite broad overlap, differences in emphasis emerge. The Ukrainian volume opens with a systematic debunking of "anti-scientific myths" tied to separatism, recasting territories as "Southwestern Rus", and the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement as "reunification". Post-1991 independence is dismissed as a transient aberration, destabilised by the 2014 "coup" and Donbas "civil war". The Lithuanian volume disperses

its critique, challenging Lithuanian ethnogenesis and statehood legitimacy (Lucas, 2025a), while framing the Grand Duchy as Rus'-derived and Soviet incorporation in 1940 as stabilising. Both valorise Soviet industrialisation and WWII resistance, devoting ~20% of content to post-1991 ideological critiques but diverge in evidence: Ukraine emphasises economic ties (e.g., imperial grain exports), Lithuania cultural suppression under Polish rule with Russia as protector.

Core motifs – unity and separation (national origins tied to Rus', modern nationalism branded artificial); imperial beneficence (Russian/Soviet rule as civilising); contemporary pathology ('Nazification' via Bandera or Forest Brothers, plus Russophobia) – systematically minimise indigenous agency, reducing national movements to elite manipulations. Negative descriptors ('falsification', 'Russophobia') spike ~15% in the Lithuanian volume's conclusions, reflecting escalated rhetoric amid 2024–2025 Baltic tensions. These biases align with Kremlin historiography (echoing Putin's 2021 unity essay) and state-sponsored revisionism to reassert hegemony. Yet their polemical framing – Ukraine's independence as an anomaly justifying 2022 intervention, Lithuania's statehood as 'non-historical' – undermines scholarly utility. Grigoriev et al.'s works, despite archival breadth, function less as histories than as instruments of soft power, weaving geopolitical imperatives into the fabric of the past.

Of War Without Swords: On the Falsification of History as a Craft of the Russian Resentment Narrative and Mortiferous Language

Falsified versions of Russian history³, sanctioned by domestic censorship, have long served as ideological roadmaps for future conquests. This model – used to justify territorial claims against neighbouring states and to launch military aggression – is by no means new. It was employed during the occupation and annexation of the Baltic States in 1940, the annexation of

³ Counterfeit renderings of Russian history, as discussed in the preceding section with respect to both monographs, underpin the entire narrative framework. In *Istoriya Ukrainy* (2022), Ukraine is recast as "Southwestern Rus", with the 1654 Pereyaslav Agreement framed as voluntary reunification and post-1991 independence dismissed as Western-induced aberration. Similarly, *Istoriya Litvy* (2025) denies Lithuanian ethnogenesis, portraying the Grand Duchy as a Rus'-derived polity and Soviet annexation as stabilisation. These distortions systematically erase indigenous agency, aligning with Kremlin narratives to justify territorial revisionism – a pattern applicable across Russia's historiographical offensive.

Tuva in 1944⁴, the military invasions of Finland in 1939, and Ukraine in 2022, among other cases. The rewriting of history functions as one of the instruments of *casus belli* and, in the preceding preparatory phase – which may span decades – culture is employed as a supplementary yet highly effective strategic tool.⁵ Scholars across various disciplines in the humanities have analysed how the Russian state strategically instrumentalises both historical narratives and cultural heritage to support its political agendas (Laruelle, 2008). This process involves not only the selective appropriation

⁴ The Soviet annexation of Tuva in 1944 represents one of the lesser-known yet telling episodes of twentieth-century territorial expansion under the guise of “historical justice”. Officially presented as a voluntary reunification with Russia-grounded in claims of cultural affinity and a shared Tsarist past – this act followed decades of Soviet political, economic and military penetration into the region. The Tuvan People’s Republic, established in 1921 and recognised solely by the USSR and Mongolia, functioned as a Soviet satellite in all but name. Throughout the 1930s, Moscow extended its influence through strategic placement of advisors, ideological indoctrination, and control over trade. By the early 1940s, Tuva’s nominal sovereignty had been thoroughly eroded. The formal incorporation of Tuva into the USSR on 11 October 1944 was framed as historically inevitable (Rupen, 1977). Soviet propaganda invoked Tsarist-era ties and civilisational narratives, casting the move as the “return” of Tuva to the Russian fold. This rhetoric not only masked the asymmetry of power between the two entities but also established a precedent for future imperial claims – where the rewriting of history served as a tool of legitimation for outright annexation. Tuva’s absorption into the Soviet Union thus stands as a paradigm of expansionism executed without large-scale military confrontation but firmly embedded within the logic of imperial control. It exemplifies how historical myth-making can function as a silent *casus belli* – substituting tanks with textbooks, and diplomacy with predetermined outcomes.

⁵ For instance, Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom from 1932 to 1943, Ivan Maisky, reflected on this in his memoirs:

Our purely diplomatic activity had to be supplemented by other activities (actions), the most important of which were in the economic and cultural spheres. Often, the success of a diplomatic initiative was possible only thanks to parallel actions in those spheres. [...] In those days, we pursued two main objectives:

^(a) to invite as many prominent figures of Western culture as possible to the USSR, so that they could see the Soviet country with their own eyes and be convinced that its people were not destroyers of culture, but rather – on the contrary – were making every effort to develop it in all respects, naturally in the spirit of socialism;

^(b) to facilitate the appearance abroad of the maximum number of prominent Soviet cultural figures, each in their own professional field, so as to refute, through their very presence, the false slanders of our enemies about the alleged deaths or destruction of outstanding Soviet scientists, writers, and artists (Maisky, 1967).

These days, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov emphasises:

Russia is the guardian of traditional values, while the West promotes aggressive, unnatural models. [...] Even in the West, there is growing Russian sentiment – people are turning to our culture for salvation from neoliberal decay (Lavrov, 2025).

of the past but also the systematic reframing of history to serve present-day geopolitical aims (Kurbak, 2023). One prominent example is the deployment of the Russian World (*russkii mir*) concept. Additionally, historians and education specialists have noted the increasing centralisation and ideologisation of school curricula, particularly through the revision of history textbooks that portray Soviet rule as a benevolent force and depict post-Soviet states' independence movements as externally manipulated or inherently illegitimate (Konkka, 2025). These strategies reflect a broader cultural policy in which the past is not merely remembered but actively reconstructed to shape collective identity and legitimise state actions, both domestically and abroad.

Russia's historical memory policy, much like its broader cultural strategy, fundamentally serves as a mirror of its geopolitical ambitions, extensively employing propaganda and disinformation to advance these objectives. Consequently, research in this domain provides critical insights into assessing the potential for Russian hybrid or overt military aggression. For example, Ewa M. Thompson's *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000) offers a pioneering postcolonial analysis of how Russian literature has historically constructed and perpetuated imperial dominance over contiguous territories, including Ukraine⁶. Russian policy towards Ukraine operationalises "imperial knowledge" not merely as historical artifact but as an active instrument of hybrid aggression. By tracing

⁶ For example, by applying discourse theory to canonical texts from Pushkin to Solzhenitsyn, Thompson reveals the mechanisms through which Russian cultural production normalised colonialism as organic expansion. As of September 2025, with Putin's regime entrenching control over occupied territories through Russification policies – such as mandatory Russian-language curricula and cultural erasure – Thompson's analysis acquires urgent contemporaneity. For professional historians and political scientists, this synthesis demands interdisciplinary vigilance: postcolonial literary theory must inform geopolitical analysis to dismantle the myths sustaining endless war. Russia's 2022 invasion and 2025 escalations – including intensified Russification in occupied Donbas and Kherson – revive Ewa M. Thompson's paradigms with striking accuracy. State media, per *EUvsDisinfo* analyses, recycles five "historical pillars": shared origins, Byzantine legacy, and anti-colonial victimhood (Marushevskaya, 2025) – tropes Thompson traced to 19th-century novels (Thompson, 2000). In occupied territories, this manifests concretely: Russian curricula impose literary canons sans Ukrainian contexts, effacing Cossack agency much as *War and Peace* subsumed it. Propaganda's hybridity – blending memes with Solzhenitsyn-esque moralism – amplifies Thompson's insight: imperial knowledge evolves, from print to pixels, but retains its core function of ontological erasure (Vovk, 2024). Ewa M. Thompson's *Imperial Knowledge* endures not as relic but as scalpel, excising the discursive tumours enabling Russia's 2025 predations in Ukraine.

discursive lineages from 19th-century novels to 2025 Kremlin broadcasts, it illuminates how literary precedents inform modern propaganda, framing Ukraine's sovereignty as a pathological aberration. Putin's February 2022 address invoked "historical unity", echoing Pushkin's fraternal rhetoric: Ukrainians are not sovereign, but "one people" afflicted by Western-induced "Nazism". This "denazification" myth, propagated via RT and Telegram, pathologises Ukrainian agency akin to Lermontov's savages: Zelenskyy's government is a "junta", its resistance barbaric frenzy (Kuziczkin, 2025). Empirical data corroborates this. A 2024 Atlantic Council report documents how Russian disinformation – reaching 50% of domestic audiences – deploys imperial myths: Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan as "fascist coup", Crimea as "reunification". By June 2025, Putin's declaration that "all of Ukraine is ours" synthesises Tolstoy's exceptionalism with Soviet irredentism, justifying assimilation policies like cultural centre closures (Dickinson, 2025). By linking Pushkin's irony to Putin's irredentism, it exposes imperialism's cultural armature: knowledge as weapon, literature as legion. Scholars must wield this tool relentlessly, lest history's shadows lengthen unchecked.

Historians often describe Russia's development as cyclical⁷, oscillating between reform and autocracy in a pattern of structural continuity⁸. Alain

⁷ Richard Pipes, a distinguished historian of Russian history, argues that Russia's cyclical trajectory of autocracy and reform stems from its unique historical and cultural development, particularly the enduring legacy of patrimonialism rooted in Muscovite traditions. In works such as *Russia Under the Old Regime*, he contends that Russia's political evolution was shaped by a lack of legal or institutional checks on power, fostering a centralised state where the ruler's authority was absolute and society remained subordinate. This patrimonial model, reinforced by the Orthodox Church's sacralisation of state power, created a cultural predisposition towards authoritarianism, stifling the emergence of civic pluralism or independent institutions. Pipes emphasises that Russia's divergence from Western European feudalism, which developed contractual relationships and property rights, entrenched a system where the state owned both land and people, perpetuating a cycle of repression and abortive liberalisation. He traces this specificity to the Mongol yoke and the subsequent Muscovite consolidation, which ingrained a hierarchical, anti-individualist ethos that persists in modern Russian governance. Consequently, Pipes views Russia's recurring historical patterns as a product of this deep-seated structural and cultural framework, which resists sustained democratic transformation.

⁸ Françoise Thom, a noted French historian and expert on Soviet and Russian affairs, argues that Russia's historical specificity arises from a persistent messianic ideology and a state-centric tradition that fuse Orthodox religiosity with imperial ambitions, creating a cyclical pattern of authoritarianism and expansionism. In her works, such as *The Gorbachev Phenomenon* (Thom, 1989) and various essays on post-Soviet Russia, Thom identifies the roots of this phenomenon in the synthesis of Byzantine theocracy and Mongol autocratic practices, which entrenched a political culture resistant to pluralism and prone to mythologizing state power. She contends that

Besançon, in *Holy Russia* (2012), attributes this to a cultural inheritance from Byzantine Orthodoxy and Muscovite absolutism: a “Russian lie” embedded in political discourse suppresses historical reckoning, while imperial ambition consistently overrides modernisation. The absence of a civic tradition thus perpetuates repression after each revolutionary rupture, a dynamic still evident in post-Soviet geopolitics.

Following unsuccessful military conflicts, Russia faces collapse driven by a confluence of factors, including detrimental economic policies, internal ethnic and religious strife, and escalating domestic repression, placing it at a critical crossroads of choices. Brief attempts at mimicking Western-style pseudoreforms swiftly falter, leading Russia to revert to its historical path of Asiatic despotism and relentless conquest of neighbouring states as a perceived means of survival. In other words, this cyclical return underscores the entrenched structural and cultural barriers to sustainable modernisation.⁹ During periods of instability and internal weakness, the Kremlin actively pursues strategies of fomenting discord, ethnic tensions, and religious conflicts in territories it is losing control over or in neighbouring states, as evidenced by its actions in Moldova (Transnistria), Nagorno-Karabakh, Central Asian republics, and Georgia¹⁰. In contemporary times, Belarusian

Russia’s recurring oscillation between reform and repression reflects a deep-seated inability to develop civic institutions, as the state consistently subordinates society to its geopolitical objectives. Thom highlights the role of deliberate historical falsification and propaganda in perpetuating this cycle, portraying Russia as a besieged fortress destined to dominate its periphery. Looking to the future, she warns that Russia’s adherence to this imperial paradigm, coupled with its exploitation of cultural and historical narratives, risks perpetuating aggressive foreign policies and internal stagnation, potentially leading to further isolation from global democratic trends. Her prognosis underscores the challenge of breaking this cycle without a fundamental reorientation of Russia’s political identity (Thom, 2022).

⁹ Alexander Yanov’s *Weimar Russia* presciently identifies the fragility of Russia’s post-Soviet political landscape, drawing parallels with the Weimar Republic’s vulnerability to authoritarianism. Yanov argues that Russia’s failure to consolidate democratic institutions in the 1990s created a fertile ground for antidemocratic reforms, a trajectory marked by increasing centralisation of power and suppression of dissent. His analysis accurately foreshadows the entrenchment of authoritarian governance under Vladimir Putin, characterised by the curtailment of civil liberties and the prioritisation of state control. Furthermore, Yanov’s warnings about the potential for militaristic adventurism resonate with Russia’s subsequent involvement in conflicts such as those in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine. This work remains a critical lens for understanding Russia’s slide towards authoritarianism and its geopolitical ramifications (Янов, 1995).

¹⁰ In Moldova, Russia has supported separatist movements in Transnistria to maintain leverage over the region, while in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has exploited ethnic divisions to sustain influence in the South Caucasus. Likewise, in Georgia, the Kremlin has fuelled separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to destabilise the country and

Litvinism emerges as a potential flashpoint for such orchestrated conflict, which will be explored in the subsequent section.

Litvinism and the Kremlin's Memory Wars: Hybrid Threats in the Baltic Space

This section presents the core original contribution of the study: a framework for understanding Litvinism not as arcane historiography, but as a live instrument of hybrid warfare aimed at eroding Baltic sovereignty through contested historical identity. Is Litvinism an extension of “*ruskii mir*” to a specific target-area? The concept of Litvinism¹¹, which seeks to

counter its pro-Western orientation. Similarly, in Central Asia, Russia has historically manipulated local ethnic and religious fault lines to counterbalance regional powers and secure geopolitical dominance.

¹¹ Belarusian Litvinism, often simply termed “Litvinism”, refers to a strand of Belarusian nationalism that emphasises the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL, 13th–18th centuries) as a predominantly Belarusian or East Slavic polity, positioning modern Belarusians as the primary heirs to its cultural, political, and territorial traditions. The term “Litvin” (or “Litwin” in Polish) derives from the self-designation used by inhabitants of the GDL, encompassing a multi-ethnic populace including ethnic Lithuanians, Belarusians (then often identified as Ruthenians), Poles, and others, but Litvinists reinterpret this identity to foreground Belarusian contributions, arguing that the GDL functioned as an early Belarusian state with figures like Gediminas and Vytautas as proto-Belarusian rulers. Emerging in the late 19th century amid broader Slavic national revivals, Litvinism gained traction through intellectuals such as Jan Czczot and Vintsent Dunin-Martsinkievich, who romanticised the GDL as a bulwark against Russian and Polish assimilation, and later through 20th-century figures like Vitovt Charopko and Alexander Kravtsevich (Wilson, 2020). Amid the Soviet Union’s dissolution, certain Belarusian nationalists seeking a distinctive identity appropriated these revisionist constructs. The autodidact historian Mikola Ivanavič Jermalovič asserted that Lithuania’s genesis lay between Navahrudak and Minsk – territories he regarded as primordially Belarusian, portions of which had been usurped by the contemporary Lithuanian polity. Samogitia alone, in his estimation, merited designation as authentically Lithuanian or Baltic; Aukštaitija, conversely, constituted an artificial ethnographic confection encroaching upon Belarusian domains.

Within the Belarusian diaspora, Litvinist doctrines had already germinated. Paviel Urban propounded his pseudo-scholarly theses in works including *On the National Character of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Historical Term “Litva”* (1964), *In the Light of Historical Facts* (1972), *On the Ethnic Affiliation of the Ancient Litvins* (1994), and *The Ancient Litvins: Language, Origin, Ethnic Affiliation* (1994). From the late twentieth century, Viačaslaŭ Čaropka championed the Grand Duchy as a Belarusian state under Belarusian hegemony, whilst Aliaksandr Kraŭčevič maintained that Navahrudak – not Vilnius – served as its primordial capital and the site of Mindaugas’s coronation. Litvinist propaganda now proliferates principally through Belarusian imprints and

redefine “true” Lithuanians as Litvins (*id est*, Belarusians), bears a striking resemblance to the Russian “*russkii mir*” ideology, particularly in its negation of national identities, as observed in the propaganda campaign against Ukrainians prior to the 2014 hybrid war and the 2022 full-scale invasion. This ideological strategy, characterised by the deliberate erosion of a group’s distinct identity, represents a form of “identity theft” that threatens Lithuania’s cultural and historical integrity (Novak, 2024). By questioning the legitimacy of Lithuanian identity, Litvinism aligns with the broader “*russkii mir*” narrative, which has historically justified territorial ambitions through cultural and historical revisionism (Hyndle-Hussein, Kłysiński, 2024). The progression from ideological annihilation to physical aggression, as evidenced in Ukraine, suggests that Litvinism could serve as a precursor to similar existential threats against Lithuania. Historical narratives are critical in shaping national identities and political alignments, and Lithuania’s connection to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) is a cornerstone of its sovereignty (Vasilevich, 2024). Failure to assert this historical legacy risks its subsumption by Litvinist ideology, potentially compromising Lithuania’s territorial integrity. Such a development could facilitate “creeping” or rapid incursions by Russian actors, mirroring tactics seen elsewhere (Lucas, 2025b). The implications extend beyond Lithuania, posing risks to regional stability in Eastern Europe. To counter this, Lithuania must robustly defend its historical narrative and national identity. Failure to do so could embolden external actors to exploit these vulnerabilities, with far-reaching consequences for the Baltic region.

Ideologically, Litvinism serves as a counter-narrative to Soviet-imposed Pan-Slavism and Russification, rejecting the notion of Belarus as a mere appendage of Russia and instead celebrating a distinct “Litvin” heritage rooted in the GDL’s multilingual (Old Belarusian/Ruthenian chancery language) and tolerant ethos. It promotes symbols like the Pahonia (chase) coat of arms and the white-red-white flag as authentic Belarusian emblems from the GDL era, often framing the duchy’s expansion as a Belarusian-led enterprise that marginalised Baltic (Lithuanian) elements. While moderate variants view the GDL as a shared Belarusian-Lithuanian federation, radical interpretations claim Vilnius (In Belarusian, it is called Vilnia) as historically Belarusian and deny Lithuania’s direct continuity with the duchy, portraying the modern Lithuanian state as a 19th-century construct influenced

digital channels, including English-language outlets that proffer Jermalovič’s putative “discoveries” and a reconstructed Grand Duchy narrative to international readerships.

by Russian or Polish forces (Kascian, 2023). This dual valence – liberatory for Belarusian identity-building yet potentially revanchist – has led some scholars to describe it as a form of “imperial mimicry”, echoing colonial historiographies while seeking post-Soviet decolonisation.

On the contrary, in its contemporary status, Litvinism remains a marginal ideology within Belarus, suppressed under Lukashenko’s regime, which has sporadically co-opted GDL rhetoric for pro-regime nationalism (e.g., declaring the GDL the “first Belarusian state” in 2022) while cracking down on opposition uses of Pahonia (Valkauskas, 2023). Among the Belarusian diaspora, particularly in Lithuania (home to tens of thousands of exiles post-2020 protests), it has sparked tensions, with Lithuanian politicians like Laurynas Kasčiūnas labeling it a security threat due to perceived territorial irredentism. In July 2024, over a dozen Belarusian organisations in Lithuania publicly disavowed radical Litvinism, denying claims to Vilnius and affirming shared heritage – though some have not, including relevant factions of the Kalinoūski Regiment – amid accusations that Russian disinformation amplifies the narrative to sow discord. Belarusian opposition leaders, including Zianon Pazniak, dismiss it as a Kremlin-fabricated “boogeyman” to discredit nationalism, though its resurgence in online forums and cultural activism underscores its role as a flashpoint in hybrid geopolitical manoeuvring. Lithuanian politicians’ apprehensions regarding the insidious permeation of Litvinist narratives into Belarusian opposition circles are far from unfounded, as recurrent ‘misunderstandings’ underscore the fragility of regional solidarity. A salient instance arose in July 2025, when Siarhei Tsikhanouski – himself a beneficiary of Lithuanian sanctuary following his release from Belarusian incarceration in June – proposed in a YouTube interview the establishment of semi-autonomous Belarusian “islands” abroad, ostensibly as embryonic nuclei for a liberated homeland (Venckūnas, 2025). This utterance, though subsequently retracted amid vehement Lithuanian backlash and clarifications from Tsikhanouskaya’s office affirming no territorial ambitions, exemplifies how such rhetoric – potentially amplified by Russian disinformation – can precipitate discord, echoing prior controversies over oppositional “passports” that distorted Lithuanian-Belarusian borders. In this vein, the Kalinoūski Regiment’s retention of Litvinist undertones, notwithstanding broader disavowals by over a dozen Belarusian organisations in Lithuania, further illustrates the imperative for vigilant discernment in fostering alliances against shared authoritarian threats.

Litvinism, as a variant of Belarusian nationalism that reinterprets the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a predominantly Belarusian entity, currently functions primarily as an instrument of information warfare, orchestrated by Russian and Belarusian actors to exacerbate tensions between Lithuanians and Belarusians through tactics such as anonymous emails, graffiti, and media narratives that foster mutual distrust (Kranz, 2025, Bajarūnas, 2025). This ideological manipulation aligns with broader Kremlin strategies to undermine Lithuania's historical legitimacy and national cohesion, mirroring propaganda efforts that preceded Russia's aggression in Ukraine by denying sovereign identities and promoting revanchist claims. Lithuanian security assessments indicate that while Litvinism has not yet manifested as a direct territorial threat, its radical fringes – asserting claims over Vilnius – serve to securitise historical discourse, potentially paving the way for hybrid operations including cyber intrusions, migrant weaponisation, and staged provocations against the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania (TVP World, 2025). The escalation potential is underscored by parallels with Russian hybrid tactics in the Baltics, where historical revisionism could transition from informational pressure to physical incursions, especially amid exercises like *Zapad-25* or shifts in Belarusian regime policies. Consequently, Lithuania's failure to counter these narratives robustly risks not only cultural subsumption but also broader regional instability, as Litvinism could be leveraged to justify more aggressive interventions under the guise of protecting “historical heirs”.

Conclusion

In the post-Cold War geopolitical theatre, Russian revanchism emerges not as mere nostalgia for tsarist or Soviet grandeur, but as a calculated neo-imperial project cloaked in narratives of historical injustice and civilisational mission. Intensified since Crimea's annexation in 2014 and culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, this doctrine evinces a deliberate contempt for smaller states' sovereignty – most acutely along the Baltic littoral, where Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's Euro-Atlantic alignment has long rankled Moscow. Central to this strategy is the recasting of historical memory, wherein anti-fascist rhetoric functions less as reckoning than as a delegitimising cudgel against polities resisting Russian suzerainty; national trajectories are recast as betrayals of fraternal unity, and autonomy

branded Russophobic heresy. This revisionist impulse finds vivid expression in two state-aligned monographs – *History of Ukraine* (2022) and *History of Lithuania* (2025) – whose archival rigour is subordinated to teleological imperatives. The former prefigures Russia's 2022 intervention by framing Ukrainian independence as transient aberration; the latter, published amid escalating NATO-Russia friction, intensifies existential denial of Lithuanian statehood. Though structurally meticulous, both works exemplify state-sponsored historiography as soft-power instrumentation: methodologically robust yet ideologically compromised, they form a diptych of Russo-centric narrative engineering, unified in intent yet tailored to distinct theatres of hybrid contestation.

The analysis of Litvinism within the Kremlin's memory wars offers a novel lens for English-language scholarship, demonstrating how historical narratives function as pre-emptive strikes in twenty-first-century geopolitical conflict. Litvinism, a revisionist strand of Belarusian nationalism portraying the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as fundamentally Belarusian, has been co-opted as an instrument of Russian and Belarusian information warfare aimed at sowing discord between Lithuanians and Belarusians. While not yet posing a direct territorial threat, its radical narratives – particularly claims over Vilnius – contribute to the securitisation of historical discourse, echoing Kremlin strategies used to delegitimise Ukrainian sovereignty prior to 2014. Lithuanian security assessments warn that, if left unaddressed, Litvinism could serve as a pretext for hybrid operations, including cyberattacks and provocations targeting the Belarusian diaspora. Conversely, Litvinism, despite its avowed opposition to Moscow and its aim to transcend post-colonial narratives, exhibits a complex interplay of nationalist resistance and imperial mimicry, reflecting the dual nature of historical myth-making. Although some experts underscore its marginality, this movement risks being exploited as a potential catalyst for conflict, as its discourse, while seeking to reject Russian influence, may replicate imperial frameworks.

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