

Fighting
false news
narratives



THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT AS KREMLIN'S PIERCER OF SHARP POWER IN NORTH MACEDONIA ON VICTORY DAY

May 2022

CONTENTS

3	BACKGROUND
5	MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS
6	METHODOLOGY
7	IMMORTAL REGIMENT
8	INTRODUCTION: THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA
8	2016: INITIATION OF THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT AS A PART OF THE ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE CELEBRATION AND THE FIRST COLUMN BY THE RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN NORTH MACEDONIA.
10	2017: INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY, ACADEMIA AND SYMBOLISM
13	2018: THE CHURCH BECOMES PART OF THE OFFICIAL PROGRAM FOR THE FIRST TIME
15	2019: LOCAL POLITICIANS PART THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT CELEBRATION, INCLUDING WIDENING OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THE EVENTS WITHIN THE PROGRAM
16	2020: HONORING THE TWO FALLEN RUSSIAN SOLDIERS DURING WWII IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND MORE OPEN PROMOTION OF THE TIES WITH THE LOCAL POLITICIANS
20	2021: "CONTINUING THE TRADITION" AND NEW ATTACKS FROM AMBASSADOR BAZDNIKIN TOWARDS UKRAINE, POLAND AND THE BALTIC STATES
22	2022: INCREASED FOCUS ON NORTH MACEDONIA, FOLLOWED BY A CULMINATION IN THE DISINFORMATION "WE ARE NOT AGGRESSORS, BUT LIBERATORS"
26	REFERENCES

© 2022 The Citizens Association MOST/Fighting False News Narratives (FN)

Direct inquiries to: The Citizens Association MOST/Fighting False News Narratives (FN)
Pariska 12, 1020 Skopje
Republic of North Macedonia

E-mail: most@most.org.mk

Program Manager and Editor: Rosana Aleksoska

Authors: Rosana Aleksoska, Darko Aleksov, Zlatko Dimitrioski and Zhivko Mickoski

Design: Marina Stojmirova

Cover page photo source: twitter.com/Liveuamap, wilsoncenter.org, hiclipart.com

Disclaimer: The opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed herein are those of the implementers/authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the donors of the FN project.

BACKGROUND

Beside the traditional “festival of autocracy and propaganda” performed by Kremlin related to the Victory Day in the Great War, 9 May has been now traditionally observed by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia. A mixture of events have been organized in order to mark the “Russian victory” in the Great War. This research looks at the various tools applied by the Russian Embassy and its proxies in North Macedonia in order to promote Russia as a powerful country and a “normal” member of the international community, thus trying to whitewash some important facts on the real role of the USSR at the beginning of the WWII, as well as to picture Russia’s repressive and autocratic regime as a value. Furthermore, the research explores whether the so-called “public diplomacy” and cultural events cross the line, and from the old style “soft power” become “sharp power”¹. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion², while sharp power as defined in the NED study “*From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’*” is authoritarian influence in foreign countries. The “sharp power” is developed around the concept in which these authoritarian regimes that suppress the freedom of speech and disrespect human rights at home, at the same time, misuse these principles, upheld by the open democratic societies, in order to promote and impose their influence within those societies. In other words, “*authoritarian influence efforts are ‘sharp’ in the sense that they pierce, penetrate, or perforate the information environments in the targeted countries. In the ruthless new competition that is under way between autocratic and democratic states, the repressive regimes’ ‘sharp power’ techniques should be seen as the tip of their dagger—or indeed their syringe. These regimes are not necessarily seeking to ‘win hearts and minds,’ the common frame of reference for ‘soft power’ efforts, but they are surely seeking to manage their target audiences by manipulating or poisoning the information that reaches them*”, claims the study.

¹ National Endowment for Democracy, *From ‘Soft Power’ to ‘Sharp Power’ - Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World*, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Executive-Summary-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf>

² Joseph Nye, *Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept*, , 2017, <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20178>

Russia's authoritarian and oppressive behaviour at home, in many cases makes the information that gets out of these countries limited and censored. This creates a solid ground for the disinformation and propaganda that aggrandizes Russia, thus presenting its oppressive and authoritarian regime in a positive manner, picturing it as equivalent to, or even better than the open societies and democracies.

The rising of authoritarian influence in democratic vulnerable societies³ such as the Macedonian, may not be seen so impactful and dangerous when looking at each of the events/articles/disinformation separately. However, when analyzed in a comprehensive and systematic manner, they show their devastating potential for distortion of the societies. The NED study emphasizes that in societies that rely on their Slavic identity and Orthodoxy, Russia tends to support narratives through a variety of channels like media, academia, civil society, culture and even the policy community to promote its narratives that advance Kremlin's interests. Furthermore, it finds that i.e. in Slovakia the Russian influence draws the population into the concept of shared values with the Slavic and Orthodox brothers from Russia, and not having anything in common with the Western world and the U.S., thus being in line with opposition to the European Union and NATO. Very similar trend is noticed in North Macedonia, only through the prism of the celebration of Victory Day, i.e. cultural events within the multi-day programs of the Embassy as well as the happening which has been recorded since 2017 – the Immortal Regiment.

Since 2014 Russia engaged in a sharp and open confrontation with Ukraine and the West due to the illegal annexation of Crimea, Ukraine. Considering the fact that ever since the Russian authoritarian regime has been becoming “more oppressive at home and more aggressive abroad”⁴, this research explores how Russia applies its aggressiveness abroad, in this case North Macedonia and what are the main events and channels for such actions.

This research besides on the “cultural” events focuses on “Immortal Regiment” march, since 2017 when it was officially integrated in the program for celebrating the “Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War” of the Embassy of the Russian Federation to North Macedonia.

³ Vulnerability Index - measuring vulnerability towards foreign malign influence, GLOBSEC, <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org>

⁴ <https://athina984.gr/2021/10/20/gg-nato-i-rosia-echei-ginei-pio-katapiestiki-sto-esoteriko-kai-pio-epithetiki-sto-exoteriko/>

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The march of the Immortal Regiment was organized for the first time in North Macedonia in 2017. However, the citizens were exposed to the Immortal Regiment one year before. In its celebration, most of the major elements of “sharp power” are in place, i.e. aggrandizing Russia’s patriotism and promoting Russia’s military victories through cultural events. Additional elements that are being used are the common Slavic origin, the Orthodoxy, as well as the concept of authoritarian rule (illiberal democracy).
- The event is used as an opportunity to revise history by distorting historical facts and sending messages with aggressive rhetoric through columns authored by Russian Ambassadors and diplomats that summarize and adapt the messages sent by Putin to the local context.
- The activities, behavior and narratives that tend to promote the idea that Macedonians share the same values as Russians (which are not the Western/EU/U.S. values) contribute towards the perception that there is a large domestic opposition to the EU integration process and NATO membership. This is done in a stealth manner, which makes this “domestic opposition” to these strategic national interests deceptively organic to the eye of the ordinary people.
- Symbolism, as one of the main features of Kremlin playbook, is seen through the presence of the Night Wolves, as well as the memorials that are being conducted for the two fallen Russian soldiers in the military actions in North Macedonia. This is done in order to present that Russia helped North Macedonia during WWII.
- The involvement of domestic civil society organizations for Macedonian-Russian friendship, as well as academia – International Slavic University “Gavrilo Romanovich Derzhavin”, local politicians, Russian-owned businesses and the church makes the celebration of the Immortal Regiment an entire influence operation falling under the concept of sharp power.
- Throughout the period 2015-2022, the program of the Russian Embassy and its proxies in regard to marking Victory Day, expanded not only in terms of content, but also geographically, and has increased its scope and diversified its target audiences.
- The Victory Day celebration in 2022 that happened amidst the aggression of and atrocities committed in Ukraine was used to spread Kremlin narratives that are completely opposite to the truth, thus attempting to justify Putin’s unprovoked war of choice on Ukraine.
- Russian aggressive rhetoric towards its neighbors – the Baltic States, Ukraine, but Poland as well – present in Putin’s speeches is served to the citizens of North Macedonia as well. The false narratives about neo-Nazism being present in the targeted countries are just one more proof about how with each passing year Russia increased the aggression in its rhetoric. Considering the Russian aggression over Ukraine, the analysis showed that besides the “preparation” of its citizens, through promotion of false narratives of neo-Nazism Russian officials in

North Macedonia “prepared” Macedonian citizens as well. One of the techniques used by Kremlin to denigrate entire nations and states in order to justify its policies and aggressions in the 21st century is generalization.

- Through the operations for promotion of the Immortal Regiment, Russia also widens the reach of the concept of “common values”, trying to win over and monopolize the antifascist sentiment of the people of North Macedonia, as well as its participation in the Second World War.
- The narrative that Russia has the most merit for the victory over fascism in the Second World War is enforced upon the citizens of North Macedonia. In this way, the population of a young and vulnerable democracy is divided, while totally ignoring the contribution by the Western allies. This is a serious information distortion which we witness every 9 May. In this regard, especially concerning is the fact that in this influence operation tools that involve children from primary schools are misused. In this manner, Russia contributes towards the maintaining of the positive perception about itself, i.e. it enforces its worldview over the social context in North Macedonia.

METHODOLOGY

Since the Russian influence through “sharp power” is tailor-made for different countries the research looks at the several major elements of Russian/authoritarian influence through “sharp power” as utilized in the case of Slovakia. The research uses the open source investigation tools to gather data on activities of the Embassy of the Russian Federation to North Macedonia and its proxies, in regards to the celebration of the Victory day. The period subject to this research is 1-10 May for the years 2015 – 2022, for each year respectively. The research explores to what level the events organized around the Victory Day celebration in North Macedonia focus on (1) aggrandizing Russia’s patriotism and military superiority, (2) promoting the legacy of Russia’s military victories in the “Great Patriotic War”, (3) promoting the common Slavic linguistic and cultural roots; (4) promoting the values of “authoritarian rule (illiberal democracy)⁵ including family, tradition and religion and (5) promoting the “Orthodox brotherhood”, i.e. the spiritual role of the Orthodox church and the Russian Orthodox Church. Also, the research explores whether in such activities the components that drive the “piercing of the sharp power” have their engagement. These are the different domestic actors, i.e. Russian proxies in a form of civil society organizations for Macedonian-Russian friendship, organizations of Russian compatriots to North Macedonia and academic institutions/universities, companies/businesses, as well as local politicians and the church. For the needs of the research, an analysis of the published speeches and columns of Russian officials, including Putin, was conducted.

⁵ Marlene Laruelle, *Making sense of Russia's illiberalism*, Journal of Democracy Vol.31, pp. 115-129

IMMORTAL REGIMENT

The controversy and the political hi-jack of the Immortal Regiment idea⁶ has been a subject to long standing analyses and debates. Its original setting was put in place by a group of veterans in 2012 in Tomsk, with its first march counting some 2,000 veterans and 6,000 people in total. In 2012, Kremlin quickly hi-jacked this idea and developed it into one of the main tools for revising history and whitewashing USSR's sins in regards to the facts and events that were happening in the period 1939-1941 during WWII. In addition, the Immortal Regiment has become the solemn sender of the main message of unity, courage and family sacrifice, loyalty to the motherland, or, as Putin pictured it in his address at the 2018 Victory Day parade: *"9 May unites the generations through a history of courage. Each family has its own heroes, who live on in our hearts. They are with us here in the ranks of the Immortal Regiment"*⁷. This is the first time that Putin introduced the Immortal Regiment in his address, where he later added the following: *"We remember the tragedies of the two world wars; the lessons of history do not let us 'go blind.' New threats bear the same old ugly features: selfishness and intolerance, aggressive nationalism and claims to exclusiveness. We are aware of the seriousness of these threats."* This was the first time since the illegal annexation of Crimea where Putin sent such strong messages, and they are combined with the Immortal Regiment.

While at its early stage, it was still focused on Russia and its cities, and was completely paid for and organized by the Kremlin, in the recent years, as part of the Kremlin "Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War" celebration, it has gone beyond Russia's borders and turned global reaching to almost 80 countries around the world. At first the targets of this event, were the countries in Russia's closest neighborhood coming from the former Soviet Union. One of the countries where this event is very well pictured is Georgia⁸. However, the Balkan countries are not immune to the Immortal Regiment. Serbia and North Macedonia are amongst the first to fall in to the "great significance" of this event. In Serbia, since 2017 the event is initially organized in Niš and in the following years it has been spread through some other cities around the country. In North Macedonia, 2017 is the year when the "Immortal Regiment" was introduced in the program in the form of a march, conducted in Skopje and Bitola.

⁶ Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, *The Immortal Regiment: the pride and prejudice of Russia*, Elcano Royal Institute, 27 September 2018, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-immortal-regiment-the-pride-and-prejudice-of-russia/>

⁷ Vladimir Putin, *speech at the 2018 Victory Day parade*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/57436>

⁸ Putin's "Great Patriotic War" in Quarantine, Mythdetector, 2020, <https://mythdetector.ge/en/putin-s-great-patriotic-war-in-quarantine/>

INTRODUCTION: THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA

The research shows that the first roots of the Immortal Regiment in North Macedonia were recorded in **2015** by opening the YouTube channel “Македонски Бесмртен Полк [Macedonian Immortal Regiment]”⁹. The channel has several videos whose content vary



Choir performing Russian military songs, Jane Sandanski SC plateau, Skopje, May 9, 2015. Source: Facebook

from old patriotic Macedonian songs to some propagandistic videos deriving from Russia. The channel has its latest post 5 years ago.

In regard to the 2015 celebration, the program for was the following: May 5, Opening of a historian documentary exhibition: “Victory over fascism: How was it achieved” – National University Library; May 8, Cinema week: “Russian Military film” – Cinematheque and May 9, Concert “URA to Victory”, where Russian

popular military songs were performed. It has to be underlined that in comparison to the years after 2016, the program was rather modest, which can be explained by the political turmoil that was going on in North Macedonia at that period.

Main takeaways from the 2015 celebration

When going through the contents and making a qualitative overview of the topics and the very nature of the events, it can be underlined that some of the major elements of “sharp power” are in place, i.e. aggrandizing Russia’s patriotism and promoting Russia’s military victories through cultural events.

2016: INITIATION OF THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT AS A PART OF THE ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE CELEBRATION AND THE FIRST COLUMN BY THE RUSSIAN AMBASSADOR IN NORTH MACEDONIA.

In **2016** the concept of the Immortal Regiment was introduced for the first time in a stealth manner. On May 8, 2016 as part of the cultural program for marking Victory Day of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia at the plateau of “Hotel Russia”, a concert was organized. The concert was under the slogan “To Be Remembered”, where different Russian popular military songs were performed for the audience by Macedonian performers. The event, as well as the entire program for observing Victory Day was

⁹ YouTube channel of the Macedonian Immortal Regiment, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmZhyvEqbDYz2-jQbbOXuwig/about>

supported and participated by the civil society organizations of Russian compatriots and Macedonian-Russian friendship, such as Ozarenie, Slavjanka, Chaika and MiR – all of them part of the National Council of Russian Compatriots in North Macedonia¹⁰. Within this event, at a video slider on a large screen, photos of Macedonian and Russian citizens that fought against fascism in the Second World War were displayed. These photos were provided by the Association of Veterans from the National Liberation Front, Macedonian citizens and the Holocaust Memorial Centre in Skopje. This is the first official event in the frame of the celebration of Victory Day where Macedonian citizens were exposed to the Immortal Regiment.

The 2016 celebration was used by the Russian Ambassador to publish a column titled *“The celebration of the victory of good over evil”*, which was published by Nova Makedonija and



later withdrawn, but still published on the official FB page of the Russian Embassy to Skopje¹¹. Within this column, Ambassador Scherbak reinforced and clarified the Kremlin disinformation narratives that *“the West is revising history”*, thus distorting the facts and making a very dangerous precedent. He also labels the Ukrainian and Polish peoples as collaborators to the fascists, and

further underlines that the situation in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia is also concerning since the *“former SS officers”* are presented as human rights defenders, while the veterans from WWII that fought against Nazi Germany are being prosecuted. This narrative was unleashed back in 2007 by Putin in his welcome speech at the Annual Conference of the International Jewish Community held in Moscow¹².

These claims coming from a diplomat cannot be assessed as public diplomacy and they launch a plethora of disinformation narratives aiming against the U.S. and the EU, thus amplifying the anti-US and anti-EU sentiment and inciting divisions amongst the population. It also entails aggressiveness and a threatening tone, which is another important characteristic of authoritarian influence. In regards to the distortions, the attacks on Poland, the Baltic states, and in particular Ukraine, with the alleged neo-Nazism on the rise, are just another way of defocusing the public from the real situation, and that is that Russia illegally annexed Crimea, Ukraine in 2014, considering it as an integral part of its territory.

¹⁰ <http://www.rusmak.org.mk/>

¹¹ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/475973559270928>

¹² Vladimir Putin, opening remarks at the meeting with members of the Executive Committee of the European Jewish Congress, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24586>

Another aspect of looking at these disinformation is that it aims at covering up the real Russian involvement in the events that led to the start of WWII. The signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret annexes by all means define the USSR as one of the first allies of Hitler and Nazi Germany in the period prior to the official start of WWII. The pact allowed the USSR to occupy half of Poland, perform aggression on Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, and take 11% of the territory of Finland, based on the Moscow Peace Treaty from 1940¹³. Besides the fact that it accelerated Hitler's progress, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret annexes also had economic benefits for the USSR.

The column is also in line with one of Putin's points from the address at the Red Square parade the same year, that "some powers" [the U.S. and the EU] seek for unilateral and unipolar world which is very dangerous. This also shows another important trend and that is that: 'what Putin says at his address is more precisely communicated by his diplomats on the ground'. In his column the Ambassador also speaks about Russia's big victory and underlines that Europe is in debt to Russia for this day. The mechanisms that are applied within this operation as well as the elements recorded around the entire program define the activities as "sharp power".

Main takeaways from the 2016 celebration

Besides the other events, 2016 was the year when the Immortal Regiment was introduced for the first time to the citizens of North Macedonia, and for the first time there is a column by a Russian Ambassador which transmits and amplifies the disinformation and distortion present in the messages sent by Putin. This is also the year in which increased level of aggression towards Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States was noticed.

2017: INVOLVEMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY, ACADEMIA AND SYMBOLISM



Bitola, May 2, 2017 – The first march of the Immortal Regiment organized in North Macedonia. Source: Facebook

The **year 2017 is the first year** when the march of the Immortal Regiment was organized in North Macedonia. The Immortal Regiment marches were organized in the two biggest cities, first in Bitola on May 2, and in Skopje on May 6. The first event was organized by the International Slavic University "Derzhavin", where some 100 students and professors, together with citizens, took part.

¹³ Estonian Institute of Historical Memory: "Communist Terror in Finland" - <https://communistcrimes.org/en/countries/finland#historical-introduction>



Skopje, May 6, 2017, the first Wall of Remembrance placed.
Source: Facebook

The event in Skopje was organized at the City Square and participated by some 300 people, as stated in the press release of the Russian Embassy. Both events were followed by cultural events, i.e. in Bitola the “Wall of Remembrance” was placed on May 7 while in Skopje a projection of a movie followed the march on the same day. In addition, there were few articles announcing the event but due to the time distance no articles related to the event were recorded.



Bitola, May 7, 2017, Russian Ambassador to North Macedonia Scherbak and the Night Wolves, Symbolism. Source: Facebook

Within the 2017 program, another set of “cultural activities” happened. On May 7, the Honorary Consul of Russian Federation to North Macedonia based in Bitola, Sergey Samsonenko hosted a concert titled “One Day of War” where the Night Wolves Macedonia appeared as one of the main features. This is an important element of “sharp power” since the “Night Wolves” are a symbol of Putin, and Russian propaganda tends to nurture and utilize

symbolism as a mean of influence operations. It continued with an open exhibition of photographs “Roads to Victory” happening in Ohrid on May 8, 2017. The exhibition was prepared by the Embassy, based on archive materials of the Russian Information Agency TASS. On May 9 the Cinematheque of North Macedonia in Skopje started airing of Russian war movies in cooperation with the Russian Embassy.

On May 9, 2017 an event was organized in Bitola while the Second Secretary in the Embassy Aleksey Krivosheev published a column “*The forgotten lessons from history*”¹⁴. Within his column, the narratives that “Crimea is Russian” and “the former Soviet Union States [that were occupied in WWII by Russia] are turning to neo-Nazism” were emphasized once more. What is even more dangerous is that within this column the 2nd Secretary Krivosheev is actually making one more distortion, and that is that the fallen

¹⁴ Aleksey Krivosheev, *The forgotten lessons from history*, Nova Makedonija, 9 May 2017, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/zaboravenite-lekcii-od-istorijata-kolumna-na-vtor-sekretar-vo-ambasadata-g-din-aleksej-krivoseev-objavena-vo-nova-makedonija-09-05-2017

Soviet soldiers in Poland (c.a. 600,000) fought to liberate the Polish people, trying to avoid the fact that Russia actually occupied half of the Polish state territory in coordination with Nazi-Germany in September 1939. It is simple, the effort to picture Russia as “neutral” in the period 1939-1941 remains an imperative¹⁵. Hence, this is the second year in a row where a diplomat publishes a column where Putin messages are translated for the common people in the targeted countries. In his address on the Red Square, Putin states: *“The lessons of the past war call on us to be vigilant. And the Russian Armed Forces are ready to counter any potential aggression. Life itself demands from us that we must increase our defense potential. However, the consolidation of the world community is needed for an effective fight against terrorism, extremism, neo-Nazism and other threats”*. This is just one more move in Kremlin tactics to distort the facts once more through a very aggressive non-diplomatic behavior. In 2021, Aleksey Krivosheev, while holding the position of 2nd Secretary at the Russian Embassy to Albania, was proclaimed *persona non grata* by the Albanian authorities with a 72-hour notice to leave the country¹⁶.

Main takeaways from the 2017 celebration

As it can be seen all the important features and elements of the Russian “sharp power” are in place, the photographs, the movies (promoting the legacy of Russia’s victory against the Nazis as an exclusive merit of Russia), the Immortal Regiment (promoting patriotism and nationalism of Russia), the columns (distorting and defocusing historical facts and adapting and amplifying the Putin’s messages on local level) and concerts (aggrandizing Russia’s victory and promoting Russian language through songs), as well as the use of aggressive rhetoric towards the friendly nations of North Macedonia. When adding to all of the above the involvement of domestic civil society for Macedonian-Russian Friendship as well as academia – International Slavic University “Derzhavin”, it becomes obvious that an entire influence operation is being undertaken, thus falling under the concept of sharp power. One of the objectives of this influence operation is to aggrandize and promote the authoritarian (illiberal) values, thus undermine democratic principles.

¹⁵ *Russian Narratives about the Second World War*, Fighting False News Narratives, 23 March 2022, <https://f2n2.mk/en/russian-narratives-about-the-second-world-war-in-the-history-textbooks-in-north-macedonia>

¹⁶ <https://time.mk/c/0b00e0c8fa/albanija-vo-poslednite-tri-godini-nad-60-stranski-drzavjani-megju-niv-i-diplomati-proglaseni-za-persona-non-grata.html>

2018: THE CHURCH BECOMES PART OF THE OFFICIAL PROGRAM FOR THE FIRST TIME



Skopje, May 5, 2018. Source: Facebook

Russia, Skopje, owned by the controversial Russian businessman and Honorary Consul of Russia to North Macedonia in Bitola, Sergey Samsonenko.



Bitola, May 9, 2018. Source: Facebook

The **2018** Immortal Regiment event was organized on May 5 in Skopje where the “Wall of Remembrance” was placed, where veterans and interested citizens could have post pictures of their ancestors that participated in the anti-Fascist front. The Russian Embassy in Skopje announced that on May 5 the Immortal Regiment event will be organized in Skopje while on May 9 in Bitola. The Skopje event was organized at the plateau of Hotel

In Bitola, once more the event was organized by ISU “Derzhavin”, which is located in Sveti Nikola, having a campus in Bitola as well. This time in comparison to the year before it was participated by students from the University, but also students from the Russian universities of Tambov and Lipeck as well as representatives of the “Regional Association of Macedonian-Russian friendship “A.A. Rostkovsky” from Bitola¹⁷ and the “Union of Associations for Macedonian-Russian friendship in R.Macedonia”.

Besides these two events within the program of Embassy and the engagement of the various Macedonian-Russian friendship associations and academia close to the Embassy, the events expanded. A series of concerts have been organized throughout the country by various actors, such as the Municipality of Strumica, ISU “Derzhavin” in Sveti Nikole, where photos of kindergarten kids were presented, accompanied with their opinions on the Victory in the Great War. Besides the “traditional celebrations” in Bitola and Skopje in the past, this year Sveti Nikole, Strumica, Prilep were also included the program. In Prilep, the local branch of the Association for Macedonian-Russian Friendship was engaged, and the Russian Ambassador laid flowers on the Mound of the Unbeaten. The inclusion of the

¹⁷ <https://msu.edu.mk/25-godishen-jubilej-na-zdruzhenieto-za-makedonsko-rusko-prijatelstvo-a-a-rostkovski-od-bitola/>

latter has a great significance, since it is one of the largest and most important monuments from the Second World War, built in 1961¹⁸, while the city of Prilep is one of the cities that was declared a hero city in SFR Yugoslavia.



Skopje, May 5, 2018. Source: Facebook

On May 5 in the chapel St. Gregory the Victorious in Skopje, next to the church built in Russian style and donated by Sergey Samsonenko, a religious memorial ceremony for the fallen in WWII was conducted. The ceremony was led by Prior of the Russian Orthodox Church branch in Sofia, Archimandrite Vasiyan¹⁹, while also present was another representative of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the event the Russian Ambassador, the Russian Honorary Consul Samsonenko, the

Bishop Agatangel from the Macedonian Orthodox Church, and other guests of honor were present. This fits within the fourth element of sharp power, the Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church.

Main takeaways from the 2018 celebration

The Immortal Regiment is taking its grip, while the program expands not only in terms of content but geographically as well, covering more cities (besides Bitola and Skopje, a total of five compared to the previous year) and having diversified scope and target audiences. The church appeared for the first time as part of the program. The religious memorial service by the church appears as the symbol of “Orthodox brotherhood” and the symbolism is one of the main drivers of Russian propaganda. This is an attempt to make Russian values and traditions exclusive in regards to the Orthodoxy and to label them as identical to the Macedonian ones and opposite to the Western democratic values. The fact that the religious ceremony was led by a Russian priest supports this conclusion. Additionally, contrary to tradition and reality, Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church does not have and could not have the primacy over the entire Orthodox community. This was the year with the largest number of events organized, and a new feature was the direct involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in the celebration of the Immortal Regiment.

¹⁸ <http://www.prilepinfo.mk/mk/muzei/mogila-na-nepobedenite>

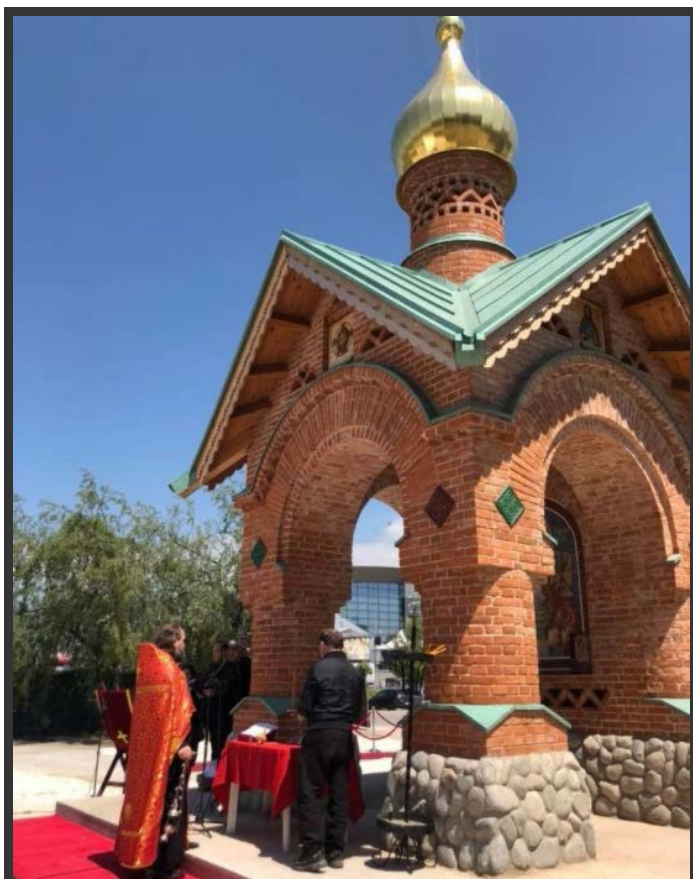
¹⁹ Honorary Consulate of Russian Federation to North Macedonia in Bitola, “Immortal Regiment” was held in Skopje, 7 May 2018 <http://www.russconsulbt.org/>

2019: LOCAL POLITICIANS PART THE IMMORTAL REGIMENT CELEBRATION, INCLUDING WIDENING OF THE GEOGRAPHICAL SCOPE OF THE EVENTS WITHIN THE PROGRAM



Remembrance wall, on the left of Ambassador Bazdnikin, Sasha Bogdanovic, Mayor of Centar, Skopje, 9 May, 2019. Source: Facebook

On May 8, 2019 in Skopje once more on the plateau of Hotel Russia, Skopje, with participation of representatives of the Russian Embassy, Associations for Macedonian-Russian Friendship, the Mayor of Centar Municipality in Skopje, Saša Bogdanovic, and representatives of the church the “Wall of Remembrance” was posted. There were also a small number of people wearing the pictures of their fallen in the war against fascism, following the example and practice from Russia. “The Wall of Remembrance” is the symbol of this event which is used by the Kremlin in the targeted countries.



Memorial ceremony for the fallen in WWII at the Chapel St. Gregory the Victorious, Skopje, 9 May, 2019. Source: Facebook

The program²⁰ followed almost the same order as in the previous year, first in the chapel St. Gregory the Victorious in Skopje, a religious memorial ceremony for the fallen in WWII was conducted, then the “Wall of Remembrance” was visited and after that there was a concert where two special guests/Russian performers sang “Russian patriotic military songs”. Also, at the concert students from the PS “Dimitar Miladinov” – Municipality of Centar, Skopje gave recitals of songs on the topic Great Patriotic War in Russian language.

Events were also organized in Bitola, Sveti Nikole and Strumica and for the

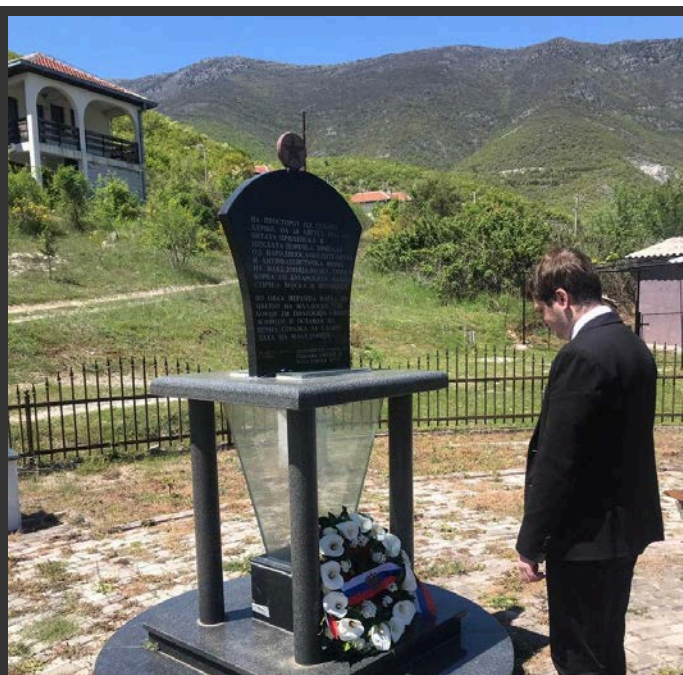
²⁰ The event “Immortal Regiment” was held in Skopje, Honorary Consulate of Russian Federation to North Macedonia in Bitola, 7 May 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1016072281927717&set=pb.100069025905838.-2207520000>

first time in the village of Zdunje – Poreche region, where a modest memorial of a Russian soldier was built. Bitola also hosted the Immortal Regiment on 9 May, an event which was also followed by a concert. In Bitola, once more the Night Wolves were present.

Main takeaways from the 2019 celebration

This is the year where for the first time, aside of all the other traditional participants, the Mayor of one of the Skopje’s most important Municipalities – Centar, was officially present at the Immortal Regiment event. This also indicates that almost all the pillars of Russia’s sharp power are encompassed. On another note, religious memorial ceremonies are conducted for a second year in a row. Also, third year in a row Strumica was one of the Macedonian cities grasped by the program, so in addition to Skopje, Bitola, Sveti Nikole and Prilep, it appears that the Russian Embassy and its proxies continue with the expanding of the Victory Day activities, not only in terms of content, but geographically as well, by which they also increase their influence over the social context in North Macedonia.

2020: HONORING THE TWO FALLEN RUSSIAN SOLDIERS DURING WWII IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND MORE OPEN PROMOTION OF THE TIES WITH THE LOCAL POLITICIANS



Representative of the Russian Embassy at the Memorial in Zdunje, pays tribute to the fallen fighters in WWII, Zdunje, 8 May, 2020. Source: Facebook

In **2020**, due to the pandemic there were no large in-person events organized. An interesting particularity is the focus on the western part of the country, which began in 2020, when on 5 May the Russian Embassy paid tribute to the fallen soldiers²¹, among whom there is one Russian national, who participated in the liberation of the village of Zdunje – Poreche region. The Russian Embassy representatives joined by representatives of the Union of Macedonian-Russian associations

²¹ In the village Zdunje in the Poreche region, a delegation from the Russian Embassy paid tribute to the seven young soldiers for the liberation of the village, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 5 May 2020, [https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-](https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/)

also laid flowers to the Mound of the Unbeaten in Prilep on 8 May²².



Ambassador Bazdnikin Mayor of Centar: Bogdanovic;
9 May, 2020, Matka, Skopje. Source: Facebook

Ambassador Bazdnikin, the Honorary Consul Samsonenko, the Mayor of Centar Municipality Bogdanovic appeared again. For the first time, representatives of Lukoil were part of this memorial ceremony.

On May 9, another from the series of events took place, this time in Skopje at the Matka Memorial²³, similar to the previous years, where soldiers from two brigades defended the Matka Dam from being blown, thus saving the city of Skopje from catastrophe. Within the soldiers there was also one Russian soldier. At the event, aside of the Russian



Mayor of Centar: Bogdanovic; Ambassador Bazdnikin;
9 May, 2020, Centar, Skopje. Source: Facebook

active participation in the Victory Day celebrations, this time also in the capacity of co-organizer of an official event within the program of the Embassy.

Later on 9 May, the same “group” revealed a monument in the Municipality of Centar in Skopje. The monument is in the memory of the “Fallen soldiers who fought in the anti-Hitler coalition” on the “9 May street”²⁴, a donation from the Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia²⁵. This is the 2nd year in a row where Bogdanovic took

/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/delegacijata-od-ruska-ambasada-vo-poreckoto-zdune-im-oddade-pocit-na-sedumte-mladi-borci-za-osloboduvane-na-seloto-5-maj-2020-godina

²² A delegation of the Embassy participated in the ceremony for laying flowers on the Mound of the Invincible, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 8 May 2020, [https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-](https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/delegacijata-od-ambasadata-ucestvuvase-vo-ceremonijata-na-polagane-cveke-kon-mogilata-na-nepobedenite-prilep-8-maj-2020-godina)

/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/delegacijata-od-ambasadata-ucestvuvase-vo-ceremonijata-na-polagane-cveke-kon-mogilata-na-nepobedenite-prilep-8-maj-2020-godina

²³ Laying flowers on the Matka Memorial, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, [https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-](https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/polagane-cveke-kon-memorijalniot-spomenik-matka-skopje-9-maj-2020-godina)

/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/polagane-cveke-kon-memorijalniot-spomenik-matka-skopje-9-maj-2020-godina

²⁴ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1301573806710895&id=330562240478728

²⁵ Post on the official web-page of the Municipality of Centar, 9 May 2020,

<https://www.centar.gov.mk/?p=9974>

The central Immortal Regiment event for 2020 was organized online, so it is very hard to determine how many participants and to what extent the participants from North Macedonia were active. However, the appearance of the Volunteers of Victory through the "Victory Team 75"²⁶ were noted for this year's celebration, mostly being active online through their FB page. It is active even nowadays and continues to recruit youth from North Macedonia for events organized by the Russian Embassy, as well as promoting scholarships, exchanges and other types of events and activities. The volunteers are led by the Gortchakov Fund alumni Darko Todorovski, who is one of the contributors to *bregalniki.mk* and *balkanist.net*, portals that are among the sources of pro-Russian disinformation, propaganda and anti-Western narratives. Additionally, the Immortal Regiment was promoted through a documentary titled "Immortal Regiment – World Movement" which was promoted by the FB page "Ruski Dom Skopje"²⁷ and the official FB page of the Russian Embassy²⁸.

Another important event marked the 2020 celebration of Victory Day. On 9 May, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia Sergey Bazdnikin published a column titled: "*Victory Day and the results from World War II*"²⁹, where in a number of occasions the author distorts and manipulates with numbers and facts both for the period 1939 – 1941, but also on the aftermath from the war. Going beyond the role as an Ambassador and stepping over the line of "public diplomacy", Bazdnikin plays at the same time with the figure 75, and that is relevant for the following: 75th anniversary of the grand victory in the Patriotic War, 75% of the military actions were undertaken by "our Army" (note by that that was the Army of the USSR and not Russia – Bazdnikin is Ambassador of Russia and not of the USSR) and the Red Army managed to destroy or confiscate over 75% of the entire German armament. While the first claim can be proven true, since it is really 75 years since the Great Victory happened, the other two figures expressed in percentages cannot be proven or independently verified under any circumstances, and therefore represent a distortion and manipulation. There is no count available on the totals of the military actions undertaken during WWII since it was a world war and not a European war, so the military operations in Burma, Malta, the Pacific, the Atlantic or even Egypt and Algeria cannot be precisely determined. On the other hand, the USSR was under significant attack for a period of time, so it is a matter of perception or definition of the term "undertaken by the Red Army", whether it is meant for those defensive operations or offensive operations. In terms of seizing and destroying of armaments, there is another dilemma, does it count for the German machinery and armaments which were frozen and destroyed by the great cold during the advancement to Moscow or not?

²⁶ Official Facebook page of the chapter in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/VT75Macedonia>

²⁷ Post on the official Facebook page of Ruski dom Skopje, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2268545103455243>

²⁸ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1299203436947932>

²⁹ Sergey Bazdnikin, *Victory Day and the results from World War II*, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/kolumnata-na-ambasadorot-sergej-bazdnikin-denot-na-pobedata-i-rezultatite-od-vtorata-svetska-vojna-za-vesnikot-nova-makedonija-9-maj-2020-godina

The point here is that no one is challenging the bravery and patriotism of the USSR people, yet, they were not only Russians and this bravery was not the bravery of the Kremlin officials. In this regard, the column there are no facts about the participation, contribution and the sacrifice of the Western allies, in terms of logistics, military equipment and finances, but also in the number of casualties, not only in Europe, but throughout the world as well. This takes us to the point of the paragraph written by the Ambassador or Kremlin, where the claim is the following: *"there are claims, in example, that from 1 September 1939 until 22 June 1941 USSR and Germany were actually allies. For Moscow it was evident that sooner or later a fight against the Nazis is inevitable – the non-aggression pact signed on 23 August 1939, as well as the other bilateral agreements, were considered as temporary and necessary measure. In the mentioned period, the USSR were military neutral and did not partake in the world war.*

This is precisely the narrative of Kremlin that in the period 1939-1941 the USSR was neutral. This research will not make an effort to deal with this false claim, for more details on this, you can find in the FN research³⁰ on the real alliance between Stalin and Hitler, i.e. the USSR and Nazi-Germany. So another distortion and manipulation – on one hand, deliberately missed facts, i.e. about the role, participation and contribution of the Western Allies, while on the other hand distorted facts – thus offering half-truths and suspicious facts in order to deceive the public, which is by definition a disinformation is that the pact was forced or necessary for Stalin³¹. Interestingly, the column found its way to the daily newspaper "Nova Makedonija" and since this is the 3rd column by Russian Ambassador published by this portal (the one from 2016 was removed swiftly), it places the newspaper among the spreaders of "white propaganda".

Main takeaways from the 2020 celebration

Regardless of the fact that it was a COVID-19 pandemic and no major in-person events happened, the program of the Russian Embassy and its proxies appeared dominant in the online space and also "rich in content". The participation of a local politician, Russian-owned business, and the inclusion of the village of Zdunje in the western part of the country in the program happened for the first time. In order to clarify the symbolism, the number of Russian soldiers that were killed in the military actions in Macedonia is small, only two, and both of them are part of the program – one in Zdunje and one at the Matka dam. This is done in order to present that Russia helped North Macedonia during WWII.

³⁰ *Russian Narratives about the Second World War*, Fighting False News Narratives, 23 March 2022, <https://f2n2.mk/en/russian-narratives-about-the-second-world-war-in-the-history-textbooks-in-north-macedonia>

³¹ Estonian Institute of Historical Memory: "Why the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 was not 'forced' on Stalin?" <https://communistcrimes.org/en/mythbuster-why-molotov-ribbentrop-pact-1939-was-not-forced-stalin>

2021: "CONTINUING THE TRADITION" AND NEW ATTACKS FROM AMBASSADOR BAZDNIKIN TOWARDS UKRAINE, POLAND AND THE BALTIC STATES



Village of Zdunje, Memorial of the fallen soldiers, Laying flowers, 8 May, 2021, Zdunje, Porece. Source: Facebook

Rossotrudnichestvo³⁴ and the Russian Embassy³⁵.

On 8 May a delegation from the Russian Embassy paid respect to the Memorial of the fallen soldiers in Zdunje, as it was the case in 2020.



Matka memorial- Near Skopje, Russian Ambassador Bazdnikin and guests, Matka dam, 9 May, 2021. Source: Facebook

In 2021 a plethora of events were organized. The Immortal regiment march was an online activity which was announced on the FB page of the Russian Embassy³² to be held on 10 May. On 7 May, there was a video promoted on the web page of the International Slavic University Derzhavin – ISU Derzhavin³³, where promotion of a video on the Immortal Regiment happened together with congratulation address by the Rector of the University. The video was also promoted on the FB pages of

The Matka memorial was again the place where on 9 May the Russian Ambassador, together with representatives of Lukoil and the honorary consuls to Macedonia, paid their respect to the fallen Russian soldier at the Matka dam.

³² Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1578794638988809>

³³ This year ISU once again participated in the event „Immortal Regiment“, on the occasion of Victory Day, International Slavic University Derzhavin, 7 May 2021, <https://msu.edu.mk/msu-i-godinava-zema-uchestvo-vo-manifestatsijata-besmrten-polk-po-povod-denot-na-pobedata-nad-fashizmot>

³⁴ Post on the official Facebook page of Rossotrudnichestvo, 8 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=464692301492503>

³⁵ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1586340781567528>



Ambassador Bazdnikin gives a speech in front of the monument "75 years from the Great Victory", Skopje, 9 May, 2021. Source: Facebook

Later that day, the Russian Ambassador, together with the Mayor of Centar Bogdanovic representative of Chinese Embassy, the Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other representatives of the diplomatic corps, were participating at the event in front of the monument "75 years of the Great Victory" (revealed in 2020) on 9 May street in the city center.



Mound of the Invincible, Ambassador Bazdnikin and guests, 9 May, Prilep. Source: Facebook

The third event that day (9 May) was organized again in Prilep. The "Mound of the Unbeaten" was again the location where Ambassador Bazdnikin was accompanied by Association of Macedonian-Russian friendship and Association of Veterans from the People's Liberation War.



Print screen from the official Immortal Regiment online event, 10 May 2021. Source: Facebook

As previously announced, on May 10 the online event of the Immortal Regiment was organized. It was not the most participated event, based on the number of participants, yet it was organized as a part of the official program of the Embassy.

On 7 May, the Russian Ambassador to North Macedonia Bazdnikin, wrote a column which was published in “Nova Makedonija”³⁶ and at the official web-page of the Russian Embassy to Skopje. In his column Ambassador Bazdnikin once more reinforced the already witnessed narrative about “the emergence of neo-Fascism and neo-Nazism” and tried to belittle the responsibility of the USSR for the beginning of WWII.

Main takeaways from the 2021 celebration

As it can be seen, the events that were part of the 2021 celebration were almost identical as in 2020.

2022: INCREASED FOCUS ON NORTH MACEDONIA, FOLLOWED BY A CULMINATION IN THE DISINFORMATION “WE ARE NOT AGGRESSORS, BUT LIBERATORS”



Skopje, May 7, 2022. Source: Facebook

In **2022** there were also several events organized, following the same pattern. On 7 May, in the chapel of St. George the Victorious, a religious memorial ceremony “for the Russian soldiers fallen at all times for creed and Homeland” was conducted³⁷.

The event was attended by a dozen of participants, including the Ambassador of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia Sergey Bazdnikin.

³⁶ Sergey Bazdnikin, *Victory Day is more than a celebration*, Nova Makedonija, 8 May 2021, <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/mislenja/kolumni/денот-на-победата-е-повеќе-од-празник/>

³⁷ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 7 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid0aCXzZ61QoBzcCd5A7BcmbjDqHrCRAfYMsjYuBr342wo5742wmmU3Atkuv2fhPrSI>



Prilep, May 8, 2022. Source: Facebook

On 8 May, a delegation from the Russian Embassy, the Honorary Consulate in Bitola, and members of the Macedonian-Russian friendship organizations laid flowers at the Mound of the Unbeaten in Prilep. The delegation was led by the Minister-Counselor Aleksandar Kosmodemyanskiy³⁸.

As it can be seen from the published pictures, the event was attended by less participants than in the previous years.



Village of Zdunje (Poreche), May 8, 2022. Source: Facebook

On 8 May, a delegation from the Embassy, together with the local inhabitants of the village of Zdunje (Poreche region) paid tribute to the seven soldiers who have fallen during the battle for liberating the village - one of them was a Russian national.

As it can be seen from the pictures posted on the Embassy's Facebook page, the ceremony was not attended by a large number of participants³⁹.

³⁸ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid0UDuJy47qzW2eNNbrfNdohoXDzhGijCxxLzfaeySmLcwqqxusa3CkefIE8Gmx5GWA/>

³⁹ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid02fnEV9onLtrVM7svLjxcuiK9moTCh65Lk9XndfS6fter1xqjn5SwKpz5UWCYHwBgCl>



Matka (Skopje), May 9, 2022. Source: Facebook

On 9 May, as a part of the program for celebrating Victory Day, a delegation led by the Ambassador Sergey Bazdnikin, together with the Honorary Consul in Bitola Sergey Samsonenko, and the Regional Manager of Lukoil Andrei Kuku, laid flowers to the Matka memorial and paid tribute to the fallen soldiers of the 12th Skopje brigade, among whom also was one Russian national.

The number of the attendants of the event cannot be determined through

the photos that are posted on the Facebook page of the Embassy⁴⁰.



Skopje, May 9, 2022. Source: Facebook

It seems that the main celebration event was organized by the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia on 9 May 2022, at the eponymous street in Skopje, where a ceremony was held on the occasion of the 77th anniversary of Victory Day. The event was attended by a delegation from the Russian Embassy led by the Ambassador, the ambassadors of PR China and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Deputy Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia, the honorary consuls of the Russian Federation in

Ohrid and Bitola, a delegation from Lukoil Macedonia, ISU Derzhavin, Russian Center, Russian compatriots, the President of the Democratic Party of the Serbs Ivan Stoilković, representatives from Levica and other participants.⁴¹ The Ambassador held a speech in which he addressed the war with Ukraine and repeated the distortions and manipulations which are featured in the Kremlin narratives the Russia is fighting Nazism and actually

⁴⁰ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid02zbYmWRcmdQRuHuAr8V59NjnbFZAwTLQR33GaLdPWpRmZdMnTr9uDM7xa1CTZLjg>

⁴¹ Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid036luvwxiQmD39V1hZGUMMnwalrrToq94VRrxFk6cwQW8ij3uw8jZMsvoEn7WdEcrql?_cft_\[0\]=AZWSG3WESqmj5kYDIR4jiBij-WAApuuJV1a9qN_9mEPnvopDEyt_DVSR9G3Fs6c5U8f86a4XdNeUI_iYgb2CEOguojWoydMJNXCvGofviB68nVGefqwkEovuFngUMXaYWFx9iSisPISBhsJnMAc8Aan3&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid036luvwxiQmD39V1hZGUMMnwalrrToq94VRrxFk6cwQW8ij3uw8jZMsvoEn7WdEcrql?_cft_[0]=AZWSG3WESqmj5kYDIR4jiBij-WAApuuJV1a9qN_9mEPnvopDEyt_DVSR9G3Fs6c5U8f86a4XdNeUI_iYgb2CEOguojWoydMJNXCvGofviB68nVGefqwkEovuFngUMXaYWFx9iSisPISBhsJnMAc8Aan3&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)

liberating Ukraine: *"Today, when as they did 80 years before, Russian soldiers should fight with arms against Nazism that has taken roots on Ukrainian soil, the celebration of 9 May has a special significance for us. That is why the Flag of Victory is raised on the liberated territories – the flag that has once been raised over the Reichstag in Berlin. WE have been accused for aggression. I underline – this is unfounded. We are not aggressors, but liberators"*⁴².

Main takeaways from the 2022 celebration

As it can be seen, the events that were part of the 2022 celebration were almost identical as in 2021, with several important differences. This time the celebration was used, or rather misused to make an attempt to justify the aggression over Ukraine. Sufficient illustration for this is one of the many lies expressed by Bazdnikin, i.e. *"we are not aggressors, but liberators"*. Additionally, for the first time a high official from Lukoil – a regional director was present, which indicates the focus that the Kremlin puts on North Macedonia. Another difference is the official presence of the political party Levica on one of the events from the program for the first time.

⁴² Објава на официјалната фејсбук-страница на Руската амбасада во Северна Македонија, 9 мај 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/305859665058228>

REFERENCES

1. National Endowment for Democracy, *From 'Soft Power' to 'Sharp Power' - Rising Authoritarian Influence in the Democratic World*, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Executive-Summary-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence.pdf>
2. Joseph Nye, *Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept*, 2017, <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20178>
3. Vulnerability Index - measuring vulnerability towards foreign malign influence, GLOBSEC, <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.org>
4. <https://athina984.gr/2021/10/20/gg-nato-i-rosia-echei-ginei-pio-katapiestiki-sto-esoteriko-kai-pio-epithetiki-sto-exoteriko/>
5. Marlene Laruelle, *Making sense of Russia's illiberalism*, Journal of Democracy Vol.31, pp. 115-129
6. Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, *The Immortal Regiment: the pride and prejudice of Russia*, Elcano Royal Institute, 27 September 2018, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-immortal-regiment-the-pride-and-prejudice-of-russia/>
7. Vladimir Putin, *speech at the 2018 Victory Day parade*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/57436>
8. *Putin's "Great Patriotic War" in Quarantine*, Mythdetector, 2020, <https://mythdetector.ge/en/putin-s-great-patriotic-war-in-quarantine/>
9. YouTube channel of the Macedonian Immortal Regiment, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCmZhyvEqbDYz2-jQbbOXuwg/about>
10. <http://www.rusmak.org.mk/>
11. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/475973559270928>
12. Vladimir Putin, *opening remarks at the meeting with members of the Executive Committee of the European Jewish Congress*, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24586>
13. Estonian Institute of Historical Memory: "Communist Terror in Finland" - <https://communistcrimes.org/en/countries/finland#historical-introduction>
14. Aleksey Krivosheev, *The forgotten lessons from history*, Nova Makedonija, 9 May 2017, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/zaboravenite-lekcii-od-istorijata-kolumna-na-vtor-sekretar-vo-ambasadata-g-din-aleksej-krivoseev-objavena-vo-nova-makedonija-09-05-2017

15. *Russian Narratives about the Second World War*, Fighting False News Narratives, 23 March 2022, <https://f2n2.mk/en/russian-narratives-about-the-second-world-war-in-the-history-textbooks-in-north-macedonia>
16. <https://time.mk/c/0b00e0c8fa/albanija-vo-poslednite-tri-godini-nad-60-stranski-drzavjani-megju-niv-i-diplomati-proglaseni-za-persona-non-grata.html>
17. <https://msu.edu.mk/25-godishen-jubilej-na-zdruzhenieto-za-makedonsko-rusko-prijateljstvo-a-a-rostkovski-od-bitola/>
18. <http://www.prilepinfo.mk/mk/muzei/mogila-na-nepobedenite>
19. Honorary Consulate of Russian Federation to North Macedonia in Bitola, "Immortal Regiment" was held in Skopje, 7 May 2018, <http://www.russconsulbt.org/%D0%92%D0%9E%20%D0%A1%D0%9A%D0%9E%D0%9F%D0%88%D0%95%20%D0%A1%D0%95%20%D0%9E%D0%94%D0%A0%D0%96%D0%98%20%D0%9C%D0%90%D0%9D%D0%98%D0%A4%D0%95%D0%A1%D0%A2%D0%90%D0%A6%D0%98%D0%88%D0%90%D0%A2%D0%90%20%E2%80%9E%D0%91%D0%95%D0%A1%D0%9C%D0%A0%D0%A2%D0%95%D0%9D%20%D0%9F%D0%9E%D0%9B%D0%9A%E2%80%9C>
20. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1016072281927717&set=pb.100069025905838.-2207520000>
21. *In the village Zdunje in the Poreche region, a delegation from the Russian Embassy paid tribute to the seven young soldiers for the liberation of the village*, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 5 May 2020, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/delegacijata-od-ruska-ambasada-vo-poreckoto-zdune-im-oddade-pocit-na-sedumte-mladi-borci-za-osloboduvane-na-seloto-5-maj-2020-godina
22. *A delegation of the Embassy participated in the ceremony for laying flowers on the Mound of the Invincible*, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 8 May 2020, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/delegacijata-od-ambasadata-ucestvuvase-vo-ceremonijata-na-polagane-cveke-kon-mogilata-na-nepobedenite-prilep-8-maj-2020-godina
23. *Laying flowers on the Matka Memorial*, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/polagane-cveke-kon-memorijalniot-spomenik-matka-skopje-9-maj-2020-godina
24. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1301573806710895&id=330562240478728

25. Post on the official web-page of the Municipality of Centar, 9 May 2020, <https://www.centar.gov.mk/?p=9974>
26. Official Facebook page of the chapter in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/VT75Macedonia>
27. Post on the official Facebook page of Ruski dom Skopje, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2268545103455243>
28. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1299203436947932>
29. Sergey Bazdnikin, *Victory Day and the results from World War II*, Embassy of the Russian Federation in North Macedonia, 9 May 2020, https://macedonia.mid.ru/web/macedonia_mc/vesti-od-ambasadata/-/asset_publisher/FYWz9cyhL1gT/content/kolumnata-na-ambasadorot-sergej-bazdnikin-denot-na-pobedata-i-rezultatite-od-vtorata-svetska-vojna-za-vesnikot-nova-makedonija-9-maj-2020-godina
30. *Russian Narratives about the Second World War*, Fighting False News Narratives, 23 March 2022, <https://f2n2.mk/en/russian-narratives-about-the-second-world-war-in-the-history-textbooks-in-north-macedonia>
31. Estonian Institute of Historical Memory: "Why the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 was not 'forced' on Stalin?" <https://communistcrimes.org/en/mythbuster-why-molotov-ribbentrop-pact-1939-was-not-forced-stalin>
32. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1578794638988809>
33. *This year ISU once again participated in the event „Immortal Regiment“, on the occasion of Victory Day*, International Slavic University Derzhavin, 7 May 2021, <https://msu.edu.mk/msu-i-godinava-zema-uchestvo-vo-manifestatsijata-besmrtne-polk-po-povod-denot-na-pobedata-nad-fashizmot>
34. Post on the official Facebook page of Rossotrudnichestvo, 8 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=464692301492503>
35. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/1586340781567528>
36. Sergey Bazdnikin, *Victory Day is more than a celebration*, Nova Makedonija, 8 May 2021, <https://www.novamakedonija.com.mk/mislenja/kolumni/denot-na-pobedata-e-oveke-od-praznik/>
37. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 7 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid0aCXzZ61QoBzcCd5A7BcmbjDqHrCRAfYMsjYuBr342wo5742wmmU3Atkuv2fhPrSl>
38. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2022,

<https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid0UDuJy47qzW2eNNbrfNdohoXDzhGijCxxLzfaeySmLcwqqxusa3CkefjE8Gmx5GWA>

39. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 8 May 2022,
<https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid02fnEV9onLtrVM7svLjxcuiK9moTCh65Lk9XndfS6fter1xqjn5SwKpz5UWCYHwBgCl>
40. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2022,
<https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid02zbYmWRcmdQRuHuAr8V59NjnbfZAwTLQR33GaLdPWpRmZdMnTr9uDM7xa1CTZLjgl>
41. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2022,
[https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid036JuvwxIQmD39V1hZGUMMnwajrrToq94VRrxFk6cwQW8ij3uw8JZMsvoEn7WdEcrql?_cft__\[0\]=AZWSG3WESqmj5kYDIR4jiBij-WAApuuJv1a9qN_9mEPnvopDEyt_DVSR9G3Fs6c5U8f86a4XdNeUI_iYgb2CEOguojWoydMJNXcvGofviB68nVGefqwkEovuFnqUMXaYWFx9iSisPISBhsJnMAc8Aan3&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/pfbid036JuvwxIQmD39V1hZGUMMnwajrrToq94VRrxFk6cwQW8ij3uw8JZMsvoEn7WdEcrql?_cft__[0]=AZWSG3WESqmj5kYDIR4jiBij-WAApuuJv1a9qN_9mEPnvopDEyt_DVSR9G3Fs6c5U8f86a4XdNeUI_iYgb2CEOguojWoydMJNXcvGofviB68nVGefqwkEovuFnqUMXaYWFx9iSisPISBhsJnMAc8Aan3&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)
42. Post on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia, 9 May 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/RussianEmbMKD/posts/305859665058228>