

Symbolic Capital and National Identity in Post-Communist Societies

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The fall of Communist governments across Eastern Europe in 1989 and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 deeply shook the politics of national identity and public memory in these countries. East European and Baltic states typically framed their (re)emerging national identities through the lens of decolonization. In this respect, these narratives could draw on many of the same themes and tropes of 18th and 19th century nationalism, with the Soviet Union or Communism taking on the role of the external oppressor. The other states of the former Soviet Union (FSU), and Russia in particular, could not readily apply this framework because of geographic and (to some extent) political continuity with the USSR. The almost nonexistent lustration process in most of the FSU meant that many Soviet-era elites remain in place in the post-Soviet period, further complicating any effort to separate national from Soviet identity. The construction of Russian national identity in the post-Soviet period has been especially complex. Compared with Germany, for example, there is a relatively weak culture of public memory in Russia, meaning that struggles over national identity have been strongly shaped by political elites.

The fate of Soviet-era monuments and memorials provides an especially useful window into this transition process because they represent the possibility of both continuity and departure from the Soviet past. Using the concept of symbolic capital – a society's medium of prestige, honor and status – enables one to analyze the fates of various monument types. Monument and memorial sites that retain or create symbolic capital become the objects both of further symbolic investment (or “glorification”) and of competition among political elites. Conversely, sites without symbolic capital are ignored or actively disavowed. Contested sites and objects fall between these two categories, and are neither fully glorified nor disavowed. Consequently, the kinds of monuments and memorials that are glorified, disavowed, and contested reveal debates over national identities.

The framework of symbolic capital also offers a way to analyze struggles over monuments and memorials that recognizes the interplay between elites and publics. Although elites, particularly in the FSU, have relatively greater power compared to civil society, they cannot

construct symbolic capital themselves. On some level, the public (or publics) need to recognize a monument, memorial, or symbol as legitimate and powerful for it to be a useful resource for elites. In Russia for example, through the late 1990s, this dynamic tended to reject overt Soviet images leading to a greater distinction between Russian and Soviet identity. This pattern started to reverse in 2000, as Putin began to both cultivate and respond to a increasing nostalgia for the USSR among Russians.

This approach to the study of monuments and national identity has two major consequences. First, it emphasizes the need for a comparative approach, both within and among societies, rather than examinations of individual monuments. Analyses must look collectively at the sites that have been erected, destroyed, or modified, and why. Second, research should pay close attention to the relative roles played by elites and publics in different contexts. These debates reveal broader narratives of identity that have been proposed and accepted within different post-communist societies.