

The role of the European Jewish Congress in the context of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, and Russia's quest to instrumentalise non-state actors

JAKUB BORNIO^{1,*}  – PRZEMYSŁAW ZAWADA² 

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ABSTRACT: The politics of remembrance has been shown to play a pivotal role in shaping international relations across Central and Eastern Europe. In the specific case of Russia, the politics of remembrance is instrumentalised to legitimise and advance foreign policy objectives. To pursue this agenda, Russia employs a broad range of instruments, including external non-state actors. This article adopts a case study approach to examine the instrumentalisation of non-state actors by the Russian state, with a particular focus on the European Jewish Congress (EJC) and its role in the politics of remembrance. The analysis centres on the 2020 commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, co-organised by the EJC at Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel. The 2020 commemoration took place amid an intensified campaign of Russian historical propaganda against Poland. The event was further marred by a diplo-

1 Institute of European Studies, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

2 Independent researcher

* Corresponding author: jakub.bornio@uwr.edu.pl

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matic scandal following the Polish president's decision to boycott it. The case study illustrates the growing importance of non-state actors in the dynamics of international relations in Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular within Polish–Russian relations.

KEYWORDS: Non-state actors, Russia, Poland, European Jewish Congress, memory politics

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1. Introduction: Research problem, methodological approach, and the structure of the paper

The central research problem addressed in this article concerns the instrumentalisation of the activities of the European Jewish Congress (EJC) by the Russian Federation and the organisation's use as a vehicle for advancing Russian foreign policy objectives. The primary aim of the study is to examine the nature and extent of Russia's influence over the EJC, as well as the mechanisms through which the Russian authorities have employed the organisation to pursue their international agenda. From this aim, two key research questions emerge: (1) What are the forms and channels of Russian influence within the EJC? (2) In what ways has Russia utilised the EJC to further its foreign policy interests? The authors advance the hypothesis that there exist clear and identifiable links between the Russian Federation and the EJC, and that the latter has been deliberately instrumentalised to serve the foreign policy purposes of the Russian state.

The analysis draws upon a case study of the organisation of the 75th anniversary commemorations of the liberation of the German concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau in Jerusalem, of which the EJC was a co-organiser. The carefully compiled empirical evidence is situated within a causal-analytical framework and contextualised through engagement with the broader scholarly literature on the subject. Methodologically, the study also draws, in part, upon the concept of *proxysip* in the relationship between states and non-state actors (NSAs), which provides a valuable lens for interpreting the observed dynamics (Marton and Thomasen 2024). According to the assumptions underpinning this concept, the Russian *modus operandi* follows a logic of systematically utilising NSAs as proxies—either by establishing them from the outset to serve state interests or by subsequently gaining influence over or even outright capturing existing entities. Within this framework, a principal–agent rela-

tionship naturally emerges, characterised by asymmetrical dependence and (a degree of) strategic control. Throughout the empirical analysis, the *proxy-ship* framework will be explicitly referenced to identify how Russia's influence manifests: the mechanisms of control and the incentives offered. Another aim is to assess the degree of autonomy that the organisations concerned retained as non-state actors operating under the influence of Moscow.

The structure of the article is as follows. It begins by outlining the broader context of Polish–Russian relations in the sphere of memory politics and the contested historical narratives that shape them. Particular attention is devoted to the sequence of events that directly preceded the 75th anniversary commemorations of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, as these are understood to form part of a wider Russian narrative strategy³ directed against Poland, culminating in the commemoration held in Jerusalem. The subsequent section provides a comprehensive analysis of the EJC and its connections with the Russian Federation, which are crucial to addressing the central research problem—namely, the instrumentalisation of the EJC by Russia. The analytical part concludes with a detailed examination of the Jerusalem commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which serves as the principal case study forming the empirical foundation of this analysis.

By analysing this case, the article contributes to the broader scholarship on the influence of NSAs (Marton et al. 2024), offering a nuanced example that deepens our understanding of their capacity to shape political narratives and diplomatic relations in the region.

2. International background – the Polish-Russian memory quarrel in the context of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp

The politics of remembrance has been demonstrated to play an important role in shaping international relations in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It is an integral part of the domestic and foreign policies of many countries in the region (Krawatzek – Soroka 2021). Recent historical events, including the Second World War (WWII) and the Holocaust, occupy a special place in this con-

³ Russia's strategic objectives include promoting a narrative of its heroic role in defeating Germany, downplaying its responsibility for WWII and occupation-related crimes in CEE, marginalising critical states (notably Poland and the Baltics), and weakening bilateral relations, all to extend Russian influence within CEE and erode the influence of Western institutions in the region.

text (Törnquist-Plewa 2024; Leggewie 2011). In Russia, the politics of remembrance are employed to substantiate foreign policy initiatives (Khislavski 2022; Malinova 2018). Concurrently, the memory of the Holocaust, whose principal stage was Central and Eastern Europe, has become an integral element of Europe's collective identity (Levy – Sznajder 2006). At the same time, antisemitism, whether invoked as an accusation or in relation to claims of engagement in its eradication, has, owing to both historical determinants and the extensive influence and institutional organisation of Jewish communities, emerged as a powerful instrument of leverage within international politics.

Polish-Russian relations are burdened by a centuries-old troubled past. The 500-year history of bilateral relations has been marked by continuous conflicts, with Russia the superior power for most of that time, especially in recent history. The scale of the problem was exemplified by the establishment of the Polish-Russian Group on Difficult Matters, a body aimed at resolving conflicts caused by divergent interpretations of historical events, which is currently non-operational (Rotfeld – Torkunow 2010). The most conflictual issues from recent history include, i.a., the Katyń Massacre, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the role of the Red Army during WWII, Polish-Russian relations during the Cold War, and the Smoleńsk catastrophe.

Narratives of historical events have occasionally caused political quarrels.⁴ These intensified after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which put Poland in a confrontational position towards Russia. On 21 January 2015, in the wake of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grzegorz Schetyna, stated that “the First Ukrainian Front and Ukrainians [opened] the gate of the camp” and suggested that Ukrainians liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp (Polskie Radio 2015a). This led to harsh reactions from Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2015a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2015b), for which the contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the massive sacrifice of the Soviet Union (USSR) and Red Army are core elements of memory politics (Malinova 2018). What is more, given additional tensions over the war in Ukraine, Poland did not strive to secure Vladimir Putin's presence at the 70th anniversary commemoration ceremonies of the liberation of Auschwitz. Notably, in that year, the EJC, chaired by Viatcheslav Moshe Kantor,

4 See more on Russian memory politics in the early Putin era in: Domańska and Rogoża 2021. Poland's response to Russian memory politics was reflected in President Lech Kaczyński's speeches on the 70th anniversary of WWII, which implicitly accused Russia of neo-imperialism through historical parallels (Prezydent.pl 2009).

organised an alternative commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz in Terezin and Prague in the Czech Republic for the first time.⁵

World War II is a centrepiece of the Polish-Russian memory quarrel, including the interpretation of its causes, the role of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and the post-WWII Soviet domination of Poland. On 17 September 2015 – the anniversary of the 1939 Soviet attack on Poland – authorities of the Polish town of Pieniężno removed the monument of the Soviet general Ivan Chernyakhovsky, which led to further indignant reactions from the Russian MFA. The Polish ambassador to Moscow was summoned. Later in September, Paweł Ukielski, vice director of the Polish Institute of National Remembrance, issued an “appeal to the authorities of all towns where ‘Monuments of Gratitude’ to the Red Army are located to make an effort and rid themselves of this legacy” (RMF24.pl 2015). The conflict only intensified in 2016 after Polish authorities introduced a systemic approach toward most of the post-Soviet monuments by establishing the Act of 1 April 2016, prohibiting the propagation of communism.

In December 2019, shortly before the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz liberation camp, Putin initiated an “anti-Polish” campaign, accusing Poland of being responsible for the outbreak of WWII. In the span of a single week, he referred to, as he believed, Poland’s role in the outbreak of WWII “no fewer than five times at key meetings - some of which had little to do with history or even foreign policy” (Shevchenko 2019). On 18 January 2020, an article by Putin was published in the American journal *The National Interest*, in which he paid an excessive amount of attention to the Second Republic of Poland, continuing the earlier-voiced narrative about the causes of the outbreak of the war, accusing Poland of systemic antisemitism, and whitewashing Soviet responsibility for the outbreak of WWII (Putin 2020).⁶ Some associated this with the coming commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz that was held on 23 January 2020 in Jerusalem in Yad Vashem (Applebaum 2020). The 2020 event marked the second time the EJC had organised an alternative commemoration, this time without a representative of Poland as one of the key speakers. The Polish president, dissatisfied with this, rejected the invitation to the event,⁷ while also concerned that in this way he would not be able to respond to further accusations made by Putin (who was given the chance to speak there) (Wroński

5 The previous editions of the World Holocaust Forum, an event organised by the EJC and initiated by Kantor, were held either on the sidelines of the 2005 and 2010 main ceremonies in Kraków, in the Auschwitz camp, or, later, in different places and on other days (related to Kyiv 2006; and Brussels 2011 and 2012).

6 Putin previously made attempts to whitewash Soviet responsibility for the outbreak of the WWII emphasising the systemic causes of the war (Putin 2009). This is popular in Russian historiography in general (Narinsky 2015).

7 More on this in the following sections.

2020). In the years that followed, narratives about the outbreak of WWII were often used by Poland to emphasise German-Soviet cooperation, with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact in particular presented as the main reason for the war (e.g. Sikorski 2025).

3. The European Jewish Congress

The European Jewish Congress, established in 1986, serves as the principal representative body of Jewish communities across Europe. Headquartered in Brussels, with regional offices in Paris, Strasbourg, Berlin, and Budapest, the EJC operates as a federation of 42 national Jewish organisations, collectively representing over 2.5 million Jews throughout the continent. Its foundational mandate is to advocate for the rights, security, and cultural continuity of European Jewry, while promoting democratic values, tolerance, and intercommunal dialogue (European Jewish Congress n.d./a).

Governance within the EJC is structured around a General Assembly composed of delegates from its member organisations. The Assembly elects a President for a renewable two-year term, alongside a Praesidium comprising leaders of national Jewish communities. From 2007 to 2022, the presidency of the EJC was held by the abovementioned Viatcheslav Moshe Kantor. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine (2022), Kantor temporarily resigned from his position (he was replaced by Dr Ariel Muzicant as interim president), but in May 2025, he was re-elected as president of the EJC for another term – despite the controversy surrounding his political connections with Russia – as discussed below.

The EJC is formally affiliated with the World Jewish Congress (WJC), a global umbrella organisation founded in 1936 in Geneva (World Jewish Congress n.d.). This dual affiliation allows the EJC to operate both as a regional actor and as part of a broader transnational Jewish diplomatic network. The EJC's mission encompasses the protection of human rights, the fight against antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia, the promotion of interfaith and intercultural dialogue, the monitoring of antisemitic incidents, and the facilitation of dialogue between Jewish communities and national governments. It maintains active partnerships with European organisations such as the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (where it holds participatory status), and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.⁸

⁸ The EJC has a track record of speaking out on socio-political trends in various countries whenever it perceives threats to Jewish communities or a rise in anti-Semitism. Examples include Moshe Kantor's criticism of Hungary after Jobbik won over 20% of the vote in the 2014 elections, which he described as "a dark day for Hungary" and "a wake-up call for the whole of Europe" (JTA 2014).

Historically, the relationship between the two organisations has been marked by strategic alignment. However, it should be underlined that relations between the WJC and the EJC were not always ideal, and were often influenced by the person of the EJC president, Kantor, and the controversies related to his connections with the Kremlin.

4. Russian links to the European Jewish Congress

The European Jewish Congress comprises a range of organisations representing Jewish communities across various European states. In Russia, this role is fulfilled by the *Federal Jewish National-Cultural Autonomy* (in Russian: *Федеральная Еврейская Национально-Культурная Автономия* – FENKA) and the Russian Jewish Congress (in Russian: *Российский еврейский конгресс* – REK). Both FENKA and REK claim the prerogative to represent the interests of Russian Jews, whose number, according to the 2021 census, is estimated at just under 84,000.⁹ Although both entities operate under the organisational framework of the EJC, their respective competences and statuses are partly overlapping. On FENKA's official website, the principal objectives of the organisation are defined, along with a map illustrating its presence across Russia's regions – including in the occupied Crimean Peninsula (Федеральная Еврейская Национально-Культурная Автономия n.d.). There, its regional branch is the *Regional National-Cultural Autonomy of the Jews of the Republic of Crimea* (Russian: *Региональная национально-культурная автономия евреев Республики Крым*), which was registered in 2015, subsequent to the unlawful annexation of the peninsula. The EJC appears to follow a similar interpretation of Crimea's territorial affiliation, as it includes Crimean Jews in the total number of Russian Jews. This is particularly noteworthy given that the demographic data presented on the EJC's website for the Jewish community in Russia are derived from the *outdated* 2010 census (which considerably inflates the population compared to more recent figures), while, at the same time, the data regarding the “Russian” Jewish community on the annexed Crimean Peninsula have been “updated”. A more serious deficiency is that the figure presented on the EJC website as representative of the 2010 census—265,000—is erroneous, overstating the true number by more than 100,000. The official Russian 2010 census recorded 158,675 Jews resident in the Russian Federation (Росстат 2010). The size of the Jewish population in individual countries is of particular significance, as, pursuant to Article 17 §2 of the Bylaws of the EJC, “the number of delegates per member community [to

⁹ The census also included the number of Crimean Jews (Krimchaks, rus. Крымчаки), 954 people in total. (Федеральная служба государственной статистики 2021).

the general Assembly of the EJC] shall vary depending on the total Jewish population of the country concerned". From a proxyship theory perspective, this overrepresentation can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt at influence-seeking: by maximising the number of its delegates within the EJC assembly, Moscow can secure disproportionate influence over the organisation's decision-making, reflecting a clear principal-agent dynamic that favours the Russian principal.

Russia's connections with the EJC, however, rest not only on its member organisations but primarily on the figure of Kantor. Born in Moscow in 1953, Kantor currently holds the citizenship of Russia, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Over the years, he adopted the name Moshe, most likely to emphasise his Jewish heritage. Kantor is a Russian businessman and billionaire, whose fortune has been estimated by Forbes at 9.5 billion USD, making him the 293rd richest person in the world as of 2025 (Forbes n.d.). The principal source of his wealth lies in the fertiliser industry, particularly through his ownership of Acron Group, Russia's largest producer in this sector. Kantor has expanded his business interests beyond Russia, including to China, Belarus, Poland, and Canada. Kantor entered this industry during the Yeltsin-era privatisation. Unlike many other Russian businessmen, he has never displayed overt political ambitions; nonetheless, his strong connections within political circles have significantly facilitated his business achievements (Rybczyński 2020). As discussed later in this article, his international philanthropic activities are necessarily constrained by Russia's policy objectives. Compliance with the Kremlin's position appears essential to the protection of Kantor's business interests (Kuczyński 2020). Prior to his involvement in Jewish community affairs, Kantor's public prominence had been largely episodic.¹⁰ Despite his business career, Kantor became actively engaged in Jewish public life both in Europe and beyond. As stated in his official biography on the EJC website,

"In 2005, he founded the World Holocaust Forum Foundation (WHFF), established to support Holocaust remembrance activities. [...] In 2006, Kantor founded the European Jewish Fund, which focuses on promoting Jewish life throughout Europe. [...] In 2010, he initiated the creation of the Kantor Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry at Tel Aviv University and the Moshe Kantor Database for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism" (European Jewish Congress n.d. b).

Between 2005 and 2009, Kantor served as President of the Russian Jewish Congress. This position, combined with his other contributions to Jewish commu-

¹⁰ For a more detailed account of Kantor's business affiliations and early professional trajectory, see investigative journalism sources (Rybczyński 2020; Konyev 2025; Korniyev 2025).

nal life and his philanthropic activity, provided a springboard for his subsequent election and continued leadership of the EJC. In this context, the influence of his business interests on his position within the organisation's hierarchy should not be disregarded. After all, during the 2010s, the centre of Kantor's business operations shifted to London, and it was notably the British, rather than the Russian, delegation that nominated his candidacy for the presidency of the EJC in 2016.

Kantor's engagement in Jewish communal and remembrance initiatives enabled him to cultivate an extensive network of high-level political connections. In 2008, together with former President of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski, he established the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation, an international NGO that acts as a "tolerance watchdog". The organisation's activities have involved a number of prominent political figures, including former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. In December 2019, shortly before the 5th World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem, Kantor appeared as a keynote speaker at the European Parliament, alongside the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, delivering an address on the growing threat of antisemitism (European Jewish Congress 2019). The foregoing demonstrated the extent of Kantor's acquired credibility and international political legitimacy, which ultimately facilitated the successful organisation of the event marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, conducted in a manner consistent with Russian interests (as elaborated in the following section).

In April 2022, Kantor was placed under sanctions by, among others, the United Kingdom and the EU. The UK statement of reasons reads that

"Kantor is a prominent Russian businessman associated with Putin. [...] Kantor [via Acron] owns or controls directly or indirectly and/or works as a director [...] trustee, or equivalent of a person other than an individual carrying on business of economic significance to the Government of Russia in sectors of strategic significance to the Government of Russia. Hence [...] is involved in gaining a benefit from or supporting the Government of Russia, whose actions are destabilising Ukraine or undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty or independence of Ukraine." (UK Sanctions List 2022).

The Council of the EU regulation adds that

"He has close ties to President Putin. This connection with the Russian president has helped him to maintain his considerable wealth. He has openly declared his support for and friendship with President Putin on numerous

occasions and enjoys good relations with the Kremlin” (Council of the European Union 2022).

In March 2025, upon the intercession of the Hungarian government, Kantor was removed from the EU sanctions list and reinstated as President of the EJC (Brzozowska 2025). It is highly probable that Kantor had hoped his philanthropic endeavours and active involvement within the Jewish community would shield him from the imposition of sanctions. This expectation was not entirely unfounded, as occasional soft-toned expressions of criticism regarding the sanctions imposed upon him appeared in the media (Coughlan 2022). The EJC likewise invoked such arguments while lobbying for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Kantor (Sokol 2023).

A range of activities and studies — both scholarly and investigative — indicate that Kantor, while pursuing his business and personal objectives, engaged also in actions consistent with the broader Russian agenda, which ultimately culminated in the organisation of the commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in Jerusalem.

One of the principal avenues through which Kantor lent support to Russia was by cultivating the image of the country as the foremost bastion in the struggle against antisemitism — a state purportedly free from this problem and capable of serving as a potential refuge for Jews (Gamburg 2024). On 19 January 2016, the Executive Committee of the EJC, led by Kantor, paid a visit to the Kremlin.¹¹ The meeting occurred only a few days before an alarming CNN report had aired, describing Jews as leaving France “in record numbers” in the face of growing antisemitism (Liebermann 2016). During his meeting with Putin, Kantor echoed similar concerns, declaring that

“this is happening not only in France today; we are seeing this in Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Sweden and Italy. The continent has not outlived the age-old disease: during times of socioeconomic crisis, it is struck again by the virus of anti-Semitism.” Putin responded immediately, stating that “They should come here, to Russia. We are ready to accept them.” The idea was received with enthusiasm by Kantor, who replied: “This is a fundamentally new idea, and we will certainly discuss it at the Congress. I hope we will support you. [...] You know, we want to express a truly high assessment of your policy, since the status of Jews in Russia today may be the best in Europe” (President of Russia 2016).

¹¹ The very first visit by the EJC delegation had already taken place in 2007, shortly after Kantor's election as President of the EJC.

Both entirely disregarded the fact that the number of Jews leaving France and Russia during that period—albeit most likely for different reasons—was strikingly similar (Miller n.d.). The crucial distinction, however, is that the Jewish diaspora in France is approximately four to five times larger than that in Russia (The World Data 2025).

Another vector of Kantor’s activity, consistent with the Russian agenda, involves targeting Russia’s opponents. As Anton Weiss-Wendt contends, Kantor’s evocations align closely with Russia’s historical narrative, which — through effective instrumentalisation — has been used to target countries such as the Baltic states and Ukraine (Weiss-Wendt 2022, p. 198). As observed by A. Pfeffer,

“during Kantor’s presidency, the EJC has certainly done a lot [...] to highlight anti-Semitism in countries to which Putin’s administration is hostile, including in Western Europe and neighbouring Ukraine, while at the same time praising the Kremlin for acting against anti-Semitism in Russia.”
(Pfeffer 2016).

In the case of Poland, this pertained to the alleged tacit consent of the government to manifestations of antisemitism — a claim suggested, among others, in the 2017 report *Antisemitism Worldwide*, published by the Kantor Centre (Porat 2018). It is worth noting that the chapter devoted to Poland was the longest of all in the report.

5. The 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp: Russia’s engagement, Poland’s absence

On 27 January 2020, the international community marked the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi extermination camp by the Red Army in 1945. The occasion carried profound symbolic weight not only for Holocaust survivors and Jewish communities worldwide but also for broader global society, as a moment of reflection on the atrocities of Nazism and the historical legacy of liberation. Traditionally, milestone commemorations have taken place at the Auschwitz Memorial in Poland, with the participation of survivors and official delegations from numerous states. This was notably the case, e.g., in 2005 (at the 60th anniversary), which saw the attendance of heads of state including Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Israeli President Moshe Katsav, Russian President Putin, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, French Pres-

ident Jacques Chirac, and German President Horst Köhler. During the subsequent commemoration in 2010 (on the 65th anniversary), despite being invited, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev was absent, and the country was represented by the Minister of Education and Science.¹² During the 70th anniversary in 2015, the ceremony was marked by the absence of President Putin, who was not invited by the Polish government following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2020, however, the commemorative landscape shifted significantly: two separate ceremonies were held, prompting media commentary that described the development as a "competition" over the narrative of Holocaust memory (Project Syndicate 2020). This bifurcation reflected not only logistical and diplomatic considerations but also deeper tensions surrounding historical interpretation, political legitimacy, and the role of state actors in shaping collective remembrance.

On 23 January 2020, the 5th World Holocaust Forum took place in Jerusalem under the patronage of Israel's President, Reuven Rivlin, along with the Yad Vashem World Holocaust Remembrance Center, with the EJC and its president, Kantor, serving as co-organisers. The forum, titled "Remembering the Holocaust, Fighting Anti-Semitism", attracted over forty world leaders, including the heads of state of Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and others. Jerusalem's largest-ever political gathering was built on the tradition of international Holocaust remembrance events, notably the "Let My People Live!" fora initiated in the 2000s by the WHFF in cooperation with the EJC.¹³

Taking into consideration Kantor's Russian origins and his ties already described in the previous section, the program of the 5th World Holocaust Forum attracted scrutiny for potential political bias. Indeed, the choice of speakers and content at the forum reflected a clear tilt toward Russia's historical narrative. Poland's President Andrzej Duda was not invited to speak, ostensibly because the roster was limited to representatives of the wartime Allied powers (Russia, France, the UK, the US) and Israel. Offended by this decision – especially in light of previous Russian rhetoric blaming Poland for WWII – Duda boycotted the Jerusalem event entirely, and instead of him, Polish ambassador to Israel, Marek Magierowski, represented the country during the forum – the ambassador did not play any noticeable role there. In contrast, President Putin was not only invited but honoured with a central speech that was seen – both in Poland (Radziwinowicz 2020) and beyond (Horovitz 2020) – as Israel's concession to Russian sensitivities.

¹² Experts suggested that Medvedev's absence was due both to the invitation being sent too late and to a substantive disagreement between Poland and Russia regarding Auschwitz (Gzell 2010).

¹³ The same year WHFF was established, Kantor initiated and organised, in partnership with the EJC, the First International "Let My People Live!" Forum in Kraków, Poland, to mark 60 years since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau (World Holocaust Forum n.d.).

Putin's presence in Jerusalem validated Polish concerns. Before the main event, Putin had already spoken at length, together with Israel's President Reuven Rivlin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, at a ceremony inaugurating a memorial to the up to 1.5 million soldiers and civilians who died in the nearly 900-day Nazi siege of Leningrad, Putin's hometown (now St. Petersburg). After the ceremony, the Israeli and Russian leaders made their journey through streets closed off for them to the main gathering at Yad Vashem. But while Rivlin and Netanyahu took their seats, Putin arrived a couple of minutes later and was introduced to the audience separately. What is more, he was even escorted by Rivlin to his seat, while other world leaders had to wait patiently (Horowitz 2020). For many, this may seem an insignificant gesture, but when taken together with the other signals described above, it shows that Putin's treatment overshadowed the true meaning of this event, namely, the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust.

During the main event, Putin also ensured that his presence remained a topic of extensive discussion. As aptly observed by Rimma Polyak, an analyst for *Russia.Post* (the Russia Program at the George Washington University), Kantor's address, which preceded that of Putin,

“prepared the other participants for the Russian leader's appearance”
(Поляк 2020).

In his remarks, Kantor asserted that in Russia, one could

“find maybe the lowest rates of antisemitism due to a very uncompromising, long-term policy towards antisemitism. And antisemitic incidents are treated with maximum severity. Therefore, practically eliminating antisemitism in the public arena” (World Holocaust Forum 2020).

In his speech, the Russian leader praised the Red Army's role in defeating Nazism and advanced false statistics. He claimed that “40% of the Jews who died in the Holocaust were citizens of the USSR”. Historians rejected this figure as baseless; research estimates there were roughly 1 million Jewish victims from Soviet territories — or about 17% of the total 6 million, not 40%. (Bauer – Rozett 1990, p. 1799).

Ultimately, Putin's address did not implicate Poland in causing the war. Nevertheless, it incorporated another persistent element of Soviet and Russian propaganda concerning Poland — the reference to Khatyn as a site of WWII German crimes. This site was deliberately integrated into Soviet narratives due to its phonetic resemblance to Katyń, enabling the two to be easily conflated

and thereby serving to obscure and whitewash Soviet responsibility for the massacre of the Polish elite in Katyn (Rudling 2012).

According to Havi Dreifuss, Putin's statement should be understood as part of the ongoing memory war between Poland and Russia (Sokolov 2020). What unfolded was rather an "asymmetric" memory war, waged by the markedly different methods, instruments, and capacities available to Russia and to those opposing it. Typically, it is Russia that initiates such "memory campaigns", deploying manipulative strategies, while Western actors are left to counter them and act reactively. The effectiveness of these efforts is constrained by the specific characteristics of the audiences being targeted or defended – whether on the international stage (which itself varies according to the region in question) or within domestic publics, both in Russia and elsewhere.

During the Jerusalem forum, the Russian historical narrative was also clearly visible in the content of the videos and exhibits presented during the ceremony. Materials were focused almost only on the USSR's role in defeating the Nazis, while downplaying the role of other countries. Additionally, they also failed to mention the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact that preceded the war, Russia's occupation of parts of Poland, and other facts uncomfortable to Moscow. This, in turn, was widely criticised by numerous historians, as it clearly reflected the influence of Russian propaganda and raised questions over the consultation process behind the content displayed. For a few days, Yad Vashem refrained from commenting on these materials. It did, however, apologise eventually for "inaccuracies" and "partial" facts presented during the event. Moreover, Yad Vashem did not say if it was responsible for the content of the ceremony and also did not address the issue of Putin being invited to speak, while no similar invitation was extended to Duda (Staff 2020). Moshe Kantor and the EJC found themselves at the intersection of these discussions. Kantor publicly framed the Jerusalem forum as a purely moral initiative and a chance to unite leaders against antisemitism, not as a political gathering. Indeed, the forum's official theme and Kantor's statements highlighted the alarming resurgence of antisemitism globally – an issue of genuine concern, reinforced by acts of violence in the US and Europe in recent years. However, the political context of the event cannot be ignored. The course of the forum and the presentation of overtly pro-Russian content further compound the issue, raising concerns about the normalisation of narratives that align with Kremlin interests within academic and diplomatic discourse. Kantor's dual identity – at once a philanthropic representative of Holocaust memory and a Russian businessman included on a 2018 U.S. Treasury list of oligarchs close to Putin (US Treasury 2018) – meant that the EJC's involvement inevitably came to be viewed through a political lens. In this sense, a non-state actor such as the EJC arguably became instrumentalised in a great-power tussle over historical truth. By

convening the forum under humanitarian pretexts, the EJC provided Moscow with a prestigious international stage to advance its preferred WWII narrative. This is a clear example of how an authoritarian state can leverage civil society partners to exercise soft power in the realm of memory politics (Staff 2020).

On 27 January 2020 (the exact liberation anniversary), four days after the 5th World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem, an official ceremony took place at the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial in Poland, with the participation of some 200 Holocaust survivors and delegations from roughly 50 countries. Dignitaries at Auschwitz included Poland's President Andrzej Duda, Israel's President Rivlin, Germany's President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and numerous royals and officials. Notably absent at Auschwitz was any high-profile representative of Russia, reflecting the ongoing diplomatic rift.

During the event organised by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and the Polish government (with significant support from WJC President Ronald Lauder and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Foundation), President Duda spoke first. His remarks had a notably different emphasis than Putin's in Jerusalem. Duda honoured the victims and survivors, and underlined that Poland, too, was a victim of Nazi aggression, occupied and terrorised during the war. Without explicitly naming Russia or the Jerusalem event, Duda also issued a pointed warning:

“Distorting the history of WWII, denying the crimes of genocide and the Holocaust as well as [the] instrumental use of Auschwitz to attain any given goal is tantamount to desecration of the memory of the victims whose ashes are scattered here” (Duda 2020).

The heart of the Auschwitz commemoration was testimony from survivors themselves. The presence of survivors, physically gathered at the site of their persecution, shifted the focus from state actors to moral witnesses. In this environment, Ronald S. Lauder, as a representative of world Jewry and chairman of the camp's preservation foundation, delivered a keynote address that complemented the survivors' message and used his speech to decry the “open spread of anti-Jewish hatred” in the world today (World Jewish Congress 2020).

To sum up, unlike in Jerusalem, where contemporary geopolitics overshadowed the moral theme, in Oświęcim/Auschwitz, the moral theme framed contemporary geopolitics through the lens of the fight against antisemitism. Another clear difference between the two events was the relative absence of controversy around the Polish ceremony, implying that the Auschwitz gathering managed to maintain a traditional commemorative ethos, with historical accuracy and survivor voices in focus. Moreover, the EJC's pattern of conduct — aligning so

closely with the Kremlin's agenda — illustrates how a non-state actor can function as a *de facto proxy*. Russia, as the principal, effectively channelled its narrative through the EJC, while the organisation's own agency was largely instrumentalised to advance Moscow's strategic objectives.

Notably, the dynamics observed in 2020 did not persist unchanged. During the 80th anniversary commemorations in January 2025, the EJC adopted a markedly different approach that did not replicate the contentious posture of the 75th anniversary. The organisation partnered with the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union to host a commemorative conference, at which the EJC's vice-president delivered the keynote address, signalling a more conciliatory stance (European Jewish Congress 2025). However, this shift is likely attributable, at least in part, to the fact that Kantor himself officially did not occupy a significant role within the EJC's leadership structures at the time, having returned to a position of influence only in May 2025.

6. Conclusions

The Russian politico-economic model is predicated on the strategic utilisation of key state-linked enterprises as instruments for consolidating national power and advancing state interests within the international system (Mróz – Paszkowski 2023; Deák 2024). Such enterprises constitute extensions of the state's foreign policy apparatus, serving as vehicles through which political influence and economic leverage are projected abroad. There is little basis to suggest that the Acron Group represents an exception to this paradigm. Through his ownership stake and managerial authority within the company, Vyacheslav Moshe Kantor is firmly embedded in this structure, deriving from it both material benefits and personal prestige. It may be implausible to assume that such a position could have been achieved without the acquiescence of the Russian authorities, or without their imposition of specific expectations and demands. The considerable financial resources amassed by Kantor through his business activities enabled him to cultivate significant influence within the European Jewish community, notably through his engagement in combating antisemitism, promoting Holocaust remembrance, and pursuing extensive philanthropic initiatives. Kantor thus remains the principal conduit of Russian influence within the EJC, providing an answer to the first research question posed in this article.

The precise nature of the nexus between Kantor and the Russian state, however, remains ambiguous. The present research, within the limits of its methodological scope, does not allow for a definitive determination as to whether Kantor's capture of the EJC stemmed primarily from individual ambition — driven by a desire to enhance his social standing and maximise profits — or whether

this was, at least in part, inspired or orchestrated by Russian authorities seeking to instrumentalise both the EJC and Kantor's position within Jewish institutional networks as tools for shaping public opinion and exerting influence upon European decision-making elites. These two explanatory frameworks are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Both references to antisemitism and Holocaust memory can function as salient instruments of political influence – highly emotive narratives readily subject to manipulation and instrumentalisation. What primarily concerned the authors in this study, however, is whether Russia managed to utilise the EJC to advance its own political objectives, particularly in the context of the organisation of the 75th anniversary commemorations of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp – which it evidently did.

However, it is important to acknowledge that not every action undertaken by the EJC can be attributed solely to direction from the Kremlin. Alternative explanations warrant consideration. The EJC – and Kantor in particular – acted under the impact of institutional incentives and personal ambitions that likely shaped its behaviour. Competition between the European Jewish Congress and the World Jewish Congress, for instance, provided the EJC's leadership with a strong motivation to elevate its profile, which may independently account for its eagerness to host a high-profile Holocaust commemoration.

Similarly, Israel's own strategic and diplomatic calculations as the host state may explain certain decisions – such as granting President Putin a prominent platform while denying Polish representatives the opportunity to speak – irrespective of direct Russian pressure. In other words, although the 2020 Jerusalem Forum clearly served Russian interests, it may also have aligned with the interests of both the EJC and Israel. This convergence of interests complicates efforts to distinguish deliberate proxy behaviour from coincidental mutual benefit.

In the authors' view, the article provides sufficient empirical evidence to substantiate the hypothesis of the instrumentalisation of the European Jewish Congress by Russia. The Jerusalem forum, though formally a civil-society initiative against antisemitism, in practice provided Russia with a prestigious international stage from which to project its version of wartime history. Crucially, the content and context of the Yad Vashem event aligned with Russian objectives. President Putin's dominant presence and revisionist historical remarks mirrored the Kremlin's ongoing campaign to shape the war's narrative to its advantage. These themes were introduced at a time when Moscow had intensified its accusations against Poland for purportedly triggering WWII, thereby weaving the 75th anniversary into a broader propaganda offensive.

The EJC's role was pivotal in this outcome. By leveraging its moral authority and organisational capacity, the EJC, led by Kantor, effectively enabled Russia's narrative to take centre stage at the Jerusalem commemoration. In fact, in

his speech, Kantor, in a way, introduced Putin and explained his presence at the event. The analysis indicates that Kantor's EJC actively served Russia's objectives: it convened an event that stifled Poland's voice by not giving President Duda the possibility to speak, overemphasised the USSR's wartime role, and lent international legitimacy to Russia's historical interpretations. From Moscow's perspective, the benefits of the Jerusalem event were substantial and likely fully intentional (anticipated and desired).

Russia thus succeeded in projecting its preferred historical narrative on a global stage under the guise of a civil society initiative. In doing so, the Kremlin effectively marginalised Poland's role in the commemoration of Auschwitz – an outcome that aligned closely with its ongoing efforts to discredit Poland. Moreover, the structure of the forum – placing Russia at the centre while excluding Poland – also contributed to tensions between two key U.S. allies in Israel and Poland, thereby advancing Russia's broader foreign-policy objective of fostering division within the Western alliance. This outcome substantiates the article's research question, demonstrating both how the EJC served Russia's interests and the extent to which its activities aligned with Russia's foreign policy agenda in this instance.

The comparison with the parallel Auschwitz commemoration further highlights the extent of this alignment. The ceremony at Auschwitz on 27 January 2020, organised by the Polish authorities in partnership with the WJC, took a markedly different approach. It foregrounded survivor testimonies, underscored universally agreed historical facts, and avoided partisan narrative framing. This stands in sharp contrast to the Jerusalem forum, where the convergence of a nominally historical commemoration with present-day geopolitics was overt. The disparity between the two ceremonies underscores that the EJC-led event closely conformed to Russian interests, whereas the Auschwitz gathering supported by the WJC involved a more impartial commemoration in line with established historical narratives. The rivalry and differing orientations of the EJC and WJC in these events further suggest that non-state actors within the Jewish commemorative sphere can become aligned with competing political agendas: in 2020, the EJC's program dovetailed with Kremlin talking points, while the WJC backed a ceremony that reaffirmed a narrative consonant with the position of Poland and the broader international historical consensus.

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