

THE DISCOURSE OF THE MEMORY POLITICS IN THE CONTEMPORARY REPUBLIC OF BASHKORTOSTAN*

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This research is devoted to identifying the peculiarities of memory politics discourse in the contemporary Republic of Bashkortostan. The politics of memory amalgamates significant past symbols and events to formulate and replicate a specific narrative, which interprets the historical social reality and manages collective memory. Furthermore, this policy direction has a significant impact on the formation of national and civic identity. The Republic of Bashkortostan is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional region with a long history. The discourse of memory politics in Bashkortostan is shaped by the mutual influence of various factors, including the Soviet legacy, national (ethnic) identity politics, and the geographical location of the region. This research analyzes the discursive elements that shape memory politics in the Republic of Bashkortostan, examining historical narratives, cultural symbols, and commemorative practices. Additionally, it explores how memory politics serve to construct and negotiate diverse identities, including national and civic identities. The study examines specific cases of elites' activities in the Republic of Bashkortostan in commemorating places of memory; the article identifies the key "sites of memory" (in P. Nora's understanding) for the political-historical discourse of Bashkortostan. The study's conclusions indicate that the discussion of memory politics in Bashkortostan is a complex and contradictory field, which reflects the interaction of multiple factors. This highlights the requirement for further research on this topic, specifically regarding the role of memory politics in the construction of political and ethnic identity in the region.

Keywords: memory politics, Republic of Bashkortostan, discourse, ethnic identity, historical narratives, cultural symbols, commemorative practices.

INTRODUCTION

The politics of memory represents one of the key elements for the construction of group identity in the modern world. Today, there is a growing focus on exploring the symbolic significance of past historical events and discourses, as they relate to the strengthening of societal bonds and the formation of national (ethnic) or national-civil identity. The demand for strengthening civil unity and legitimizing political decisions in the face of macro-political instability underscores the relevance of this

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issue. Utilizing symbolic resources such as images, places, values, and narratives of the shared past plays a vital role in fostering social solidarity and cultivating a sense of national cohesion.

Studies of memory politics or memory studies are a component of symbolic politics, which can be defined as a public activity associated with formulating and reproducing certain ways of interpreting social reality [Malinova, Miller, 2021, p. 11]. An important feature of this policy is the deliberate development of narratives and meanings by the state or other actors in order to manage collective memory [Rusakova, Gribov, Moiseenko, 2022, p. 160]. To integrate these meanings into public consciousness, various strategies and tools are used, which include the use of commemorative practices — public recollections of significant events and images of the past, taking into account the modern context and the needs of power actors [Kovba, Gribov, 2020, p. 64]. The aforementioned meanings are conveyed through the creation of commemorative dates and holidays, the positive or negative evaluation of specific figures from the past — their heroization or deheroization, symbolic rituals, works of literature and art, cinema, etc. [Mitrokhina, 2022, p. 195]. Consequently, the community unifies through shared history and culture, a pantheon of national heroes, and common adversaries. Also, an important aspect of collective memory management is “social forgetting”, intended for full or partial omission or reinterpretation of specific fragments of the past [Potseluev, 2020, p. 49]. Separately, it should be noted that the education system plays a crucial role in disseminating specific interpretations of historical events, values, and identification attitudes through history textbooks and new training courses [Ogonovskaya, 2022].

Thus, the politics of memory constructs a certain semantic frame of events of the past and reproduces this narrative in order to influence the events of the present.

The focus of memory politics studies has primarily centered on analyzing the state-level phenomenon, resulting in an imbalance regarding regional authorities' activities in commemorating the past [The Politics of Memory in Russia..., 2023, p. 9]. Recently, however, major works devoted to the memory policy of regions, including subjects of the Russian Federation, have begun to appear [Malinova, Miller, Pakhalyuk, 2022; Efremenko, 2022; Kirchanov, 2022]. Regional memory politics seems to be an important object of study due to its significance for the formation of local and regional identities, as well as local consolidation — especially in the national (ethnic) republics of the Russian Federation.

The relevance of the present research is determined by the weak study of the features of discursive practices of official authorities in the Republic of Bashkortostan concerning the implementation of historical policy and its integration into national narratives.

The theoretical and methodological basis of the research is the concept of agonism and antagonism, formulated by the Belgian researcher Chantal Mouffe, in particular in her work “On the political” [Mouffe, 2005, p. 20], to describe democratic societies, and adapted for the study of memory politics by Alexey Miller [Methodological Issues..., p. 7–8]. According to this theoretical concept, a discussion can be antagonistic (the parties do not accept the opposite opinion and try to suppress each other in the discursive field) and agonistic (the participants of the discussion realize

the irreconcilability of their own views and the impossibility of compromise, but at the same time they do not deny the existence of opposing views and recognize the need for discussion). This concept is the key to establishing the type of relationship in the issue of historical memory between regional and central authorities.

For the purposes of this study, the terms “memory politics” and “historical politics” are used interchangeably and refer to a set of “social practices and norms related to the regulation of collective memory” [Miller, 2009, p. 7]. Besides, the term “place of memory” introduced by the French researcher Pierre Nora will play a significant role in this work. The term has the following meaning: tangible things or intangible images that are symbols of the preservation of collective memory [Nora, 1999, p. 25].

While researching places of memory, we identified the main directions of the region’s memory policy. As a result of this analysis, we put forward a hypothesis about the agonistic nature of the discourse of historical policy in Bashkortostan.

Due to the impossibility of comprehensively covering all aspects of memory policy implementation in the Republic of Bashkortostan, this paper will conduct a case study analysis of a few significant cases.

It should be noted that the issues of studying memory policy have a well-developed conceptual and theoretical framework, primarily applied to the state level. In this paper, we use the existing experience to analyze regional memory policy.

CASE 1: NARRATIVE ABOUT SALAVAT YULAEV

The image of Salavat Yulaev can be called the most significant in the modern pantheon of heroes of the Republic of Bashkortostan and, accordingly, one of the key elements of the official historical discourse of Bashkortostan. The immortalization of this historical figure in the names and material places of memory of Bashkortostan confirms the thesis stated above. As some examples of commemoration, we note that S. Yulaev is devoted to the names of the hockey team, one of the cities and orders of the Republic, a monument in Ufa (was built in 1967) [Bederson, 2013, p. 88].

We can explain the high importance of the considered image in the discursive field of historical policy of Bashkortostan as follows: the image of S. Yulaev is a kind of a gap at the junction of memory policy of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Bashkortostan. The historical discourse of the federal center largely borrows the narratives of Soviet historical policy.

In the USSR’s memory policy, S. Yulaev’s image was sacralized and mythologized because he was considered one of the most ardent fighters against the tsarist regime as an associate of Yemelyan Pugachev. Consequently, the leadership of Bashkortostan can use the heroizing narrative of Salavat Yulayev to strengthen the ethnic identity of the Bashkirs with the support of federal authorities. In 2022, the ceremony honoring S. Yulaev’s monument saw attendance from various high-ranking guests, including the Aide to the Russian President, Vladimir Medinsky¹, in addition

¹ Radiy Khabirov together with honorary guests of the republic laid flowers at the monument to Salavat Yulaev. *Glava Respubliki Bashkortostan*, 11.10.2022. Available at: https://glavarb.ru/rus/press_serv/novosti/158492.html (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

to the Head of the Bashkortostan Republic. This demonstrates the importance of S.Yulaev's image in both all-Russian historical policy and the memory of Bashkortostan.

Thus, the narrative about Salavat Yulaev holds a prominent position among Bashkortostan's national heroes. This can be attributed to its agonistic portrayal, which aligns with the national memory discourse.

CASE 2: NARRATIVE ABOUT THE BASHKIR ASSR

Another important aspect of the Bashkir memory politics discourse is the justification of Bashkir statehood. As a prime example, we propose examining the significance of the Bashkir ASSR in the political history of the contemporary Republic of Bashkortostan. The importance of this "place of memory" is evidenced by the fact that the establishment of the Republic of Bashkortostan traces back to the establishment of the Bashkir ASSR. That is, the Bashkir people attained political subjectivity following the establishment of a territorial autonomy within the RSFSR.

So, for example, in 2019, the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Republic of Bashkortostan was celebrated. The celebration was organized by a decree of the President of Russia². Representatives of the federal political elite, including Valentina Matvienko, Chair of the Federation Council, and Igor Komarov, representative of the President of Russia in the Volga Federal District³, were in attendance at the event. The event's framing as the centenary of the Republic of Bashkortostan illustrates that the Bashkir ethnicity, specifically the ethnic entrepreneurs represented by the Republic's elites, attribute the Bashkirs' political subjectness solely to the establishment of the BASSR as a result of Soviet national (ethnic) policy.

It is important to note that, according to the latest version of the Law "On Holidays and Memorial Days in the Republic of Bashkortostan"⁴, there are 3 non-working days in the Republic in addition to all-Russian days off: 2 religious holidays (Uraza-Bayram and Kurban-Bayram) and Republic Day, which marks the adoption of the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Bashkir ASSR (October 11). Also, this law includes a set of "memorial days", which are established "in recognition of significant historical events in the formation of the Republic of Bashkortostan..."⁵. There are eight days dedicated

² Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of 17.07.2016, no. 346 "On celebrating the 100th anniversary of the formation of the Republic of Bashkortostan". *Ofitsial'nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii*, 18.07.2016. Available at: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201607180001?ysclid=ijue6axc8466753855> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

³ Celebrations in honor of Bashkortostan's 100th anniversary took place in Ufa. *Glava Respubliki Bashkortostan*, 23.03.2019. Available at: https://glavarb.ru/rus/press_serv/novosti/121239.html (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

⁴ Law of the Republic of Bashkortostan of 27.02.1992, no. VS-10/21 "On holidays in the Republic of Bashkortostan" (as revised on 07.06.2023). *Ofitsial'nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii*, 13.06.2023. Available at: <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=145012837&rdk=&backlink=1> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

⁵ Ibid.

to commemorating events from the 20th century only, with two specifically honoring dates related to the formation of the Bashkir ASSR: the Day of signing the Agreement of the Russian Workers' and Peasants' Government with the Bashkir Government on the Soviet Autonomy of Bashkiria (March 20) and the Day of formation of territorial and national autonomy of Bashkortostan as a federative part of the Russian state (November 29). That is the narrative about the significance of the BASSR and the 20th century for the formation of the republican identity at the level of the official policy of commemorative dates.

The potential to construct an identity based on the recollection of statehood origins by means of this narrative appears to be feasible for analogous reasons as the utilisation of S.Yulaev's depiction: the said depiction is ingrained in the nationwide commemorative policy, which inherits the Soviet historical policy.

CASE 3: NARRATIVE ABOUT THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

The last part of the historical policy discourse of the Republic of Bashkortostan that we have examined is the narrative of the military past, within which the Great Patriotic War seems to be the most significant one.

This image is the key one in the national historical discourse of modern Russia, so this image cannot be ignored by the regional authorities. The authorities of the Republic of Bashkortostan perpetuate the memory of the Great Patriotic War in various ways. Among them we consider it necessary to single out one connected with the Special Military Operation in Ukraine.

As part of the Special Military Operation, the government and the head of the Republic of Bashkortostan personally advocated the creation of several volunteer battalions, which are supported by the republican authorities. Several battalions have been named to honour heroes of the Republic of Bashkortostan, including two named after Minigali Shaimuratov and Tagir Kusimov, who served as Red Army officers during the Great Patriotic War⁶.

Additionally, the Law "On Holidays and Memorial Days in the Republic of Bashkortostan" states that two out of eight memorial days relate to the events of the Great Patriotic War: The Memorial Day of the Northern Cabin boys (May 25) and The Day of the 112th Bashkir Cavalry Division (November 13). This highlights the importance of this narrative for the official memory policy of the Republic of Bashkortostan.

Thus, in terms of historical policy narratives, the authorities of the Republic of Bashkortostan fully align with the federal center's policy.

⁶ Radiy Khabirov met with the fighters of the Bashkir battalion named after Minigali Shaimuratov. *Glava Respubliki Bashkortostan*, 26.01.2023. Available at: https://glavarb.ru/rus/press_serv/novosti/161393.html (accessed: 04.11.2023) (In Russian); Bashkir battalion named after Tagir Kusimov left Ufa for the place of combat training. *Glava Respubliki Bashkortostan*, 12.05.2023. Available at: https://glavarb.ru/rus/press_serv/vystupleniya/165296.html (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

CASE 4: NARRATIVE ABOUT AKHMET-ZAKI VALIDI

The commemoration of the image of Akhmet-Zaki Validi (Zeki Velidi Togan), who is an ambiguous symbol of Bashkir history, deserves separate consideration. The memory of A.-Z. Validi is a manifestation of antagonism between the national historical narrative and the regional one. The historical figure in question is perceived oppositely in the Republic of Bashkortostan and by the authorities of the Russian Federation.

In 2008, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bashkortostan presented a bust of Validi to St. Petersburg State University (SPbU), which was placed on the university campus and the Akhmet-Zaki Validi Centre for Turkic Studies was established⁷. According to the materials of the rector's meeting of SPbU from 22.01.2021⁸, the first appeal to check the legality of the placement of the bust was received in 2016. In 2019, SPbU submitted an appeal to the Prosecutor's Office requesting a legal assessment of the placement of the bust. The response of the Prosecutor's Office of Vasileostrovsky district of St. Petersburg decided to dismantle the bust due to Validi's involvement in assisting the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War, the University obeyed this decision⁹.

Now, let us explore the responses of representatives from various sectors of Bashkir society. The World Kurultai (Congress) of Bashkirs requested clarification and stated that there was no evidence of Validi's involvement in Nazi actions, following the Prosecutor's Office decision¹⁰. Additionally, a court case was held, seeking to overturn the bust demolition. The Third Court of Cassation of General Jurisdiction issued the final ruling on August 9, 2023. According to the court's published ruling¹¹, a resident of Beloretsk, Bashkir ASSR, filed a lawsuit with the Vasileostrovsky District Court of St. Petersburg seeking to protect the honor and dignity of A.-Z. Validi. The district court rejected the claim, and the St. Petersburg City Court upheld the decision. The ruling contains information provided by the Prosecutor's Office of the Vasileostrovsky District of St. Petersburg revealing details about A.-Z. Validi was involved in activities against the interests of the USSR, assisting the Nazis, and spreading racist ideas¹². Following

⁷ Akhmet-Zaki Validi Center for Turkic Studies opened in St. Petersburg University. *IA "Bashinform"*, 28.06.2008. Available at: <https://www.bashinform.ru/news/politics/2008-06-28/v-sankt-peterburgskom-universitete-otkrylsya-tsentr-tyurkskih-issledovaniy-imeni-ahmet-zaki-validi-2067164> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

⁸ Proceedings of the Rector's Meeting of 22.01.2021 no. 459. *Sankt-Peterburgskii gosudarstvennyi universitet*, 22.01.2021. Available at: <https://spbu.ru/openuniversity/documents/materialy-rektorskogo-soveschaniya-32p8> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ The Kurultai of Bashkirs spoke in defense of the bust of Ahmet-Zaki Validi in St. Petersburg. *RBK*, 20.01.2021. Available at: <https://ufa.rbc.ru/ufa/20/01/2021/600835879a7947a0aa6bff75> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

¹¹ Decision of the Third Cassation Court of General Jurisdiction in case 8G-13377/2023 [88-14310/2023] of 09.08.2023. *Tretii kassatsionnyi sud obshchei iurisdiktsii*, 14.06.2023. Available at: https://3kas.sudrf.ru/modules.php?name=sud_delo&srv_num=1&name_op=case&case_id=13847437&case_uid=673b8b6a-57bf-4727-a17c-28c28bafc867&new=2800001&delo_id=2800001 (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

¹² Ibid.

a court ruling, the decision to demolish Validi's bust on the grounds of St. Petersburg State University remains in effect.

However, on the territory of the Republic of Bashkortostan there is a significant number of material places of memory dedicated to Validi: 5 monuments, 2 memorial plaques, at least 8 streets, 1 avenue, 1 public garden. The National Library of Bashkortostan, a public award and a medal of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Bashkortostan bear his name [Aksenov, Andreev, 2021, p. 879]. The creation of these places of memory would be impossible without the authorization of the authorities of the Republic of Bashkortostan. However, in the official discourse of the Republic's leadership, Validi's image is absent as a permanent component of the memory policy narrative. According to the publication¹³ of *Idel.Realii**, activists of Bashkir national organizations in 2020 held an action in honor of the 130th anniversary of Validi's birth, during which accusations were made against the official authorities of the Republic for ignoring this memorable date, as well as the absence of a monument to this historical figure in Ufa.

Thus, this case is currently an example of the antagonism of the state and Bashkir memory narratives. Outside the Republic of Bashkortostan, law enforcement agencies prohibit the commemoration of the image of Akhmet-Zaki Validi because, in their opinion, it contradicts one of the key trends of the state historical policy: the fight against the rehabilitation of Nazism. In the Republic of Bashkortostan, however, there are several memorial sites associated with the image of Validi, and these sites attract local nationalists who demand a larger-scale memorialization of this historical figure because of his prominent merits as a Turkicologist. Based on this case study, we can also highlight the interaction between the state and ethno-regional memory policy: the commemoration of ambiguous symbols outside the region is prohibited, but in the region itself the federal authorities do not prevent the perpetuation of such symbols, provided that there is no excessive emphasis on the creation of new places of memory (during the preparation of this paper we did not find any information about the federal center's demands to the leadership of Bashkortostan to remove the name of Validi from the names of objects bearing his name).

CONCLUSION

The discourse of the politics of memory in the Republic of Bashkortostan has a dual nature, exhibiting both agonistic and antagonistic elements towards national narratives. This study analyses the portrayal of Salavat Yulaev, Zeki Velidi, the Bashkir ASSR, and the Great Patriotic War, which form the core of commemorative practices that shape the republic's memory policy discourse.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that the discourse of historical and symbolic politics of the Republic of Bashkortostan is, in many ways, agonistic in relation to the federal policy of memory. However, we believe that the discourse of mem-

¹³ Bashkir activists honored the memory of Ahmet-Zaki Validi in Ufa. *Idel.Realii**, 10.12.2020. Available at: <http://www.idelreal.org/a/30994408.html> (accessed: 04.11.2023). (In Russian)

* Is recognized in the Russian Federation as an organization performing the functions of a foreign agent.

ory politics in this region uses the frame of national narratives, focusing on aspects that strengthen the Bashkir ethnic identity.

For instance, the antagonistic discourse may involve the image of Zeki Velidi, who retains a positive connotation for the Bashkir ethnic group, but is seen negatively at the federal level. We assume that if Bashkortostan's memory discourse's central narratives align with the federal narratives, the Russian authorities will disregard the existence of antagonistic elements.

Existing gaps in the national narrative enable the political elites in the Republic of Bashkortostan to employ imagery that reinforces the ethnic identity of the Bashkirs, while upholding the national-civic identity formation policy.

Based on case analysis, two models of interaction between memory narratives can be formulated at the state and ethnic region levels, depending on narrative type. Historically and culturally significant symbols within these narratives can form a particular interpretation of social reality, reflecting the interests of various levels of authority.

State-approved historical images are used by ethnic regional elites to reinforce ethnic identity claims, with each symbolic element's content transformed to serve the intended purpose. This model is characterized as agonistic, as it maintains the symbolic form and frame, its content changes, which allows incompatible narratives to coexist in the same discursive field.

For state-rejected narratives, a different model is applied. The spatial distribution of these narratives is limited within the region. This interaction can be called antagonistic because there is a dominant narrative that suppresses the contradictory narrative in the majority of the state's discursive realm.

The examined models, following further investigation with a greater volume of empirical data, have the capacity for scrutinizing antagonistic and agonistic discourse within different ethnic regions of the Russian Federation.

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ДИСКУРС ПОЛИТИКИ ПАМЯТИ В СОВРЕМЕННОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКЕ БАШКОРТОСТАН*

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Данная работа посвящена выявлению особенностей дискурса политики памяти в современной Республике Башкортостан. Политика памяти, объединяя значимые для сообщества символы и события прошлого, формулирует и воспроизводит определенный нарратив, транслирующий интерпретацию исторической социальной реальности для управления коллективной памятью. Также данное направление политики оказывает значительное влияние на формирование национальной и гражданской идентичности. Республика Башкортостан является полиэтничным и поликонфессиональным регионом, имеющим длительную историю. Дискурс политики памяти в Башкортостане формируется в результате взаимного влияния различных факторов, включая советское наследие, политику национальной идентичности и географическое положение региона. В работе рассматриваются ключевые дискурсивные элементы, формирующие политику памяти в Республике Башкортостан, в том числе роль исторических нарративов, культурных символов и коммеморативных практик. Кроме того, исследуются способы, посредством которых политика памяти используется для создания и согласования различных форм идентичности, включая национальную и гражданскую. В рамках исследования проведен анализ конкретных кейсов деятельности элит Республики Башкортостан по коммеморации мест памяти; в работе выявлены ключевые для политико-исторического дискурса Башкортостана «места памяти» (в понимании П. Нора). Выводы, сделанные по итогам проведенного исследования, демонстрируют, что дискурс политики памяти в Башкортостане представляет собой противоречивое и динамичное поле, отражающее сложное взаимодействие различных факторов. Данное обстоятельство подчеркивает необходимость дальнейших исследований по этой теме, особенно в отношении роли политики памяти в конструировании политической и этнической идентичности в регионе.

Ключевые слова: политика памяти, Республика Башкортостан, дискурс, этническая идентичность, исторические рассказы, культурные символы, коммеморативные практики.

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