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Politics of Memory as a Tool of Civic Culture Formation: The Russian Specifics and Regional Aspects

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to describe the specifics of the formation of the discourse of politics of memory in Russia and to determine the means of its instrumentalization as applied to the processes of development of civic culture, aimed at unification of people around the common historical heritage. Regarding methodology, the potential of cultural & sociological approach, constructivism, the theory of social and symbolic capital, and inter-disciplinary analysis of monumental policy and its role in consideration of civic culture and creation of significant images of historical past is used. The authors dwell on the key directions in the spheres of studying the politics of memory in Russia as a tool of formation of civic culture in the context of global and regional trends; determine the specifics of politics of memory in Russia and define the state's role in this process in view of the tendencies of formation of civic nation and unification around the common historical heritage; describe the complexities which might be faced by politics of memory in South of Russia – which are largely predetermined by the ethnocultural differences; consider further perspectives of development of research of politics of memory and civic culture in Russia within the influence of the “Eastern European discourse of memory” and other regional narratives.

Keywords: Politics of memory, Wars of memory, Civic culture, Culture of memory, Monumental policy, Legitimacy, State and civil society, Historical heritage.

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1. Introduction

Modern Russian citizens – especially youth – remain an important object of the national policy that is aimed at the formation of civic culture, which could ensure a high level of solidarity of Russians based on the common memory of the most important events of the Russian history. It is possible to state that “after more than twenty years after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia is still not able to form a concept of national history that conforms to the tasks of creating its new collective identity” (Malinova, 2012). It is obvious that the politics of memory, which is based mainly on the state’s resources, could be successful in case of support from the actively forming civic culture. At least, in the issues of stimulation of national memory, the government should be oriented at civic initiatives from “below”, which help in the issue of inter-generation solidarity. Thus, the most successful civil initiative of recent years in Russia is the project “Immortal regiment”, within which regular events aimed at preservation of memory of the Great Patriotic War are conducted.

Historical politics of memory has recently acquired a rather controversial character, caused primarily by the Russia's Soviet heritage and the irreversible process of destruction of the Yalta-Potsdam order (Miller, 2016), which used to establish the rules of interpretation and representation of the main events of the 20th century’s history – especially, the ones connected to a complex of causes of World War II, its main stages, and lessons for future generations. From this point of view, the issues connected to politics of memory are important due to the fact that the Russian society does not have a consensus regarding the heritage of the "Imperial" and "Soviet" periods of the Russian history, including the era of "Stalinism". It is treated mainly as a stage of Russia's history in the conditions of a row of repressions against Russians, but is also positively evaluated by some people, as it is considered to be the period of the highest power and geopolitical success of the communist project. Victory over Nazi Germany, which became possible due to military mobilization of Soviet people conducted by the "Stalin regime", remains the key ideological concept and the basis of all aspects of patriotic education of the Russian youth. It should be noted that attempts of certain researchers to give criticism regarding a range of heroic episodes of the Great Patriotic War are negatively treated by the representatives of public authorities. However, well-balanced politics of memory on the Russian historical past should be conducted based on a wide civil consensus, which would exclude a vivid “witch hunt” and exposure of political opponents under the pretense of the search for “enemies of the state”.

Studying politics of memory as a specter of measures and tools of formation of civic culture should include clarification of the specifics of its influence on the representatives of the young generation, whose socialization takes place in the conditions of the information society. It is also necessary to take into account the cultural specifics of people of the South of Russia, which might order the analysis of the studied problem and correct politics of memory in the region. Thus, an urgent problem is permanent attempts of rehabilitation and even “glorification” of Cossack military units, which participated in WWII as part of Nazi Germany’s SS.

2. Methodological Framework

Research of politics of memory in the context of formation of civic culture of the modern Russian society has an interdisciplinary character, which was formed at the crossing of a range of humanitarian disciplines: social sciences, history, and political philosophy. In this paper, we use methodological approaches that are presented by cultural sociology (Alexander, 2016; Alexander & Mast, 2006), the theory of social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 2007; Bourdieu, 2016), constructivism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2000; Tishkov, 2013; Anderson, 2016), and studies of symbolic and monumental politics (Gill, 2011; Forest & Johnson, 2011).

The above approaches allow presenting the studied problem of functioning of historical memory as a battlefield of the struggle between various symbols, which might have several contradictory interpretations. The role of politics of memory in formation of civic culture is an undeniable fact of building a nation and forming the institutional environment of civic society. We also use a view of A.I. Miller that “during West Europe’s consideration of the growing tension in the relations between Russia and its neighbors, the Eastern European mechanisms of collective memory and construction of identity dominated” (Miller, 2016). Moreover, the national politics of memory in modern Russia is largely an attempt to create an alternative discourse of understanding the Soviet heritage, which is a reaction to the dominating Eastern European tendencies of interpretation of the main historical events of the 20th century. Other works of Russian researchers that are devoted to this problem include a monograph and papers of O.Y. Malinova (2012, 2015), V.A. Achkasov (2015), etc.

3. Results

3.1. Studying the role of politics of memory in formation of civic culture as an object of scientific discourse

In the space of the scientific and research discourse, the issue of studying the politics of memory and its role in formation of civic culture of the modern Russian society is very important; however, the number of scientific works devoted to this problem is small (Methodological issues of studying politics of memory..., 2018) – especially in view of the implemented inter-disciplinary projects, which result is a factual synthesis of knowledge on the creation of historical memory for the important symbols of civic culture. At least, the attempt of the search for such symbols of civic unity and solidarity, which are far from full identification with the state machine, is the top-priority sphere of culture research. So it is possible to state that the scientific discourse “politics of memory” is at the stage of its formation and institutionalization – thus, it is open for attraction of specialists from various spheres of humanitarian knowledge.

It is obvious that developed collective and individual historical memory is – in the socio-cultural sense – an important resource of interpretation and understanding of the current public problems, which could be harmoniously embedded into the discourse of building a nation. Politics of memory is in the center of formation of a nation – the one that changes the vector of its own development. A “traumatic experience”, which is found in the national memory, could be useful for future generations – e.g., for creating a positive (civic) identity. There is an existing dilemma as to “which past is worthy of preservation or oblivion, dividing the politics of memory into two blocks (policy of memorizing and policy of oblivion), which are interconnected” (Bespalova, 2017). It is clear that the institutions that have symbolic power decide the fate of the national memory, perform a choice in favor of actualization of certain events of the past, or in favor of ousting the “inconvenient” episodes of history, which could be treated in a negative way for the current authorities. However, it is important to remember that the historical past has a lot of unpleasant episodes, which could diminish the achievements of certain historical persons, and, especially, of their descendants.

Thus, collective memory is a good environment for the development of civic culture, which forms based on a dialog between generations. “Ability to recollect and identify oneself with the own past gives sense, goal, and value to existence... Even very painful memories remain the most important part of emotional history; people who have memory losses and are bereaved of recollections of their past, do not have an identity” (Lowenthal, 2004). Thus, the formation of civic culture envisages development and stimulation of historical memory for creating conditions for establishment of a compromised identity, in which the creation of an important role belongs to the state and civil society. Of course, there should be discussions on controversial issues of politics of memory that would help

finding the essence of the existing problem and the means of overcoming it with the help of “psychological analysis” of culture.

Deficit of civic culture in Russia is largely caused by the problems of building a nation, including the “divided image” of the past. Politics of memory often turns to the present-day problems, trying to find answers to the important questions in the historical past. Thus, Pierre Bourdieu said that “the most typical strategies of construction are those which are aimed at the retrospective reconstruction of the past, being applied to the needs of the present, or at construction of the future through creative forecasting, which is to limit the open sense of the present” (Bourdieu, 2007). Here it is necessary to take into account the opposition of various groups that have their own alternative tradition and that do not want to accept the official historical treatment – however, they could strive for its correction and specification.

On the whole, researchers who start studying the politics of memory and the perspectives of implementing its results into the civic culture of the Russian society should be ready for affective emotions that always accompany its integration in the mass consciousness. “Ideas that influence modern societies are not cognitive storages of confirmed facts; they are symbols that continue to be formed by deep emotional impulses and determined by limitations” (Alexander, 2013). The practice shows that formation of civic culture that could ensure a wide consensus and solidarity at the national scale faces an active opposition of symbols which remain in “hostile” dispositions. In Russia, a lot of attempts to condemn the “Stalin regime” and the confirmed (mass) repressions of various groups of population face an active opposition from the political “defendants of the Soviet heritage”, which use the patriotic banners of the “left opposition”.

The presence of civic culture is still largely determined by the citizens’ ability for self-organization in solving everyday and important issues of politics, which are directly connected to the future of the country’s political structure. Ethnic identities, combined with historical traumas (often dealt with the whole ethnic groups), complicate the politics of memory even more. “The multicultural society’s current task of “managing the variety” leads to the questions of agenda, risks, and limitations of the politics of identity and possibilities of its reformatting for solving this political & managerial task. The state gets into a “trap”: effectiveness of such politics is determined by the involvement and competition in “fighting for identity” of different subjects of the political process, and the state – often in opposition to bureaucratic group interests – has to “demonopolize” this field” (Semenenko, 2016).

It is possible to conclude that in the process of implementing the memorial programs in modern Russia one should not disregard the ethnic and regional peculiarities of the country’s regions, which might be different from most “central Russian” regions.

3.2. Cultural specifics of the South of Russia due to the practices of institutionalization of politics of memory: regional aspects

Specifics of the South of Russia are largely predetermined by its geographical and strategic location, borders with other countries, and rather wide ethnic structure. As compared to other regions, Rostov Oblast and Krasnodar Krai joined the Russian Federation not long ago – which is not forgotten yet by the local population. Thus, there are various forms of Cossack separatism – cultural and political – in the region. This is not a secret for representatives of the scientific community (Serikov, 2014). Accordingly, the politics of memory in this region should pay more attention to the permanent integration of the Cossack history in the common course of development of the Russian civic nation. These recommendations are also true for treatment of the Great Patriotic War, as the general heroic card of historical memory is complicated here by the stable patterns of memories of a large (especially

in the sense of formation of the post-Soviet “Cossack culture”) part of Cossacks who collaborated with Nazi Germany (unlike the Vlasovites, they were in the “privileged position” in the Nazi military and political machine.

Despite the authoritative opinion that Cossacks (primarily, Don and Kuban) were an important tool of the imperial colonization of the whole South of Russia, the Cossacks' cultural memory retains the ideas of their own (lost) political independent and even sovereignty (which was canceled by the Russian Empire during the reign of Peter the Great). That's why researchers note that such forced “branding of Rostov Oblast or Krasnodar Krai as the Cossack regions in the context of their opposition to “rookies” and “katsaps” might give regional identity a destructive character from the point of view of Russia's integrity and general Russian identity” (Patriotic education of the youth of Rostov Oblast..., 2013). A lot of bearers of the modern Cossack identity think that their ethnicity and culture are very much different from representatives of the Russian ethnicity, which gives them a potential basis and right for creating one or several republics (similarly to republics of North Caucasus – Ingushetia, Chechnya, Ossetia, etc.). Moreover, since the late 80's – early 90's, these tendencies of cultural (and partly political) autonomization of the region had been growing and started to decline only after Crimea became a part of Russia in 2014.

The negative aspects of identity in the South of Russia, caused by painful historical memory, should be considered as marginal – as compared to the emotions of the main part of the region's population regarding the Great Patriotic War. However, these negative aspects of the treatment of own historical heritage complicate the picture of historical memory in the context of the studied region, creating preconditions for ignoring a range of events of the traumatic character that took place in the recent past. “At present, manifestation of such regional identity and extreme forms of “local” patriotism are marginal, but the potential for increase – especially, in the conditions of aggravation of the socio-economic situation and inter-ethnic relations – does exist” (Patriotic education of the youth of Rostov Oblast..., 2013). A lot of cultural resources of Rostov Oblast and Krasnodar Krai are still built around the brands of Cossack culture and identity, which at the official level is presented as a foundation of public authorities, stimulating the preservation of “traditional values” (Slavic population of the region) and being an integrator for public service and local police functions.

3.3. Perspectives of interdisciplinary studies of politics of memory in the context of formation of civic culture

Politics of memory remains an important tool for constructing various segments of social reality which need the skills of working with the past. However, the connection between civic culture and national policy in solving a range of issues of historical heritage will remain a central topic of scientific studies. Here it is possible to state that historical memory is a sort of social (symbolic/cultural) capital, managing which is not easy. According to V.A. Tishkov, “Russian nation, as a form of collective identity, is built from above, overcoming internal and external counteractions” (2013). That's why the role of state participation and investing in the politics of memory in Russia will be very important – especially, in view of the international context and the trends of “decommunization”, which are peculiar for most Eastern European countries. In recent years, Russian mass media have been focusing on “painful” aspects of “decommunization” – dismantling of monuments to heroic deeds of Soviet armies, which showed as only as liberators of “fraternal peoples”.

Most researchers realize that politics of memory is a variety of investments in social capital. A modern Russian researcher of political processes V. A. Achkasov is sure that “rewriting of history takes place everywhere, history has long been serving the political purposes, and there are regular attempts of adoption of an official version of the past, including at the legislative level with an appeal to the

collective memory of conformist social groups – as a guarantor of the correctness of the official version of history. Therefore, historical policy cannot be eliminated. It is easy to understand the desire of any country's authorities to confirm their actions with historical substantiation, for history is always used by ideology as a "servant of politics" (2015). It should be noted that versions of the official past, which are the foundation of civic culture, are confirmed at the legislative level, and attempts of public denial of crimes of the past might be punished with imprisonment.

That's why in the sphere of construction of social reality researchers will always face the ideological "wars around memory"; for the scientific purposes, they will have to avoid bias – especially when public authorities stimulate patriotic discourses. "It should be noted that Eastern European 'counter-narrative' challenged not only Russian but also Western European regime of memory, as the striving to put the crimes of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes on the same board contradicted the idea of the uniqueness of the Nazi crimes and exclusiveness of the Holocaust" (Malinova, 2015). Thus, it is possible to say that reaction to the politics of memory that is implemented by the leading circles of Eastern European countries is one of the main factors that stimulate and actualize studies on this problem and is the landmark for a lot of Russian scholars.

As a result, we see a picture of symbolic struggle or memory wars, which involve political powers of various countries, which seek their own – often contradictory – interests. Thus, the main actors of formation of historical memory from countries of Eastern Europe (especially, Poland) wish to represent themselves as the main victims of WWII (attacked by two regimes – Hitler's and Stalin's), but do not want to take partial blame for co-participation in the Holocaust, which is the structural component of the Western European narrative of collective responsibility for the performed crimes. The existing situation also influences the context of politics of memory in modern Russia, as the political elite of Russia is *against equaling* the German national-socialism, led by the Hitler regime, to "Stalinism" and the practices of communist internationalism. In the existing situation, researchers should preserve scientific sobriety and distance from "patriotic" or "anti-patriotic" arguments and accusatory speeches from different parties.

4. Discussion

Analysis of the instrumental aspects of politics of memory, which are used in formation of civic culture and national identity, allows stating that formation of memory discourses takes place in the constant struggle between various images of the "open" past. The main attention of Western researchers is paid to politics of memory in the post-communist countries, in which substantial changes took place in the recent 25-30 years. Thus, Canadian Scholars B. Forest and J. Johnson (2011) devoted their study to monuments, analysis of their installation and dismantling for acquitting legitimacy and political influence, and overcoming "obsolete" cultural identities that do not conform to the image of own "updated" (post-communist) nations. Monuments are considered to be incorporated symbolic capital – i.e., memory in bodies, which have a vivid symbolic value (both positive and socially acceptable and negative, with clear "toxic" content). Regarding the situation in post-Soviet Russia, the Australian researcher G. Gill (2011) notes that even in the period of presidency of V. Putin Russia was not able to create an integrated narrative (and targeted practices of formation of civic culture) that would harmoniously "pack" the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet history in the course of the unified politics of memory.

At present, there are global trends of politics of memory, which are often used as an important tool for forming and supporting civic culture. A special interest for Russian researchers is posed by the European context of politization and institutionalization of historical memory (or "memory wars"), which directly influences the development of discourse of historical memory in Russia. "In the 21st

century, the interaction of the Western European and Eastern European cultures of memory led to the radical transformation of the European politics of memory on the whole. It is possible to state that the Eastern European model, focused on suffering of the nation and the motive of existential threat, overcame the Western European model, in which the main role belonged to the topic of own guilt and responsibility. This is partially due to the fact that the elites of the leading Western European countries did not consider it necessary to confront new EU members on the issues of politics of memory. This might be explained by the fact that in the recent ten years the confidence in success of the EU – as an integration project – was put in doubt in ‘old Europe’ (Miller, 2016). A.I. Miller said that “discourse of victim” (victim of two totalitarian regimes) turned out to be more profitable and popular among people than the “discourse of own guilt and responsibility”.

Regarding the formation of civic culture and solidarity in the issues of historical heritage, researchers note inconsistency of Russia’s public authorities in politics of memory and possible implementation of long-term socio-cultural projects within it. Thus, O.Y. Malinova notes that “collective past is rather an object of situational ‘use’ than an object of targeted ‘construction’”. It is obvious that politicians that speak on behalf of Russia prefer to avoid “difficult past” and unambiguous evaluations of historical events, processes, and figures which cause discussions in society (Malinova, 2012). It is especially true for evaluations of the Soviet policy before the end of WWII and the period of so called repressions, which were conducted in several waves and ended only after the death of J. Stalin. On the other hand, hot and ineffective discussions regarding such figures of the Russian history as Lenin and Stalin are often stimulated by the Russian authorities – so uncertainty in the issues of historical memory allows the leading elites to be above the oppositional and radical treatments.

Modern Russian researchers could get into a “topicality trap”, initiated by public authorities. According to V.A. Achkasov, “national interests, articulated by the political elite, very often are reversed, and historians who are oriented at the governments, have to change their views according to the “general line”. That’s why it is vitally important to form and institutionalize the environment that would allow for doubts and discussions on the debatable issues of history and for competing interpretations of historical events and facts” (Achkasov, 2015). Formation of the discussion environment around the country’s historic heritage should be accompanied by creation of the conditions for implementing the educational programs for establishing the memory of the events that are important for development of civic culture.

Certain scholars note a decrease of public interest to the “age of Stalinism” in Russia” for it is easier to oust traumatic and unclear moments of the historical past into the sphere of unconscious mind. “The contents of public agenda in the sphere of politics of memory underwent significant changes. The attitude towards the Stalin era loses the role of the main object of arguments and discussions. This does not mean that society has fully clarified the issues connected to the tragic experience of that era. As the public authorities stopped the useless – from the point of view of their political interest – attempts of “normalization” of Stalinism and prepares a state program of perpetuation of the memory of the communist regime, the tension in this sphere decreased” (Miller, 2013). Besides, it is necessary to remember that the modern Russian state and public authorities are successors of the USSR, which gained the peak of its geopolitical power in the “late Stalinist” age.

5. Conclusion

Thus, it has been determined that politics of memory is rather effective as a tool of formation of civic culture, but, at the same time, it is subject to permanent influence of the situation created by the elite of the leading countries. It is possible to conclude that historical memory of whole nations is an open socio-cultural reality or a system of symbols, which is capable of update and revision, and

which is often conducted “in the interests” of the state, society, or its certain groups. Moreover, different regions of the world have rather similar tendencies, which consist in the general striving for controlling politics of memory – namely, legislative adoption of “correct” treatments of historical heritage.

Researchers note that politics of memory in Russia is inconsistent due to “division of public awareness”, which is caused by the contradictory attitude to the “Soviet” heritage. The modern civic culture in Russia – as well as the country and its nationhood (including the main symbols) – exists on the ruins of two Empires (Soviet and Russian), which is an important condition of a dissonance in understanding and building a consistent interpretation scheme of national memory. The Russian politics of memory – especially the one connected to construction of the image of the Great Patriotic War in the modern civic culture – confronts, and, at the same time, depends on the processes de-communization and “symbolic memory wars” (including the “war” against monuments to Soviet soldiers), which take place in Eastern Europe and represent the Soviet heritage only in negative aspects.

Studying politics of memory as an effective tool of formation of civic culture in the country, it is necessary to take into account large socio-cultural differences, including the ones connected to interpretation of the common history, found in certain regions of Caucasus and the South of Russia, Volga region and Siberia. It becomes clear that development of the ethnic culture could contradict civic culture – especially in the case of inter-cultural tension between ethnic minorities and majorities. “The problem of unity of the historical myth on the territory of Russia comes to the foreground”, because in a lot of national republics the politics of memory contradicts the task of formation of all-Russian identity” (Miller, 2013). The existing situation is peculiar for a lot of “small” nations and republics of the Russian Federation, which population is mobilized largely according to the ethnic principle, which is also a landmark for other ethnic groups, which strive to have their own republics.

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