

Historical Policy of Local Communities: Formal-Legal and Informal Foundations

Mikhail Yurievich Martynov*

Doctor of Political Science, Professor of the Department of Political Science, Surgut State University, Russia

Abstract. The article examines the historical policy of institutionalized and non-institutionalized actors as tools for the formation of national identity and interethnic tolerance. Local communities, whose commemorative practices are family memory, as well as discourses on social networks, are considered as non-institutionalized factors. The research area is Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Area - Yugra. The methods used are content analysis of regulatory documents, as well as in-depth interviewing.

Institutionalized and non-institutionalized means of historical policy are considered. It is concluded that historical policy implemented by local communities in the sphere of formation of interethnic tolerance has normative and legal support and is systematic.

The differences between the narratives of historical policy at the local level and the official state discourse are noted. Informal practices of forming collective ideas about the past are not only trusted at the cognitive level, but also have a much deeper impact on the emotional sphere of people, appealing to images of family or local history. And this often turns out to be a factor that has a deeper impact on the formation of collective ideas about the past.

As a result, in some cases the narratives of state historical policy are simply ignored by collective memory, while in others they can acquire a significantly different semantic content. Even in cases where collective ideas about the past seem to coincide with the official narrative, the concepts they operate with can have a significantly different semantic content compared to the indoctrinal position. As a result of this kind of aberration of historical memory, the connotations of historical events acquire completely different meanings in people's memory compared to the official discourse.

Keywords: historical politics, politics of memory, collective representations, local communities, identity, interethnic harmony, Russian Federation.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to previous hopes, the first quarter of the 21st century turned out to be filled with numerous conflicts. The driving force behind these conflicts in most cases is ethnic separatism. The reasons for its growth are economic changes. The emergence of multinational states in the previous era was associated with the formation of national markets that bound peoples, often quite different in their ethnic roots and ethnic cultures, together with economic ties. However, the processes of globalization that had begun started to destroy these seemingly strong ties quickly. It became more profitable for ethnic groups and elites that had previously formed a single state to free themselves from the control of the central government and to join international economic relations as independent entities. This is how, for example, the collapse of the USSR occurred in its time. Moreover, separatist tendencies do not end there and can continue on the territory of newly formed states, dividing their peoples. They, in turn, strive to become independent or to go under the guardianship of other states, which gives rise to new conflicts.

In these conditions, the role of economic motives for preserving state unity is declining, central governments are forced to seek other mechanisms for this, since economic ties, although important, are not the only prerequisite for preserving a common nation. The historically formed identification of citizens with a given nation, which has a socio-psychological nature and represents an imagination of unity with other people is equally important. British political scientist B. Anderson directly calls a nation an "imagined community". This means that in order to preserve a nation, a socio-psychological instrument is needed that can support this imagination of unity. Such an instrument has become an appeal to collective ideas about a common historical past (Semenenko *et al.*, 2017).

The concept of collective representations of the past was formulated by the German sociologist M. Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 2007) a hundred years ago, but today, when it is necessary to mix the destructive consequences of globalization for state identity, it has received a second life.

The struggle to preserve identity becomes a key factor in preserving statehood in the context of globalization. The importance of forming collective representations of the past for success in this struggle has given rise to a whole direction of modern politics –

*Address correspondence to this author at the Doctor of Political Science, Professor of the Department of Political Science, Surgut State University, Russia; E-mail: martinov.mu@gmail.com

the politics of memory or historical politics. Its theorists include such modern researchers as P. Nory, P. Ricoeur, J. Assmann, A. Assmann and others.

Since the constructivist methodology emphasized the active role of the subject in the production of collective ideas about the past, these ideas themselves were identified with constructed myths (Assman, 2014). Therefore, the politics of memory quickly moved from the field of purely scientific research to the political sphere, turning into an ideological instrument of politics (Fadeeva, 2020), and then generally received a completely tangible legal basis. In different countries, legal acts regulating the attitude to the historical past are increasingly being adopted. Previously, these included documents aimed at preserving the historical heritage or establishing memorable dates. However, at the end of the 20th century, there was an increasing need not only to preserve and protect historical memory, but also to use it as a targeted symbolic policy. These norms began to be established by special laws and provide for administrative and criminal liability for their violation. The first such law is probably the French law, named after its initiator Jean-Claude Gaysot, "On the suppression of any racist, anti-Semitic or xenophobic actions", adopted on July 13, 1990, No. 90-615. Special laws directly prohibiting public denial or justification of crimes committed by the Nazis have been adopted in Austria, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, France, Switzerland, Canada, Israel, Portugal, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and a number of other countries around the world.

The new version of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, approved in 2020, suggests that the state "ensures the protection of historical truth. Diminishment of the significance of the people's feat in defending the Fatherland is not permitted" (Article 67.1)¹.

The Criminal Code of the Russian Federation establishes liability for distorting the memory of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945. The ideas of strengthening the state as a condition for the survival of the nation based on an appeal to the heroic past, the need to protect sovereignty and independence ultimately constituted the official discourse of state ideology (Avksentiev & Aksyumov, 2024). In all these cases, we are not talking about the individual right of

an individual to historical memory, as a symbolic image of the past, but about collective memory. Therefore, the very existence of the concept of "historical truth" and the corresponding codification of narratives of historical memory set the task of forming official narratives of the historical past. It is no coincidence that commemorative practices in the majority turned out to be affiliated with state historical policy.

Russian scholars have repeatedly turned to the study of this official discourse of post-Soviet history of Russia, using, among other things, the annual presidential addresses to the Federal Assembly as a source. In particular, it is noted that the first such narrative model, which emerged back in the 1990s, was a critical assessment of the Soviet era and the interpretation of the Soviet political regime as totalitarian and criminal (Malinova, 2016). The Soviet era was recognized as a "failure" in Russian history. For example, in the address of President B. Yeltsin in 1996, "the mobilization Soviet model was harshly criticized, which, in his opinion, was unviable" (Bagdasaryan *et al.*, 2021).

The reason for such a negative interpretation of recent history is quite simple. Russia's transition from socialism to a liberal economy and market in the 1990s was accompanied by a process of unprecedented appropriation of huge state property by a relatively small group of people. This process required legitimization, which implied condemnation of the previous socialist historical stage for its rejection of the principle of private property. The declaration of this path of development as a dead end legitimized the process of privatization.

Since the 2000s, changes have been taking place in the Russian official historical narrative, with the concept of the state as the main historical value and the condition for the preservation of the nation is gaining ground (Bagdasaryan *et al.*, 2021). Since then, The appeal to the heroic past and the need to protect sovereignty have since then constituted the main discourse of historical politics. It was within the framework of this narrative that a national identification symbol was formed - the Victory in the Great Patriotic War. However, this event itself is considered outside the historical context. Attention is focused on the heroism of soldiers and home front workers, but at the same time, such factors of victory as the advantages of a centralized socialist economy and the moral and political unity of society, based on the absence of

¹Constitution of the Russian Federation // Official Internet portal of legal information. URL: <http://pravo.gov.ru> (date of access 05.05.2025).

property stratification and the ideology of social justice under socialism, are eliminated from the narrative.

Thus, the political elite that controls the symbolic means of memory management, in addition to the goal of forming a national identity, also pursues a second, private goal: the legitimization of its own power. By broadcasting a historical narrative, it constructs it as a mythologized concept of the past, ensuring the legitimization of its actions in the present and in the future. In fact, historical politics turns into manipulative practices aimed at "using state administrative and financial resources in the sphere of history and memory politics in the interests of the ruling elite" (Miller, 2012).

Most authors consider the state as the main actor in historical policy (Popova & Grishin, 2024). However, collective ideas about the past are not a direct projection of the official discourse of power, but are formed by a whole range of channels from the education system to family memory. Among these channels, historical policy implemented by local communities is of particular interest.

The discourse of historical policy of local communities can act in an institutionalized form, for example, in the form of memorial policy of local authorities and public organizations. The subjects of such policy at the local level can be local government bodies, the business community, local party organizations, non-profit public organizations, ethnic communities, local media. But collective ideas about the past can also be formed in the form of non-institutionalized discourse, for example, by means of family memory or discourses in social networks. Local communities act as a relatively independent subsystem of mnemonic activity, and play an important role in the formation of identity by means of memory policy "from below" (Hirst & Coman, 2018).

According to our hypothesis, local communities act as relatively independent subjects of this policy, and are capable of forming a discourse that both supports the official historical narrative and forms an alternative one that contradicts it. If at the highest echelons of power the political elite often considers the use of historical policy for the purpose of ensuring its own legitimization more important than the task of forming a national identity, then for local communities, which are polyethnic in their overwhelming majority, this function associated with legitimization is not essential, but the preservation of interethnic harmony based on the construction of a national identity stays vital.

RESEARCH METHODS

The territory of the study was the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Area - Yugra. This subject of the Russian Federation is one of the strategic regions of Russia, ensuring the energy security of the country and being the largest oil-producing region of the state and the world. The demographic features of the autonomous region are the presence of indigenous groups of the North in the population, as well as the generally multinational composition of the population, due to increased migration activity. The waves of migration that swept through the region several times inevitably influenced the formation of collective ideas about the past. This made the task of forming a national, macropolitical identity especially relevant.

To test the hypothesis, it was supposed to compare the narratives formed by the official discourse, on the one hand, and the historical policy of local communities, on the other. The sources for studying the institutionalized historical policy at the local level were the normative legal acts regulating this policy at the municipal level and reports on the events held. The normative legal framework of all 22 municipalities of Yugra was analyzed. The objectives of the content analysis were to determine the main actors of policy in the sphere of interethnic relations and historical policy in local communities and the structure of their relations, to clarify the directions, forms and methods of their activities, as well as to assess the level of systematicity and semantic integration of policy in this area. Procedurally, in accordance with the methodology of content analysis, the recording of mentions of the key words "interethnic harmony", "identity", "memory" was formalized in associative word forms.

Non-institutionalized aspects of the historical policy of local communities related to the functioning of social networks and the transfer of family memory were studied using in-depth interviews. In-depth interviewing was carried out in January-February 2025 using the method of focused individual interviews (N=37). The survey participants included respondents of different ages, genders, occupations, and places of residence (Surgut, Khanty-Mansiysk, Nizhnevartovsk, Lyantor, Berezovsky District, Surgut District).

RESULTS OBTAINED

The content analysis included 84 regulatory documents (municipal programs, orders, decrees of heads of administrations and municipal authorities) of

municipal entities of the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Region, regulating activities in the field of interethnic relations and memory policy at the local level. These documents can be divided into four groups.

The first group includes normative acts that regulate relations between subjects of municipal policy in this area, directions and methods of their interaction.

The most important documents here are resolutions or orders on the creation of coordinating councils, the task of which is either the regulation of interethnic relations and the interaction of municipal authorities with national-religious associations and national-cultural autonomies (Khanty-Mansiysk, Surgut, Nizhnevartovsk, Nefteyugansk, Pyt-Yakh, Berezovsky District, Kondinsky District, Nizhnevartovsk District), or military-patriotic education (Surgut District, Sovetsky District, Uray, Nyagan).

The dominant actor of the local community in the sphere of harmonization of interethnic relations are municipal authorities. The functions of direct participation in this sphere are, as a rule, provided to three divisions of local administrations: youth policy, education and culture. The members of the coordinating councils include the leaders of national-religious associations operating within the boundaries of the local community. The status of the councils is quite high. They are usually headed by the mayor of the city, and their members include his deputies and directors of a number of leading departments of administrations and municipal institutions.

The second group of normative legal acts includes the documents of a programmatic, goal-setting nature, describing the tasks, expectations, resources, etc. of the activities of local actors in the sphere of harmonization of interethnic relations and historical policy. In a number of cases, municipal programs specify the tasks of ensuring interethnic harmony, as, for example, in the municipality of Surgut, where it also includes "support and development of the languages and culture of the peoples of the Russian Federation" and "ensuring the social and cultural adaptation of migrants."

In municipal units with complex situations in interethnic relations, they strive to create programs aimed at predicting the development of such situations and developing regulations for their regulation. An example is the program "On the procedure for the actions of local government bodies of the municipal

formation of the urban district of the city of Langepas when identifying emerging conflicts in the sphere of interethnic relations and actions aimed at eliminating their consequences."

In a number of cases, municipal units programs for the formation of patriotic consciousness are additionally created. Thus, in Surgut District, a plan of joint events for the civic-patriotic education of children and youth was adopted, and in the city of Khanty-Mansiysk - a plan of patriotic events in the city's educational institutions.

The third, rather numerous group of normative acts is aimed at creating favorable conditions for the functioning of civil society institutions and municipal institutions in this area. They concern, for example, the inclusion of the events dedicated to state and national holidays of the Russian Federation, memorable dates and events of Russian history and culture, events held by military-patriotic clubs, holding events with representatives of national diasporas and religious confessions, organizing work on social, linguistic, cultural adaptation of children of foreign citizens, on the prevention of terrorism and extremism, etc. in these organizations' work plans.

The fourth group consists of documents concerning memorial policy, local history and museum affairs. These may be orders of heads of local administrations on the creation of museums on the territory of a municipal unit, documents regulating the procedure for assigning names or titles of historical events to streets, squares, municipal institutions, etc.

In order to clarify the semantic content of historical policy in the sphere of formation of civil identity and historical policy at the local level, 24 reports on events held in municipal units during 2023 were analyzed. These are memorial events dedicated to memorable historical dates, youth competitions, competitions, festivals of patriotic content, national holidays of peoples living in the territory with an emphasis on a common joint and heroic history.

It turned out somewhat unexpectedly that only a small number of events were aimed at forming native, local, and regional identity. If reference to local history had been used, it was only as a material for constructing a national identity. Thus, the discourse of events dedicated to the memory of the war of 1941-1945 was the heroism of people who went to the front from a given locality, as well as the conscientious work

in the rear of members of the local community, regardless of their nationality, for the sake of national interests.

Another feature that we note is the exclusion from the context of local events of even a hint of ideological discussions and conflicts related to different interpretations of history, which are so characteristic of federal politics. The main function of memory politics is not the legitimization/delegitimization of power, but exclusively the construction of a national identity to achieve interethnic peace and social stability.

However, a person's historical memory is formed not only by institutionalized means of historical politics, but also by non-institutionalized means in the form of informal interpersonal connections, primarily in the family. Moreover, the discourse formed by them can differ significantly from the official one. This can be judged by the results of in-depth interviews.

Almost all of the 37 respondents we interviewed noted during the interview that the events of past history are discussed in one way or another in the family, as well as the participation of family members in those events.

According to one respondent, "the discussion of historical events in our family was like this: relatives told more living stories (food prices, housing, people who surrounded them) and about their ancestors." As another respondent explained, his understanding of history was "an unspoken understanding formed from fragmentary stories of elders, rare mentions in conversations and echoes of the past hanging in the air."

The most important and most frequently discussed with relatives historical event of this past was the Great Patriotic War, which affected each family in one way or another. Judging by the respondents' answers, this event is a kind of semantic core and reflects the understanding of the past as a complex interweaving of the heroic and tragic. The majority of respondents - 39.1% - are proud of the participation of their ancestors in the Great Patriotic War.

Moreover, in addition to the legitimate sense of pride, families share memories of the terrible trials that befell their relatives. One of the respondents recounts his great-grandfather's story about the war: *"It was scary, bullets were whistling over our heads. We were ordered to crawl under fire - we crawled, rise a little bit, and you were wounded. There was dirt all around,*

mixed with the blood of our comrades, the smell of burning and flesh, screams, groans. It is impossible to forget, it will remain in your memory forever. My great-grandfather was wounded twice, after the hospital he returned to the front. He never watched films about the war, he said that everything there was untrue."

A number of respondents' stories showed a lack of understanding of certain aspects of modern explanations of history. One of them said: *"My great-grandfather Pyotr Romanovich was born in Kuban, to a Cossack family. In 1925, the entire family was exiled to a Siberian village, not far from Surgut. Did he hate Stalin, who treated his family cruelly? It is unknown. But I know very well that he had a good attitude towards the Soviet government. He was a communist, he fought. In 1942, he was seriously wounded and sent home. All his life, he worked as a school principal and taught algebra and geometry. I do not understand why communists and socialism, which they defended from the fascists, are criticized today, if today we are also fighting the fascists. And among the Heroes of the Soviet Union, the majority were communists."*

Respondents were asked to express their opinions on the main stages of post-Soviet history. The highest rating was given to the era of Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1988). This result seems somewhat unexpected, since in the official historical narrative this last Soviet period was interpreted mainly in a negative light as an "unviable" model, which was important as part of the symbolic policy of legitimizing the new government.

The second era in terms of the number of positive assessments was the period of I. Stalin's rule (1924-1953). However, it is premature to classify respondents who positively assess I. Stalin's rule as inveterate "Stalinists". In fact, the connotations of these assessments are multi-layered and ambiguous. As it turned out, at least three images of I. Stalin appear in the perceptions of respondents. In the first, based on the descriptions of five respondents, he appears as a villain, guilty of the deaths of millions of people. In the eyes of a significantly larger number of respondents - fourteen people - he is an outstanding political figure and military leader. But the majority of interviewees - eighteen respondents - see Stalin as a man who managed to ensure social justice, protecting the "ordinary" man from bureaucrats and corrupt officials. *"He was a cruel man, but under him there was order, factories worked, houses were built. Under him, those who worked were respected, and thieves were put in prison,"* says one of the elderly respondents.

We encounter equally significant connotation differences in connotations assessments of the collapse of the USSR. The overwhelming majority assess this event as unequivocally negative. However, one should not rush to see in this a manifestation of "nostalgia for the imperial past", regrets about "lost territories", etc. The overwhelming majority of respondents do not think of this event in such categories at all. For almost all respondents, the collapse of the USSR is not so much a geopolitical as a socio-economic catastrophe associated with the loss of "good relations between nationalities", "decent work and education", etc.

In general, the Soviet era, with the exception of the time of N. Khrushchev, looks quite attractive in collective perceptions, judging by the interview results. In the respondents' answers, the advantages of the late Soviet period are seen not so much in the existence of social guarantees and greater confidence in the future, but in greater respect for people and their work. Let us cite the statement of one of the respondents: *"My grandfather started working as a driller, and an article was written in the central newspaper Trud for his work merits. My grandmother also proudly told me that he had an award for the development of Western Siberia. And for a long period of time, his name and portrait hung on the honor board in the Yuganskneftegaz production association. The scale of the tasks solved during that period is noted: 'These years became a golden age for Soviet citizens in terms of quality of life, large-scale industrial, infrastructure and scientific projects were implemented in the state.'"*

Another respondent explains and draws attention to the moral side: "Values were different at that time, material things were in the background. Everyone had the same things, furniture, clothes - it was easier to live. The doors to the apartment were not locked with ten locks, if you went to school - the key was under the doormat."

Almost all respondents who described the Soviet era positively highlighted the educational opportunities that opened up at that time. One of them said: *"My mother is proud that the Soviet education system gave her the opportunity to become a teacher, and she believes that this is her contribution to the future generation."*

The period of Perestroika and the rule of M. Gorbachev (1985-1991) occupies the penultimate place in the improvised rating of eras as viewed by

respondents, and the period of the 1990s and the rule of B. Yeltsin (1991-1999) closes it. Surprisingly, of all the participants in the in-depth interview, not one (!) found positive words when assessing the activities of M. Gorbachev and B. Yeltsin. The discourse of reviews of these leaders is dominated by the expressions "betrayal", "disgrace", "shame", "collapse", "theft", "banditry", "poverty". *"How we survived then, only God knows"*, one of the respondents sums up the 1990s.

CONCLUSIONS

Collective ideas about the past that are formed in the informal practices of local communities do not at all represent a set of narratives passed on to the next generation with clearly nostalgic connotations that give rise to mnemonic monsters like "imperial consciousness". Just as state historical policy at the national level has a real political goal, for example, the legitimization of power, the informal historical policy of local communities also reflects current social interests. Thus, a person's helplessness in the face of the market or power gives rise to the modeling of ways to protect against them in collective ideas, forcing people to look for their analogues in political systems and political figures of the past. Positive images of Stalin, the USSR, etc. are the interests of modern social groups "dressed in the clothes of the past". Since the interests of citizens and the authorities do not always coincide, the narratives of official historical policy and informal mnemonic practices of local communities do not always coincide either.

Even in cases where collective ideas about the past seem to coincide with the official narrative, the concepts they operate with may have a significantly different semantic content compared to the indoctrinal position. As a result of this kind of aberration of historical memory, the connotations of historical events, such as the collapse of the USSR or the assessment of entire eras, in particular the Soviet era, acquire completely different meanings.

In other cases, the narratives of state historical policy are simply ignored by collective memory. Thus, attempts to turn the concept of guilt and repentance for the "difficult past" into the dominant discourse have remained in vain, without leaving a noticeable trace in collective representations.

Moreover, informal practices of local communities have proven capable of forming discourses that contradict the official historical doctrine, and

successfully resist it. For example, in contrast to attempts to present the activities of B. Yeltsin, although accompanied by mistakes and failures, but on the whole as historically significant and positive, negative connotations prevail in collective representations.

The sources of informal mnemonic practices of local communities, the immediate environment in which individuals communicate, enjoy in their perception not only greater trust at the cognitive level, but also have a much deeper impact on the emotional sphere, appealing to images of family or local history. And this often becomes a factor that has a much deeper impact on the formation of collective ideas about the past.

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