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Moskwa Dagmara**THE INFLUENCE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S
HISTORICAL POLICY ON THE IDENTITY
OF THE MODERN RUSSIAN SOCIETY**

*Who controls the past controls the future.
Who controls the present controls the past.
George Orwell, «Nineteen Eighty-Four»*

The article examines the historical policy of the Russian Federation during the Vladimir Putin's (7.V.2000 – 7.V.2008) and Dmitry Medvedev's presidency (7.V.2008 – 7.V.2012). It investigates how the historical policy influences the modern Russian's perception of the past, their national identity and functioning in a society. This paper explores period from 2000 to 2012, because of its great importance. Just then the authorities, centred around the Russian President, have changed their attitude to using of the past in achieving political and social goals.

Keywords: Russian Federation, historical policy, collective memory, Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev.

Москва Д.**ВПЛИВ ІСТОРИЧНОЇ ПОЛІТИКИ РОСІЙСЬКОЇ
ФЕДЕРАЦІЇ НА ІДЕНТИЧНІСТЬ СУЧАСНОГО
РОСІЙСЬКОГО СУСПІЛЬСТВА**

У статті проведено аналіз історичної політики Російської Федерації протягом президентства Володимира Путіна (7.05.2000 – 7.05.2008 рр.) та Дмитра Медведєва (7.05.2008 – 7.05.2012). Автор досліджує, як історична політика впливає на сприйняття сучасними росіянами минулого, своєї національної ідентичності і функціонування в суспільстві. У цій статті розглядається період з 2000 по 2012 рік з огляду на його велике значення. Саме тоді влада, яка зосереджена навколо Президента Російської Федерації, змінила своє ставлення до використання минулого для досягнення політичних і соціальних цілей.

Ключові слова: Росія, історична політика, колективна пам'ять, Володимир Путін, Дмитро Медведєв.

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ВЛИЯНИЕ ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ РОССИЙСКОЙ ФЕДЕРАЦИИ НА ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ СОВРЕМЕННОГО РОССИЙСКОГО ОБЩЕСТВА

В статье проанализирована историческая политика Российской Федерации на протяжении президентства Владимира Путина (7.05.2000 – 7.05.2008 гг.) и Дмитрия Медведева (7.05.2008 – 7.05.2012). Автор исследует то, каким образом историческая политика влияет на восприятие современными россиянами прошлого, своей идентичности и функционирования в обществе. В этой статье рассмотрен период с 2000 по 2012 год, поскольку он имеет большое значение. Именно тогда власть, которая сконцентрирована вокруг Президента Российской Федерации, изменила свое отношение к использованию прошлого для достижения политических и социальных целей.

Ключевые слова: Россия, историческая политика, коллективная память, Владимир Путин, Дмитрий Медведев.

Introduction

At the beginning, I would like to make a few observations related to the terminology presented in the text. The study of historical policy is a serious challenge which – very often – has negative associations especially among historians (but not only). The basic term included herein – historical policy – appears as (quoting after a historian Alexei Miller) an interpretation of the history by the political institutions and attempts to convince the public to the truth of this interpretation in order to achieve some goals [1, p. 13–17]. Moreover, the historical policy shaped by the Russian authorities can be defined as a ‘conquest policy’. It means that the ruling elites impose on the society their own history interpretation and core values such as patriotism and pride of homeland [2, p. 56].

Another crucial term (if not even more important in that case) is collective memory. It is used by Polish sociologists, for instance Barbara Szacka [3] (who quotes after a French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs [4]) and Andrzej Szpociński [5]. I would like to emphasize that not all of the researchers understand the collective memory in the same way. Some of them use terms such as ‘cultural memory’ (introduced by a German Egyptologist, Jan Assmann [6]) and ‘places

of memory' (created by a French historian, Pierre Nora [7]). This text makes explicit reference to Szacka, who understands the collective memory as:

The ideas of the past of our community constructed by some individuals from saved or not (...) information coming from various sources (...). They are understood, selected and transformed according to our cultural standards and beliefs. The standards are created by the society, so they are common to the members of the community. It makes the past images uniform and helps to talk about the collective memory of the group [3, p.44].

In the context of the collective memory of Russians, very important is also to the concept of a cultural memory in the meaning created by the aforementioned Jan Assmann. As he stresses, it refers mainly to the rituals:

If the routine activities achieve the status of ritual and – besides the practical function – become general, they will be outside the mimetic memory. The rituals belong to the sphere of cultural memory, because they hand down essential traditional values and meanings (...). Cultural memory has more sacred, symbolic and abstract nature. For this reason, cultural memory cannot be created by the individuals, their role have to take over the highly organized institutions [6, p. 36-67].

In case of Russia, the most important 'organized institutions' are the state-run ones, responsible for shaping 'the only true' conception of the past.

The historical policy (especially this one launched by Russian state-run institutions) has more in common with the collective memory than with history in general. In my opinion, we can consider them as two different kind of knowledge of the past. Following Szacka [3, p. 30], collective memory and history should be considered as two separate models with various representations of the past (including the historical policy) located between them.

Both Assmann and Szacka emphasize that the events, people and processes from the past are selected by some institutions, organizations or people (subjects which could influence a memory of the community by consolidating beneficial for them interpretation of the past events or processes). What is more, there is not only a selection of information, but also a modification of its sources. As a result, new social consciousness of the past (often incompatible with a reality) is arisen and can be used to achieve social or political goals [8, p. 15-16].

Collective memory and national identity

Using the identity [9, p. 63-78] we are able to understand and organize some phenomena concerning individuals and the community. Moreover, it helps us to indicate the similarities and differences in understanding ourselves and the others. The identity enables us to divide the individuals into 'me' and 'he'/'she', 'we' and 'they', and to answer the question 'Who am I?'/ 'Who are we?' and 'Who do I/we want to be?' [10, p. 12]. A national identity is a result of the nation-building process. What's more, the social factors (including a tradition, myths, and a way of the past understanding) influence the identity of every single generation [11, p. 57].

How people live today determines how they perceive the past and what they see in it [12, p. 45].

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the Soviet Union) ceased to exist in December 1991. From this period, Russia witnessed an ideological gap after a collapse of the Communism. The Russian people had to develop their new national identity. The division into 'us' and 'they' – a de facto basic element of an identity – became plainly visible then [13, p. 17]. And even today this division leads to many political, economic, cultural and ethnic problems (ethnic disturbances, xenophobic feelings etc.) [14].

One of the most important functions of the collective memory is an identity one. A way of understanding the past is essential for identifying 'who am I' and 'who I want to be' (we are the heirs and followers of our ancestors). Moreover, a memory is a mean of conveying social and behaviour patterns:

In the context of the collective memory any figures and past events do not have a neutral nature. Quite the opposite, they have unambiguously moral character, either good or bad, and that is why they are venerated or condemned. There is no place for an indifference [15, p. 48-50].

It is crucial to emphasise that there can be seen also changes of historical heroes, processes and the past events (they become symbols like for example the soldiers fighting during the Great Patriotic War – a symbol of heroism and tragic death) [3, p. 48-50, 54-57]. So the memory leads to social integration and consolidation of the society (often used by the Russian authorities).

The characteristic features of Russia's historical policy from 2000 to 2012

When Putin took an office as a Russian President (2000-2004, 2004-2008), a strong concentration of power took place in the country. It has led to the intensification of the authoritarian tendencies (restriction of the social control over the policy implementig by the authorities, manual control of internal policy etc.) [16, p. 31-32]. At that time, a historical rhetoric appealed to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union [17, p. 2-3]. There was a return to the Soviet Union ideas in some way – rehabilitation and glorification of the superpower policy of the Soviet empire, Russia as the besieged fortress etc. There was also the theme of the enemy outside the country (the West) and inside the country (the opposition or Islamic extremist groups). The main goal was to consolidate the society around the guaranteeing safety and peace authorities [18, p. 17].

From the beginning of Medvedev's tenure (2008-2012), the distinct changes could be seen in Russia's historical policy (the most active supporter of them was Medvedev himself). The most significant one was to give up Stalin's apology. The symbols of this turning point were the main politicians' statements, the celebration of national holidays (e.g. The Katyn Massacre on 7 April – the then Prime Minister Putin condemned the Stalinist repression – or the Victory Day on 9 May) and a media campaign. Also, it was constantly emphasized that the Soviet Union had key part during World War II – the superpower which saved the European countries from Nazism

[19, p. 2-3]. However, Medvedev's decisions differed significantly from declarations – the commission was set up by a decree issued by Medvedev in May 2009 officially to defend Russia against the falsification of its history. De facto however, the commission dealt mainly with fending off criticism of the Soviet Union [20, p. 6].

The historical policy has been changed during Medvedev's presidency. New rules have been introduced to create an image of Russia as a powerful country in Europe especially in a sphere of security (emphasising the Soviet Union's major part in the World War II were to legitimize Moscow's aspirations to play a greater role in the European security). The aim of imposing new rules should also make an achieving of the political and economic goals easier. Moreover, it should convince the sceptical member countries of the European Union about the chances to cooperate more closely with Russia. World War II victory is presented as a result of the Soviet people joined forces. Thus it could strengthen the Community in Post-Soviet Societies and justify Russia's leading role in this area. When Medvedev took an office as President, Russia witnessed a separation the Soviet Union position in World War II from its assessment of political system and the participation in the post-war order creating. The President admitted the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state and described Katyn massacre as an example of distorting history [19, p. 2-3].

There is one fundamental myth which is a part of national identity in Russia – a victory in the Great Patriotic War. This myth is especially aimed at strengthening the legitimization of the authorities and consolidation the society. It also stressed the Soviet soldiers' heroism (the beginning of World War II dates when Hitler broke the pact between the Soviet Union and the Nazi Germany and invaded the Soviet Union in 1941). Joseph Stalin is presented as a powerful communist leader but there was nothing said about Communist crimes for a long time.

The most important government activities in the field of historical policy are [21]:

– politicians speeches during celebrating anniversaries of significant events of the past (e.g. the Victory Day) and their definite stands presented in the international arena. The calendar of national holidays has an incredible impact on the society and its feelings (celebrations are to commemorate certain episodes and heroes of the past);

– institutions activity aimed at conducting the historical propaganda operations (e.g. the History Commission of Russia – formally, *the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests*) [16, p. 3];

– regulations in the most essential national policy documents (including *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013* [22]).

The main goals of a correction of the Russian Federation's historical policy within its borders include the need to prove Russia's power in the international arena and consolidate Russian society around the authority by a sense of national pride and an information policy conducted in state-owned media [17, p.3]. What is more, official historical policy connected with a president office is aimed at giving the society official history version in order to make them loyal to the country. The notion about the past, created by the authorities, is very often misconceived and simply wrong. However, it seems that the Russian people have nothing against it. The truth is that the ambitions to become a world superpower and a desire to rule the country with a rod of iron are deeply ingrained in Russian political culture [23, p. 21]. And there is only a small chance to change this situation in the nearest future [24].

Summary

Do the state authorities have the right to interfere in the interpretation of the past? Or should it evolve in a free marketplace of ideas? In my opinion, the authorities should indicate the way of understanding the past and leave the society a possibility to draw their own conclusion about the past.

On the one hand, historical policy can be used as a political weapon to discredit political rivals but on the other hand to integrity the society around the authority. There is no coherence between the authorities and the society in Russia (not only in the field of interpreting the past), so there is no approval from ruled to the rulers [25]. That is why the efforts are made to convince the public opinion that the political institutions have the only right to create 'the only true' vision of the past.

The truth is that every state has its own politics of memory. The authorities often show history in a distorting mirror – there must be the conformity of the past to its official interpretation. But it is a norm in history to seek objectivity, which implies discussing different options. As Norman Davies said:

Historical propaganda, either good or bad, is an inherent problem in history. It is a struggle for a knowledge. But a historian is never able to remain independent or objective (...). If historical propaganda accompanies us forever and every political system has it, then must be someone to correct political platitudes. And this is, inter alia, a task for every historian [26, p. 81-83].

This paper was inspired by the author's research conducted in connection with a Phd dissertation on the historical policy of the Russian Federation.

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3. Wyobrażenia o przeszłości własnej grupy, konstruowane przez jednostki z zapamiętanych przez nie – zgodnie z odkrytymi przez psychologów regułami – informacji pochodzących z różnych źródeł i docierających do nich różnymi kanałami. Są one rozumiane, selekcjonowane i przekształcane zgodnie z własnymi standardami kulturowymi i przekonaniami światopoglądowymi. Standardy te zaś są wytwarzane społecznie, a zatem wspólne członkom danej zbiorowości, co prowadzi do ujednoczenia wyobrażeń o przeszłości i tym samym pozwala mówić o pamięci zbiorowej własnej grupy, see: Szacka B, Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit, Warszawa 2006.

4. Halbwachs M., Społeczne ramy pamięci, Warszawa 2008.

5. Szpociński A., Współczesne społeczeństwo polskie wobec przeszłości, [in:] Różnorodność procesów zmian. Transformacja niejedno ma imię, ed. A. Szpociński, Warszawa, 2004.

6. Jeśli czynności rutynowe osiągną status rytuału i oprócz funkcji praktycznej zyskają pewien status uniwersalny, wówczas znajdują się poza obszarem pamięci mimetycznej. Rytuały należą do obszaru pamięci kul-

turowej, ponieważ służą przekazywaniu i urzeczywistnianiu istotnych dla danej kultury znaczeń (...). Pamięć kulturowa wyróżnia się bardziej sakralnym, symbolicznym czy wręcz abstrakcyjnym charakterem, co sprawia że jej kreatorami nie mogą już być poszczególne jednostki, ich role przejąć muszą zorganizowane instytucje, see: Assmann J., *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa 2008.

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9. For details connected with an identity in general and the identity of modern Russian see: Moskwa D., *W poszukiwaniu tożsamości narodowej – «Russkij» czy «Rossijskij narod?»*, Наукові Записки, серія «Культурологія» випуск 12, Матеріали VI Міжнародної наукової конференції «Культура в горизонті сталих і плінних ідентичностей» (12-13 квітня 2013 року, м. Острогор), part 2, Ostrog 2013.

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11. Wierzbicki A., *Rosja. Etniczność i polityka*, Vol. 5, Warszawa 2011.

12. To, czym ludzie żyją dzisiaj, decyduje o tym, jak widzą przeszłość i co w niej dostrzegają, vide: Szacka B., *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006.

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14. Vladimir Putin restored the Soviet anthem and an imperialist rhetoric to fill the ideological gap in the Russian society.

15. W pamięci zbiorowej postaci i wydarzenia przeszłości nie mają charakteru neutralnego. Są jednoznacznie moralnie: albo dobre, albo złe i jako takie czczone bądź potępiane. Nie ma tu miejsca na obojętność, see: Szacka B., *Czas przeszły, pamięć, mit*, Warszawa 2006.

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21. These activities include also building monuments, fixing commemoratives plaques, setting standards of historical education, street and square names, the mass media use. To find more see: Monitoring polityki historycznej (2010-2012), see: Мониторинг исторической политики: о проекте, Уроки истории XX век, <http://www.urokiistorii.ru/2589>, 13 I 2014.

22. Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В.Путиным 12 февраля 2013 г., http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7F z 15 I 2014.

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24. The superpower thinking of Russia is visible even in an attempt to integrate the Post-Soviet states or in the negative attitude of the Russian authorities towards the expansion of NATO military infrastructure near the Russian borders, vide: Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации утверждена Президентом Российской Федерации В.В.Путиным 12 февраля 2013 г., sect. IV, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newsline/6D84DDEDEDBF7DA644257B160051BF7F, 13 I 2014.

25. For more details connected with the historical Policy of the Russian Federation from 2010 to 2012 see: Мониторинг исторической политики: о проекте, Уроки истории XX век, <http://www.urokiistorii.ru/2589>, 13 I 2014.

26. Propaganda historyczna, czy dobra, czy zła jest z nami zawsze. To jest ciągła walka o wiedzę, w której historyk nigdy nie może być do końca obiektywny czy bezstronny (...). Jeśli propaganda historyczna zawsze nam towarzyszy, a każdy system ma swój rodzaj tej propagandy, wtedy potrzebny jest ktoś, kto poprawia te tendencyjne asercje polityczne. I to jest, między innymi, rola historyka, vide: Norman Davies during the conference: Polityka historyczna: rola historyków, rola polityków?, [in:] Polityka historyczna. Historycy – politycy – prasa, The conference under the patronage of Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, Warszawa 2005.