

## Conference Paper

# Socio-Political Mechanisms of Constructing Contemporary Regional Myth: The New Past for the Republic of Tatarstan

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**Abstract**

The article analyzes socio-political conditions in which contemporary myths about the regional past are constructed. It focuses on ethno-national histories, which are integral to the current ideologies of 'national republics' in the Russian Federation. In the 1990s, the Republic of Tatarstan, situated in the middle Volga region, epitomized the 'parade of sovereignties' of ethnic regions of Russia. The political drift towards sovereignty was reproduced in regional history writing. Since the early 2000s, however, as the 'vertical of power' has been strengthened, attempts were made to develop a unified historical canon for the whole of Russia. At present Tatarstan's historical narrative follows the preferences of the regional political elite, which aims at creating a separate segment in the puzzle of Russia's 'new past' while mitigating conflictual entanglements of common history. Nevertheless, the *History of Tatarstan* was not subsumed by the *History of Russia* and this disciplinary independence – inherited from the *History of Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic* – facilitated the fast 'sovereignization' of regional history. The separate historical narrative of Tatarstan persistently brings up the concept of 'Tatar world, which competes in a way with its Russian counterpart – 'Russian world'. The competition between the federal and regional levels of history writing is caused by the administrative and territorial division of Russia rather than by the genuine 'struggle of ideas' and it reflects the complexity of imperial legacy rather than confirms the emergence of a civic nation.

**Keywords:** myth, ethno-national history, Tatarstan, Bolğar, 'Tatar world'Corresponding Author:  
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Accepted: Month 2020  
Published: 28 September 2020Publishing services provided by  
Knowledge E

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Convention-2019 Conference Committee.

## 1. Introduction

The demise of the Soviet Union resulted in emergence of a number of independent and often competing states. Today these states reproduce the ethno-nationalist and primordialist discourses of ethnicity, whose first appearance could be seen already in the national histories within the *History of the USSR*. Due to this common origin, there is a strong family resemblance of the national historiographies in post-Soviet republics, which remains discernible even if their present national histories might be in direct

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opposition. This phenomenon of post-Soviet ethnocentric versions of the past is now generating more interest among scholars [1–3]. A leading Russian researcher in this domain is V.A. Schnirelman, whose seminal work on the construction of Azerbaijani and Armenian national histories is widely known [4]. On the other hand, there is a perceptible lack of research on Russian developments, which might be of great interest.

The Russian Federation includes quite specific administrative units known as ‘national republics’, which, while having many attributes of state sovereignty such as a constitution, parliament, government, and office of the president, e.g. in Tatarstan, remain integral parts of Russia. ‘National republics’ were formed within the administrative-territorial division of the USSR. The same can be said of their official histories. The political system comprising these ‘subjects of the Russian Federation’ (the official term for constituent regional entities of Russia) is based on the notion of ‘natural necessity’ for each ‘people’ to attain statehood. The concept of ‘people’ here implies an ethnic grouping rather than any territorially defined population. Consequently, from these ideological premises, it may be assumed that the history of a national republic can only be told as a history of its ‘titular nation’ (a hegemonic ethnic group).

This vision of history is widespread and functions ‘by default’ in the Russian media, while federal authorities are solely concerned with constructing a unified legitimate version of the past. Thus, we can speak of a hierarchy of historical narratives, which emerges despite certain tensions and conflicts among them. How does this neo-imperial and neo-colonial knot of histories function today? What risks and potential conflicts might it engender? Is there a feasible way of transforming it into a national history of the Russian civic nation or is it doomed to remain a puzzle of segmented narratives held together by the political power of the Center (metropolis) within the rather porous common boundaries? These questions are important for most post-Soviet countries and, in my view, can be summed up in a following query: to what extent is it plausible that ideological historical narratives of authoritarian states can ‘transit’ to become the accounts of the past for democratic civic nations?

## 2. Materials and Methods

To answer this question, we can take a closer look at the recent developments in Tatarstan, an exemplary ‘national republic’ situated in the middle Volga region and a successor state to the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Since the declaration of sovereignty (30 August 1990), a significant body of sources on ethno-national ‘history of the Tatar people’ has accrued, such as university and school textbooks, artistic and

literary works, political tracts and journalism, cinematic and photographic materials, even monumental constructions, etc. The methods of our research include grounded description and participant observation, which are traditional for anthropological studies. The aim of this article is to outline a research model for studying ethno-national history, in which the content of the texts in question is only one of the necessary components of the total 'social fact'.

### 3. Results

The evolution of the regional academic community and its relations with regional authorities as well as the accepted standards of scholarly output, such as 'histories of Tatar people', can only be understood if we look at the history of the Soviet period.

The outlines of the contemporary political and bureaucratic arrangements in Tatarstan began to form in Brezhnev's era, when the First Secretary of the Tatar Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was Fikryat Tabeyev (1960–1979). During F. Tabeyev's long incumbency, the regional educated class, especially in the humanities, significantly increased. These people mostly came from rural areas and graduated from the local institutions of higher education built and supported by the regional Soviet authorities.

Therefore, the patron-client relations were established between the political and intellectual elites of the republic, which can be best investigated through the anthropological methods. The regional academic humanities were headed by Doctor of Philology M.Z. Zakiyev (born 1928), who headed the Institute of Language, Literature and History of the Kazan Branch of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR and who was the rector of Kazan State Pedagogical Institute. He promoted the humanities and was active in supporting the Tatar intelligentsia, in particular the authors of national historiography.

F. Tabeyev and M. Zakiyev were friends since the time they were both students of the Kazan State University. In his memoirs Tabeyev recounts the episode of interest when in 1946 some freshmen were sent to a village to help with potato harvesting. Under the stringent post-war circumstances, Zakiyev, who was the squad's cook, delivered buckets of hot potatoes he himself boiled to his comrades in the field [5, p. 42]. Bringing and distributing the food, the image of a 'helmsman', and a communal meal engendered informal relations among the students, which resulted in covert fraternities. These alliances and friendships would play a major role in the situation when many had to build their careers in the city, in a 'post-peasant' environment.

In the 1990s, after Tatarstan gained its sovereignty, the relations between the regional authorities and academic leaders hardly changed. When F. Tabeyev left the leadership of the Tatar SSR, the position of his protégé M. Zakiyev became precarious. The new independent Institute of History n.a. Sh. Marjani (Şihabetdin Märcani) was established within the regional Academy of Sciences. At the helm of this institute stood the former ideologue of the Tartar Regional Committee of the CPSU Rafael Khakimov, physicist by training and a son of famous Tartar poet S. Khakim, who in turn was himself of peasant descent.

As was the case with M. Zakiyev, R. Khakimov belongs to the regional political elite, who all share traditionalist and patriarchal values. He lives in the elite village Borovoye Matyushino near Kazan, where the government and other regional leaders keep their households. From the perspective of political anthropology, one cannot help noticing how the recollections about M. Zakiyev's 'cooking skills' mentioned earlier resonate with the story R. Khakimov told about a New Year celebration: "Traditionally in our village Borovoye Matyushino the New Year fest begins with the opening words of Mintimer Shaimiev (Tatarstan's President before 2010 – A.O.). So we all gather together and under his lead we dance and sing" [6]. The indiscreet slip by R. Khakimov here, in my view, highlights the relations typical of a secret male association (*Männerbund*) that existed in traditional societies and had its own rituals, initiations, language, etc. It lies at the heart of the political elite that originated in rural communities and serves as the locus for political decision-making. R. Khakimov mediates the relations between the political authorities and academic community in the region and supervises the latter. The academic community is divided into separate collectivities that are astonishingly similar to peasant communes. In my previous publications, I suggested the term 'post-communes' for these groupings [7]. My observations led me to the conclusion that the role of informal relations in these academic post-communes is so important that their members are largely unaware of the official structure and rules of their institutions in which they are often employed throughout their whole life. Tatar academic post-communes have a sole collective patron – the regional political elite.

The symbiosis of the political and intellectual elites resulted in the construction of the myth about the ethno-national 'history of the Tatar people'. This myth is constituted around the statements that can be summarized as follows: 'Tatarstan inherited and now upholds the traditions of the great Turkic-Tatar states of Antiquity and the Middle Ages'; 'Ivan IV the Terrible's sack of Kazan interrupted the natural development of the Tatar people, who had to put up with the Russian domination while striving to preserve

their ethnic identity and traditions under Russian rule'; 'Contemporary Tatarstan re-established the statehood of the Tatar people which was lost a few centuries ago, but the Russians and other ethnicities presently living in Tatarstan are equal citizens of the republic with the complete set of rights'.

If, however, during the Soviet period the 'History of the Tatar ASSR' as well as its regional elite were incorporated into a larger whole of the 'History of the USSR', in the 1990s the 'history of Tatar people and Tatarstan' became independent and it even opposed the attempts to create a unified 'all-Russian' historical narrative. Tatarstan's political leaders have proved – not once actually – that they are capable of mobilizing regional scholars in critical situations. For instance, in 2002, right before the National Census, some argued that the Kryashens, who are Orthodox Christian Tatars, should be regarded as a distinct population group; Tatarstan's academic community was united – and clearly controlled from one center – in debunking this proposal as well as in criticizing the Kryashens' opinion leaders and the federal government officials sympathetic of their cause. In 2005, Tatarstan's government successfully completed the mega-project of celebrating 1000<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kazan.

Since the early 2000s, the 'vertical of power' was solidified in official Tatarstan's history writing, which increased the number of 'compromises' in interpreting conflict-ridden episodes of the past, such as the Tatar-Mongol Yoke, the siege of Kazan and the fall of Kazan Khanate, forced baptisms of Tatar Muslims, etc. In 2017 a large multimedia exhibition center "Russia is my History" was inaugurated in Kazan. If one analyzes its narrative dimension, it is clear that – in contrast with the 1990s – local scholars from the regional Academy of Sciences who participated in curating and launching this exhibition were not keen on showcasing the negative consequences of Ivan IV's sack of Kazan in 1552 and the subsequent forced baptism. There are no oppositions between two mythologemes of the independent 'Turkic-Tatar' and 'Russian Orthodox' civilizations. The visual exhibition materials were quite clear about the fact of Tatarstan being an integral, though unique, part of the Russian Federation. On the other hand, Tatarstan's academic community remain autonomous and aloof from their Russian colleagues; moreover, in my view, even academic cooperation is not pursued, unless it is approved by the regional authorities.

The socio-political mechanism of constructing new regional historical mythology can be brought into greater relief if one analyzes the case of 'revival' of the architectural and archaeological monuments in Bolğar and Sviyazhsk, which began in Tatarstan in 2010. M. Shaimiev, who was the head of Tatarstan for nearly twenty years, followed suit of other major figures in regional politics, such as Moscow Mayor Yu. Luzhkov and

neighboring Bashkortostan's President M. Rakhimov and stepped down unexpectedly for many pundits. However, Shaimiev did not abandon the political arena, on the contrary, "supported by V. Putin" (as was often repeated), he took the specially introduced office of State Counselor and engaged in a seemingly exclusively cultural project of 'reviving' the architectural and archaeological monuments in Bolğar and Sviyazhsk. A new Revival foundation was established under Shaimiev's patronage to accomplish this goal. A call for donations was announced across Tatarstan and, according to the official records, practically every organization in the republic, regardless of its legal status, has contributed to the foundation.

An unexpected move to combine the 'revival' of both 'Tatar Muslim Bolğar' and 'Russian Orthodox Sviyazhsk' in a binary ideologeme 'handed down' from the authorities prompted some of the regional scholars to reconsider their views rather radically. In this new narrative, Bolğar was presented as a center of 'Tatar Islam' and a place where in 922 the Volga Bulgars, as is alleged, officially adopted Islam. The only primary source for the period – the Account of a Journey by Ahmad ibn Fadlan, who was a secretary to the embassy to the Volga Bulgaria – mentions neither Bolğar, nor the official conversion to Islam. This fact was often highlighted by Kazan historians and archaeologists such as F. Khuzin and G. Davletshin [8–10] in their works prior to the 'Bolğar revival' project. However, after the political circumstances changed, they altered their opinion and accepted the view that Bulgaria had officially converted to Islam in 922 [11–12]. F. Khuzin, in turn, argued that Kazan dated back 1000 years, which allowed the government to celebrate its thousandth anniversary in 2005 with unprecedented magnificence. The relation of F. Khuzin to the political authorities of the republic is well expressed in his interview: "Mintimer Sharipovich (Shaimiev – A.O.) has mastered our profession so well, he is fluent in our terminology known only to archaeologists; this makes us happy. I wish there were more leaders like him" [13].

The myth of the "official conversion of the Tatar ancestors to Islam in Bolğar in 922" gave sufficient reason to build the Bulgar Islamic Academy, a pompous memorial sign to honor that event, and to commission the largest Quran in the world. Paradoxically, both politicians and scholars justify these projects by referring to some non-existent evidence in ibn Fadlan's Account, just like the courtiers praised the emperor's new clothing in Andersen's tale. For instance, Shaimiev categorically stated that "we would not have been able to prove that Islam was voluntarily adopted in Bolğar in 922 unless we had had primary sources from the period, ibn Fadlan's Account" [14].

The political authorities reciprocated the scholarly loyalty by establishing a new Institute of Archaeology named after A. Khalikov in 2010, whose main task was to work on the

sites in Bolğar and Sviyazhsk. Archaeologists thus can be regarded as a post-commune who entered into reciprocal-redistributive relations – typical of moral economy – with the regional political elite. Every member of a post-commune follows certain rules and refrains from obstructing the established system of exchanging symbolical and material gifts or resources. A situation with the so-called ‘Khan’s Palace’ (or ‘Batu-Khan’s Palace’) in Bolğar, can serve as additional example here. The archaeological site was originally called ‘House with Turrets’ but the name was changed with clearly ideological purposes by R.S. Khakimov when the ‘revival’ projects started. R. Sharifullin, a specialist from the Institute of Archaeology, who had worked on the site for decades, abstained from publicly criticizing this controversial renaming. If he had chosen otherwise, the whole Institute might have been at risk (for more details see [15, pp. 264–265]).

Weaving the tapestry of the ‘Bulgar myth’ resulted in placing Bolğar at the core of the ideologeme ‘Tatar world’, which is constructed by the regional political elite in opposition to the federal myth of the ‘Russian world’.

TABLE 1: Ideologemes of the ‘Russian World’ and ‘Tatar World’: comparative analysis

Russian World	Tatar World
<i>State entities</i>	
Russia	Tatarstan
<i>Policy center for ideology</i>	
Administration of the President of the Russian Federation	Administration of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan
<i>Financial and administrative entities responsible for the projects’ realization</i>	
Foundation <i>Russkiy Mir</i> (Russian World), established by the decree of the President of the Russian Federation	Foundation <i>Vozrozhdenie</i> (Revival), established by the decree of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan
<i>Influence zones</i>	
Russian diaspora in the world	Tatar diaspora in the world
<i>Main ideologemes</i>	
Russian culture, Russian language, Russian Orthodoxy	Tatar culture, Tatar language, Tatar Islam
<i>New sacred spaces (hierotopoi)</i>	
Chersonesus (“the holy land for the Orthodox Russians”)	Bolğar (“the holy land for the Tatar Muslims”)
<i>Central myths</i>	
spiritual source of the Russian nation and Russian statehood, the ‘cradle’ of Russian Orthodoxy re-actualization of images –Apostle Andrew, Prince Vladimir	1.the venue where Tatar ancestors adopted Islam, the center of Tatar Islam 2. re-actualization of images – the sahabi (Companions of the Prophet), who allegedly were buried in Bolğar
<i>Memorial dates</i>	
Christening of Russia	Official date of Volga Bulgaria’s conversion to Islam (celebrated in Bolğar)

## 4. Discussion

After all these considerations, we can now try to answer the queries we presented in the introduction. Regional ethno-national histories and their current functioning are determined by the slow process of gradual autonomization of the regional elites, which began in the Soviet period. The current historical narratives express, above all, the established patron-client relations between the regional authorities and academic post-communes. The open or implicit opposition between the ‘history of the Tatar people’ and the hegemonic Russian historical canon is primarily indicative of the complex and strenuous relations between Tatarstan’s political elite – the major patron of local historians – and the federal center. This situation is fraught with potential conflicts; it suffices to mention the responsibility of ethno-national intelligentsias, who had been nurtured by the Soviet authorities but were eager to legitimate the bloody ethnic violence and to furnish it with academic justification from the cultural studies perspective after the collapse of the USSR. It is likely that the construction of the Russian historical narrative from the segmented ethno-national histories, and more generally, the prevalence of the ethnic discourse in history writing might cause further secessionism and result in violent ethnic conflicts as the case of the ‘history of the USSR’ can amply demonstrate. This sort of historical discourse is far from the history of a mature civic nation. Substantial reconstruction of the Russian historical narrative would require, on the one hand, political democratization, on both federal and regional levels, but, on the other hand, it would be necessary to transform the current hierarchical academic corporations (post-communes), dependent on the government’s funding and bound by collective responsibility, into autonomous associations of researchers who have access to non-governmental financial resources.

## Funding

The research was supported by the Russian Science Foundation (grant №19-18-00421).

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