



## ESTRATÉGIAS DE BRANDING REGIONAL E MEMÓRIA SOCIAL (NO EXEMPLO DA POLÍTICA DE MEMÓRIA DO VOLGA BULGARIA NA REPÚBLICA DO TATARSTÃO)

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### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Este estudo investiga as estratégias de branding regional e memória social, com foco na política de memória relacionada à Bulgária do Volga na República do Tartaristão. O objetivo é identificar as práticas e narrativas associadas à construção da identidade regional e étnica através da valorização do passado búlgaro.

**Métodos:** Foram utilizados métodos qualitativos, como análise de conteúdo de publicações em mídias regionais e entrevistas com especialistas que trabalham com a construção e tradução de imagens do passado do Tartaristão, incluindo arqueólogos, historiadores e trabalhadores culturais. Também foram coletados dados de visitantes dos museus-reservas da região.

**Resultados:** Os resultados mostram que a herança da Bulgária do Volga desempenha um papel central na estratégia de branding da região, enfatizando sua conexão histórica e cultural com outras regiões. Essa herança é utilizada não apenas para promover o turismo, mas também para reforçar a importância histórica e cultural da etnia tártara na Rússia moderna.

**Conclusões:** As estratégias de branding regional baseadas na política de memória buscam criar formas institucionais sustentáveis de transmitir representações do passado, consolidando o papel do Tartaristão no nível federal e internacional. O estudo sugere que o uso de canais formais, como eventos e monumentos, é crucial para moldar a percepção do passado búlgaro e sua relevância contemporânea.

**Palavras-chave:** Etnia. Marca. Tartaristão. Marca regional. Memória social. Política de memória.



## REGIONAL BRANDING STRATEGIES AND SOCIAL MEMORY: THE CASE OF VOLGA BULGARIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF TATARSTAN

### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study investigates regional branding strategies and social memory, focusing on the memory policy related to Volga Bulgaria in the Republic of Tatarstan. The objective is to identify the practices and narratives associated with the construction of regional and ethnic identity through the valorization of the Bulgar past.

**Methods:** Qualitative methods were used, including content analysis of regional media publications and interviews with experts working on the construction and transmission of images of Tatarstan's past, such as archaeologists, historians, and cultural workers. Data was also collected from visitors to the region's museum reserves.

**Results:** The results show that the Volga Bulgar heritage plays a central role in the region's branding strategy, emphasizing its historical and cultural connection with other regions. This heritage is used not only to promote tourism but also to reinforce the historical and cultural significance of the Tatar ethnic group in modern Russia.

**Conclusions:** Regional branding strategies based on memory politics seek to create sustainable institutional forms of transmitting representations of the past, consolidating Tatarstan's role at the federal and international levels. The study suggests that the use of formal channels, such as events and monuments, is crucial for shaping the perception of the Bulgar past and its contemporary relevance.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity. Brand. Tatarstan. Region branding. Social memory. Policy of memory.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The memory policy is a definition that is often found both in scientific and public discourse. For example, V.I. Miller (2009) understands memory politics as "various social practices and norms related to the regulation of collective memory" (p. 8). Using the results of memory research in a constructivist way, we can formulate the most adequate definition of memory politics for the purpose of this study - it is not politics in the direct sense of the word (purposeful actions of the authorities), but rather the creation of certain frames of perception and representations of the past, which can be set not only by the state. A multitude of such "frames" often coexist with each other.

Within the framework of the sociological approach to the study of memory, we should first of all note E. Durkheim's ideas about "collective representations" (Durkheim & Mauss, 1963), studies of social (collective) memory by M. Halbwachs (1925),

analysis of social memory through the prism of culture in the works of A. Assmann (2004), P. Nora's works (analysis of "memory places") (Nora, 1989), etc.

The understanding of social memory as a social construct is based on poststructuralist and constructivist sociological concepts. In the context of this study, the concept of reproducing "narratives" by H. White (1973), social constructivism by P. Berger and T. Luckman (1966), the works of representatives of structural linguistics and the idea of "signifier and signified" (Sossur, 2011), the theory of representation by S. Hall (1997).

The connection between memory and local social context is explained using the metaphor of "social field" by P. Bourdieu (1986). The heterogeneity of social memory within one community is considered by G. Schuman and J. Scott (1989). The dynamism and variability of social memory is described by J. Olick's process-relational model (Olick, 2007) and the idea of "invention of traditions" by E. Hobsbawm (2000). Various aspects of practices related to memory politics are considered in the works of V.A. Shnirelmann (2010), P.K. Varnavskiy (2008), Gudkov (2005) and others.

## 2 METHODS

The article uses materials of analysis of regional mass media publications devoted to the historical heritage of the Republic of Tatarstan, a series of expert interviews with specialists working with the processes of constructing and translating images of the past of the Republic of Tatarstan (archaeologists, historians, museum workers, guides, local historians, representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic, cultural workers and artists, n=36) and visitors of the museum-reserves Ostrov-grad Sviyazhsk and The Great Bolgar (n=33). The combination of different methods of data collection and analysis allowed to verify the results obtained in the course of the study.

## 3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The heritage of the Volga Bulgar period is considered as a significant part of the image and brand of the republic. In the memory policy there is a special place, which is occupied by the problem of the place of the region, its importance at the federal level. Reference to the Bulgarian past is made not only to emphasize the traditions of tolerance in the past and present of the republic, but also as a source of justification of



the special significance of the region and the ethnic group of Tatars in modern Russia. The first element of this strategy is the justification of the existence of the oldest connections of the Volga Bulgaria with other territories and the actualization, on the basis of this connection in the past, of the connections in the present. The cultural ties that were established between Volga Bulgaria and other territories of Eurasia allow to strengthen the perception of ties between modern citizens of the Tatarstan and the rest of the Russians. This is most noticeable in the tourism sphere, where the narrative of benevolent relations in the past works to strengthen the image of the republic and weaken negative stereotypes about the Tatar ethnic group.

On the other hand, the strategy also constructs the idea of the special significance of Volga Bulgaria in the history of Russia - Volga Bulgaria is represented as a state developed on a par with Russia: "I say: there were dozens of cities here, and no neighboring nation had them, only Kiev, Vladimir-Suzdal and Bulgaria. All - I say, all other tribes did not reach that level of urban civilization" (guide, Tatar).

Informants working in museums of the Republic of Tatarstan note that at different times the approach of historians and cultural officials to the representation of relations between Russia and Volga Bulgaria changed: "the attitude was related to the political conjuncture, it was convenient to interpret the history of Volga-Kama Bulgaria as the history of an independent state, it was necessary to show it off, they showed it off. Then they began to consider it as a state that cooperated very closely, not only fought with the neighboring Russian principality" (museum researcher, Russian).

On the other hand, the Volga Bulgaria itself appears as a part of Russian history and a source of such traditions as federalism, multiculturalism and tolerance of religious differences: "it was the prototype of future Russia" (archaeologist, university teacher, Russian). Within this narrative, the Bulgar experience of statehood is sometimes seen as the foundation of a vast Mongol empire that influenced the whole world. This extension of the significance of the influence of the Bulgar civilization to a global scale is extrapolated to the Tatar ethnic group as well, and the validity of claims for recognition of the value of contemporary Tatar culture is interpreted.

The significant cultural value of material and non-material traces of the Volga Bulgaria in Tatarstan is substantiated: both aesthetic and moral. The Bulgarian civilization is recognized as developed and special at the level of technology and everyday culture, both by professional historians, teachers and artists working with the Bulgarian theme: "I wanted to show that this is a developed, reasonable civilization,



that it is already at a high level of development, and even the remains that are there, they tell us about it, they prove it" (composer, Tatar).

One of the most significant sources of historical representations, according to the interviews, is travel to historical sites, therefore, it is worth considering separately such part of the policy of memory of the Bulgar heritage of Tatarstan as reference to physical evidence of the antiquity and significance of the Bulgar heritage of Tatarstan. This is the most common strategy in the field of tourism.

The presence of physical sites in which the memory of Volga Bulgaria is encapsulated, even if they are only reconstructions, is necessary for the representation of historical narratives about the connection of the Volga Bulgaria heritage and modern Tatarstan and the Tatars as authentic. In this case, physical places of memory are the basis for a special, emotion-filled perception: "on the spot a person starts to perceive differently" (guide, Tatar).

Physical objects - monuments and artifacts - are what the image of the region's Bulgar past and tourist interest in it is built around: "People come to Egypt, they see a pyramid. And what is it? They come to us, they see these monuments, they see this history, they see archeology, they ask, what is it? To feel history, even a showcase, is much more interesting than reading a book" (museum researcher, Russian). This technique also works within the framework of the translation of images of the republic's past through education, schoolchildren of the republic are more often taken to Bulgar monuments in an organized manner: "To look at something real for any person is more interesting. And just a story, he will just say, I'll open a book" (history teacher, Tatar). Places of memory also have a significant impact on representations of the Bulgarian period in art: "The very idea of creating an opera about the Bulgars arose from an architectural object. I wanted this very architectural object to sound" (composer, Tatar).

Therefore, the creation of places of memory, the visualization of the past through reconstructions, is a significant part of the politics of memory. The existence of physical places of memory, albeit created and (or) reconstructed, works to assert the authenticity of narratives about both the significance and greatness of the Bulgar heritage and the belonging of this endowment to modern Tatarstan and the Tatar ethnic group.

Strategies of branding the region through the interpretation of the Bulgarian past are most widely represented in the field of tourist practices, so it is natural that the policy of memory also contains strategies aimed at organizing and streamlining the

work of channels for the transmission of narratives about the past, for example, such as events, museums and memorial objects. There is work on the selection and construction of forms of representation of the Bulgarian past that would correspond to advanced models. It is not a question of trying to disseminate the meanings and images associated with the Bulgarian period in the foreign media or in academic circles. Rather, it is more about the form of presentation, the organization of excursions, practices of commemoration and the creation of cultural forms that correspond to the "world level": the equipping of museums and the creation of monuments takes place using the experience of foreign museums, interactive reconstructions of medieval life, etc.

Festival forms of presenting the past are actively developing, and small businesses (souvenir sellers, craftsmen of various kinds) are being integrated into such events. For example, within the framework of the annual festival "Great Bolgar". The festival is presented to the audience of tourists (through official portals, regional media and Internet communities) as an event that guarantees "complete immersion in the atmosphere of the Middle Ages, because every detail of the festival corresponds to the declared historical era". The narrative about the need to create an analog of the "Golden Ring of Russia" - the tourist route "Silver Arc" (Bilyar - Bolgar - Suvar, monuments of the Bulgarian period) is also widespread. Art workers also seek to utilize the objects of the Bulgarian heritage in new, not trivial for our country forms.

#### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

Strategies of branding the region through reference to the memory of the Volga Bulgaria are aimed at creating sustainable institutional forms and ways of transmitting representations of the past that would serve to present the republic and the Tatar ethnic group at the federal and world levels. The analysis of strategies of branding the region within the framework of memory politics allows us to draw a significant conclusion that the determining role in the construction of a particular image of the past is played not only by the narrative, but also by the channels used for its transmission. The channels themselves - such as authoritative foundations, high-profile events, official speeches by politicians or cultural works - become what defines the frame of perception of the Bulgarian heritage. The channel influences the degree of formalization of information, the level of saturation of its emotions, as well as the level of trust in the source, and thus in the information as a whole. The level of institutionalization of the channel

significantly affects the coverage of the audience of the memory policy.

Branding of the region with the help of memory policy includes tactics of using narratives about the special value of Tatarstan as a political and cultural unit, but it is more focused on creating an "external", tourist image of Tatarstan and Tatars, which could be easily perceived and remembered and would be cleansed of negative connotations. The results of content analysis of social media and records of Internet portals devoted to the Bulgarian theme allow us to confirm this thesis - representations of the heritage of the Volga Bulgaria through mentioning tourism in Tatarstan occupy a large part of the volume of messages. And mythologization, with its romanticization of narratives about the past and filling them with emotions, becomes a strategy of memory policy, allowing to represent the necessary content from the point of view of constructing ethnic identity and at the same time to fit it into the logic of commercialization and development of tourism in the region.

In general, work with the history of the region as part of the brand of the republic and the Tatar ethnic group is carried out within the framework of the academic sphere, religion and tourism. In many ways, the policy of memory actualizes the creation of various kinds of infrastructure around the objects associated with the memory of the Volga Bulgars. Infrastructure such as roads, cafes, hotels, port are the factors that activate not so much the construction of new meanings about the past, but practices related to commemoration (tourist traffic, religious rites and rituals, school excursions, etc.). Among other things, there is an increase in the number of triggers of actualization of ethnic identification for members of the Tatar ethnic group, and a more active construction of the eternal image of the ethnic group.

The creation of infrastructure within the framework of the policy of memory determines the frequency of practices associated with a particular place of memory and their nature. Thus, tourists (both from Tatarstan and others) are more willing to visit those monuments and sites that are better equipped, the infrastructure of which allows you to get both an interesting presentation of the historical period, and to provide comfort during the journey to the monument and in the process of getting acquainted with it (the quality of roads, the availability of public transportation and parking for private cars, the number and quality of catering outlets, etc.).

Practices of another kind, the work of research scientists in creating images and interpretations of the Bulgarian past, can also be conditioned by the infrastructural features of the site - interest in research on the Bulgarian period can be formed by



good working conditions created on the territory of a particular monument – The Great Bolgar. Good infrastructure exactly on the monument of the Bulgarian period in conjunction with a large number of museums, excursions, festivals, religious events and other practices attract the attention of the media and the public to the memory of the Volga Bulgaria and make it more relevant to a wide range of residents of the Republic and its guests.

From the point of view of the analysis of the logic of the implementation of memory policy, the strategy of institutionalization is also of particular importance; it is expressed both in the establishment of physical places of memory of the Bulgarian period, and in the creation of formal and non-formal institutional structures engaged in the construction of the Bulgarian past of the region. In fact, memory politics with the help of this strategy reproduces its key elements: narratives, actors (socialized as representatives of a certain school of historical research, guides, history teachers), channels (museums, conferences, texts, etc.) and sets the framework for interpreting both the image of the region and the image of the Tatar ethnic group on the basis of reference to the Bulgarian past.

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