

**POLITICS TODAY****POLITICAL MYTHS  
IN THE SYMBOLIC SPACE OF RUSSIAN ELITES:  
FEDERAL AND REGIONAL ASPECTS  
(A NORTH CAUCASIAN CASE STUDY)****Ali SALGIRIEV**

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Academic Secretary,  
Kh.I. Ibragimov Interdisciplinary Scientific Research Institute,  
Russian Academy of Sciences; Leading Research Associate,  
Sector of Philosophy and Sociology, Institute of Humanitarian Studies,  
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic  
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

**Maret BETILMERZAEVA**

*D.Sc. (Philos.), Professor, Department of Philosophy,  
Political Science and Sociology, Chechen State Pedagogical University;  
Professor, Department of Philosophy, Chechen State University;  
Chief Research Associate, Sector of Ethnology, Institute of  
Humanitarian Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic  
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

**Magomed-Emi SHAMSUEV**

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Leading Research Associate,  
Sector of Philosophy and Sociology, Institute of Humanitarian Studies,  
Academy of Sciences of the Chechen Republic; Senior Research Associate,  
Laboratory for the Studies of Social, Political, Legal and Spiritual Processes,  
Department of Humanitarian Studies, Kh.I. Ibragimov Interdisciplinary  
Scientific Research Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences  
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

Abbaz OSMAEV

*D.Sc. (Hist.), Professor, Department of Ancient and Medieval History,  
Chechen State University, Leading Research Associate,  
Laboratory of Historical and Ethnological Studies,  
Kh.I. Ibragimov Interdisciplinary Scientific Research Institute,  
Russian Academy of Sciences  
(Grozny, Russian Federation)*

## ABSTRACT

**T**he political and administrative elites acting amid social, political and economic changes and facing the rising conflict potential in their countries have no choice but to tap into the full potential of symbolic politics as an important instrument of power. Indeed, their continued presence in the corridors of power depends, to a great extent, on their ability to influence public opinion; this is doubly important during election campaigns. In order to succeed, the elites have to use symbolic interactions and political myths as the most efficient instrument of brainwashing. The authors have described the technologies and practices used to construct functional political myths.

The social and cultural crisis into which the country had slipped in the first post-Soviet years, economic problems, seats of ethnopolitical conflicts made the use of barely verified information practically inevitable. The authors have analyzed the sources, means and instruments used to form and adjust public opinion. In democratic countries political systems are formed by and rely on independent media, balanced editorial policies and resolute rejection of unfounded or harmful information by the public. We live in "real virtuality" (Manuel Castells): real politics is still burdened by the Soviet heritage of myths firmly rooted in people's minds and people's readiness to accept utopian ideas.

The elites, meanwhile, are building up conspiracy theories, searching for external and internal enemies, offering simplified and

irrational explanations of social and political processes unfolding in the country. New myths are created and promoted amid the country's mounting isolation, multiplying sanctions and economic problems.

The authors have identified the sources of an obvious mythologization of public space as the alienation of citizens from real politics and their inertia, as well as the specifics of the binary structure of consciousness that is rooted in the past. In their minds, people separate politics from the economy, and are more concerned about the country's greatness and might than about the standards of living. No wonder that the citizens of Russia are proud of the country's armed forces, space exploration, heroic history and sport achievements and are pushing mundane issues aside. As could be expected, political elites are associated with the country's might, its international status, etc.

Ideological preferences and adherence to different schools produced several debatable opinions about the role of the political elites. So far, it is more or less commonly believed that they play a negative or even a destructive role. To arrive at an unbiased conclusion, we have analyzed their resource base, algorithms of their activities, the political and governing functions and related strategies. We have concluded the article with the recommendations on lowering the level of mythologization of public consciousness by implementing at least some elements of civil society.

**KEYWORDS:** *Russia, the Northern Caucasus, myth, political myth, mythologeme, public space, political elites, symbolic elites, the media, public opinion, brainwashing, consciousness, institutions, conflicts.*

## *Introduction*

In different languages the word ‘myth’ has the same meaning—a legend or a tale about heroes, gods and elements of nature. All cultures possess myths of their own, the best-known of them being the ancient Greek myths about Heracles, Prometheus and other heroes. Here we will analyze the role and place of a myth in the political space of the elites. There are different types of political myths; there is any number of explanations of their nature, genesis and essence. For our purposes, we have selected the political myth as an instrument of political governance.

Political elites that have concentrated the basic resources of influence and have acquired additional mobilization potential (economic, tribal and political) are important actors of political governance, their members, recruited through a nontransparent patron-client model, become a source of considerable conflict potential. This principle relies on authoritarian approaches in governing interactions.<sup>1</sup>

Sergei Potseluev has pointed out: “Symbolic politics, a very special type of political communication, are targeted at confirming sustainable meanings through visual effects rather than at rational comprehension. The process relies not only on various symbols, but on political actions treated as symbols.”<sup>2</sup> Egocentrism, eulogies and festivals that follow one another without interruption can be described as an inevitable attribute of the ruling elites.

Political elites rely on myths to explain the social and political processes unfolding in society, they refer to the exclusive nature of national history, hold up the heroism of the people and cultural specifics to manipulate public consciousness.<sup>3</sup> These and similar political myths (that spoke of golden taps, camel milk and saints that go up into the sky to down enemy aircraft with their sticks, etc.) were highly popular in the early 1990s, the time of mass rallies and demonstrations in the center of Grozny.<sup>4</sup> Common people readily accepted these myths; the rallies attracted mainly ignorant, marginalized and extremely reactionary people.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the comprador elite was plundering the state and moving their money out of the republic.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Salgiriev, “The Northern Caucasus: Tribal-Clan Structure of the Political Elites as a Factor of Political Tension,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 17, Issue 1, 2016, pp. 29-35.

<sup>2</sup> S.P. Potseluev, “Simvolicheskaya politika: konstelliatsiya poniaty dlia podkhoda k probleme,” *Politicheskie issledovaniya*, No. 5, 1999, pp. 62-75.

<sup>3</sup> See: M.M. Betilmerzaeva, *Etnicheskaya mentalnost v sisteme kultury*, Ph.D. thesis, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, 2005; idem, “Mesto i rol gumanitarnogo znaniya i dukhovnoy bezopasnosti v kontekste multikulturalizma,” in: *Gumanitarnoe znaniye i dukhovnaia bezopasnost. Sbornik materialov II Mezhdunarodnoy nauchno-prakticheskoy konferentsii*, Grozny, 2015, pp. 74-82.

<sup>4</sup> See: A. Salgiriev, M. Betilmerzaeva, M. Soltamuradov, M.-E. Shamsuev, “Specific Interests of the North Caucasian Elites as a Conflict Potential,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 19, Issue 1, 2018, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> See: A.R. Salgiriev, “Rossiysko-chechenskiy konflikt: prichiny, posledstviya i puti dostizheniya mira,” in: *Perspektiva-2005. Materialy Vserossiyskoy nauchnoy konferentsii studentov, aspirantov i molodykh uchennykh*, ed. by R.Kh. Kochesokov, Nalchik, 2005, pp. 226-228.

<sup>6</sup> See: A.D. Osmaev, L.M. Kotieva, “Borba za vlast v Chechenskoj Respublike Ichkeria (leto 1998-1999 gg.),” in: *Natsionalno-gosudarstvennoe stroitelstvo v Chechne: istotia i sovremennost. Materialy regionalnoy nauchnoy konferentsii, povsiashchennoy 90-letiu avtonomii Chechni*, ed. by S.R. Tepsuev, Grozny, 2013, pp. 277-285.

Any political myth is an irrational and simplified interpretation of social and political processes: it does not provide facts or reveal their logic; instead, it appeals to emotions and faith and addresses targeted groups. Any attempt to verify a myth through facts and logic is fiercely objected to as conspiratorial.

In the politics of symbols, the concepts of knowledge are used as an instrument of brainwashing of reference groups. By the concerted efforts of bloggers, journalists and public opinion leaders, the public learns what it should think about certain political decisions passed by the elites. For an outside observer this looks like the will of the people, as if a specific idea has been accepted by society after a wide discussion. As struggle for power is growing fiercer, and rivalry—more vehement, information and discussion practices gain more consequence as a source of new knowledge.

## Realities of Symbolic Politics

No society is free of social contradictions or even clashes: local people find it hard to accept migrants in their territory; there are confessional and ethnic conflicts, as well as the territorial conflicts between different constituencies, etc. In an effort to capitalize on these contradictions, people in power deliberately channel them into the information sphere to create a platform of condemnation as the first step towards a highly politicized public consciousness.

There are all sorts of political myths and a wide range of technologies used to create them, the symbolic elite being one of the main instruments. This technology is fairly simple: political and administrative elite ‘suddenly’ becomes aware of certain scholarly or even pseudo-scholarly studies. The required result is achieved by pushing this myth out into the information space to draw the expert community into a discussion.<sup>7</sup> Today, coercion or direct physical pressure are inefficient or rejected as unfitting, therefore groups close to the elites (which can be called ‘symbolic’), by which we mean journalists, academics, public figures, experts, etc., while being fully aware of their direct or indirect dependence on the administrative elites, have no choice but to create a myth designed to achieve certain results. Total control over public discourse is an inalienable condition of manipulating social sentiments and political preferences intended to change electoral preferences.

These principles and relationships are based on the guild model of circulation of the political elites, which takes into account the constitutional aggregation of interests. So-called brigades, commands or teams close ranks around their leaders. The leaders, in their turn, highly appreciate the loyalty of their followers who should be ready to accomplish a feat, while the relationships of kinship, place of origin, personal devotion, friendship, nepotism, etc., can be described as the main channel of cooptation.<sup>8</sup> Good education and upbringing, competence and patriotism come second. No wonder that societies are living in permanent tension and at the brink of conflicts. The symbolic elites (that could be conventionally defined as a ‘royal court’) create all sorts of myths around their leaders: he is lauded for his high moral principles and administrative skills supported by the examples of personal bravery, self-sacrifice, modesty, etc. This is done through the economic, media and reputational resources that make it possible to promote particular interests of a reference group.<sup>9</sup> In this manner political myths emerge not only in society, but also within political clans. This model of

<sup>7</sup> See: S.A. Sukalo, “Simvolicheskaia politika kak tekhnologia kulturnogo kontroliia massovogo soznania,” *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta kultury i iskusstva*, No. 3 (20), 2014, pp. 6-9.

<sup>8</sup> See: A.R. Salgiriev, “Struktura politicheskoy elity v politichnykh Respublikakh Severnogo Kavkaza,” *Vestnik Rossiyskogo universiteta druzhby narodov*, Seria: Politologia, No. 2, 2015, pp. 83-89.

<sup>9</sup> See: Z.Kh. Sergeeva, “Konflikty za kulturno-simvolicheskoe prostranstvo i postkolonialnoe myshlenie: analiz keisa,” *Upravlenie ustoychivym razvitiem*, No. 4 (5), 2016, pp. 56-64.

political governance and configuration of forces and resources can be observed in the Third World countries or risk societies, as they are often called.

Myths emerge, develop and conquer the minds in societies with a very low political culture: such people do not strive to comprehend the very essence of the political behavior of their elites. Such societies never study programs of political parties in detail; they never carefully listen to what they are told to identify tale-telling contradictions: it is much easier to absorb a myth. Society prefers to reduce realities to myths, with this trend becoming especially apparent during electoral cycles.<sup>10</sup> New myths appear when civil rights and freedoms are infringed upon, when sovereignty is violated; they thrive in societies where legal culture borders on legal nihilism, where authoritarian principles of governance dominate, where national human rights structures are weak and where the rich and the poor are separated by a wide gap.

Mass consciousness has not yet freed itself from Soviet myths: they are very much alive and encouraged; Lenin and Stalin still figure prominently as basic components of Russian culture. To confirm isolationism as Russia's policy, its leaders rely on the Soviet past that surfaces in the information space in the form of films that perfectly fit the current ideological trend and of works by certain authors that have found their way into school curriculum, etc.<sup>11</sup>

Crises, election campaigns, conflicts and other challenges to the elites' stability create the most obvious background for all sorts of myths. It should be said that today Russia's foreign policy course is moving towards autarchy and militarism. The pressure is increasing; Western countries are introducing new economic sanctions, while diplomatic collisions are reviving the old and creating new myths. The utopian idea to revive the Soviet empire is actively discussed; leaders of the Soviet Union are idealized while retrospective analysis is going on unabated. Democratic initiatives are declined, while the institutes of civil control—the public chamber, public councils at the structures of state and municipal authority—set up on state initiative are not adequately supported and therefore cannot satisfy social demands.<sup>12</sup>

## Symbolization of Regional Political Space

Post-Soviet social transformations and the widest possible sovereign rights of national republics launched the process of power redistribution within republics.<sup>13</sup> Ethnopolitical elites acquired a taste for policies based on ethnic stereotypes and myths.<sup>14</sup> They relied on historical memory: Stalinist repressions, social injustice, legends, etc., which explained why separatist sentiments came to the fore as soon as federal authority had weakened and the country had slipped into an economic and social crisis. Ethnopolitical tension was spreading far and wide, drawing republics into an abyss of disagree-

<sup>10</sup> See: G.S. Devnina, "Rol sotsialnogo mifa vo vnutrigosudarstvennykh politicheskikh krizisakh Rossii: sotsialno-filosofskiy analiz," *Vesti. Sev. (Arktich.) feder. Un-ta*, Seria: Gumanit. i sots. nauki, No. 4, 2017, pp. 61-69.

<sup>11</sup> See: S.I. Belov, "Sovetskiy politicheskiy mif: prichiny gibeli, soderzhatelnoe i simvolicheskoe nasledie," *Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie. Elektronny vestnik*, No. 65, 2017, pp. 45-56.

<sup>12</sup> See: M.M. Iusupov, "Spetsifika upravleniya regionom v postkonfliktnoy situatsii," *Sotsium i vlast*, No. 5 (37), 2012, pp. 71-75.

<sup>13</sup> See: V.D. Nechaev, *Regionalny mir v politicheskoy kulture sovremennoy Rossii*, Author's abstract of Ph.D. thesis, Russian Humanitarian University, Moscow, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> See: V.Kh. Akaev, *Sufizm v kontekste arabo-musul'manskoj kultury*, Author's abstract of Ph.D. thesis, Rostov State University, Rostov-on-Don, 2004.

ments and mutual claims: the events in Chechnia,<sup>15</sup> in the Prigorodny District of South Ossetia-Alania, the Karabakh conflict, etc. Under President Putin power grew even more centralized: the country acquired the institute of presidential plenipotentiary envoy to federal districts; certain federal constituencies were joined together to create larger units, heads of republics and regions were appointed, rather than elected by popular vote, etc.

At the current stage of political development we should expect regional myths tinged in corresponding geographic, territorial, mental and cultural hues.<sup>16</sup> In the Northern Caucasus, for example, the myths about ethnogenesis are still alive (their content depends on the constituency's national specifics); discussions of which of the local peoples are autochthonous and which are not are going on unabated. Not infrequently, public discourse is extrapolated on the institutionalized field of conflict behavior. For example, one of the republics added the telling name of Alania to the preceding name of North Ossetia, while the capital of Ingushetia, its closest neighbor, is called Magas. (In the Middle Ages the Kingdom of Alania spread out through the territory of both republics with the capital called Maghas [Magas]). Amid a social and cultural crisis, the archaization of self-identification adds vigor to the symbolic rhetoric used in political and social contexts.<sup>17</sup>

Ethnic groups and ethnic minorities are very sensitive, or even hostile to all sorts of cultural monuments and symbols that appear in public discourse. Their members have not forgotten that their rights were trampled upon; Stalinist repressions, deportations of individuals and entire peoples, ethnic stigmatization, territorial conflicts are still alive in the minds and are perceived as a historical injustice. Nationalist groups and public structures never hesitate to capitalize on these negative sentiments in their rhetoric. It should be said that the consciousness of all Caucasian peoples is strongly mythologized; it is traditional to the extent that all forms of modernization and social changes are interpreted as attempts at assimilation, as threats to national culture, customs, traditions and common law.<sup>18</sup> Cultural values shared by all Russians, not to mention European values, are treated as hostile and highly dangerous for the national tongues and national specifics. Ethnic elites are not alien to exploiting the "national trump card" in their political interests under the purely political slogan of defending national honor and dignity for the sake of entirely political aims.

Public opinion is formed by information obtained from open sources—TV, newspapers, radio, the Internet—which means that the results of an election cycle depend on information, whether objective or not. Many TV channels, up to and including NTV, TNT and REN TB, feed their audiences information on flying saucers, talking animals, clairvoyants' battles,<sup>19</sup> etc. The so-called special literature, which occupies bookshelves in book shops and figures prominently in the Internet, not only demonizes the non-systemic opposition but also deepens utopian ideas in the minds of Russians. Myths live for as long as their structure allows them. In recent times, the lifespans of many myths have become shorter; their ideological impact is losing its efficiency, while their subjects should articulate the interests of the masses while taking into account the interests and intentions of the elites.

<sup>15</sup> See: A.D. Osmaev, *Obshchestvenno-politicheskaia i povsednevnaia zhizn Chechenskoj Respubliki v 1996-2005 gg.* Author's abstract of doctoral thesis, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography, Daghestan Scientific Center of Russian Academy of Sciences, Makhachkala, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> See: I.S. Bashmakov, "Regionalnaia mifologia kak instrument simvolicheskoy politiki v formirovanii territorialnoy obshchnosti Krasnodarskogo kraia," *Teoria i praktika obshchestvennogo razvitiia*, No. 2, 2011, pp. 183-186.

<sup>17</sup> See: M.E.Kh. Shamsuev, "Grazhdanskaia identichnost kak faktor bezopasnosti v makroregione (na primere Severnogo Kavkaza)," *Vestnik Rossijskoy natsii*, Vol. 29, No. 3-4, 2013, pp. 121-137.

<sup>18</sup> See: M. Betilmerzaeva, A. Akhtaev, B. Sadulaev, A. Salgiriev, "Religion and State: Interaction and Sociocultural Transformations (The Chechen Republic Case Study)," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 18, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 124-132.

<sup>19</sup> See: I.E. Krolivetskaia, I.A. Ostapenko, "Stikhiynoe i organizovannoe v protsesse mifologizatsii massovogo soznania sovremennogo rossianina," *Nauchnyy almanakh*, No. 4-4 (18), 2016, pp. 128-132.



The elites of highly centralized countries forced to survive in geopolitical tension produce one myth after another to remain in power and retain their resources; they have no choice but to justify their conflicting behavior by threats of disintegration, by finding enemies at the country's threshold, etc. We all know that regular Russians are more concerned with the country's greatness than with the standard of living, their incomes and other boons.<sup>20</sup> Recently, the share of political and obviously propagandist TV and radio programs has increased. Public opinion is formed by the pro-government media, which means that there are no other sources of information and no food for contemplation and comparison. The vigor of anti-Western rhetoric in the media is increasing, while regular people cannot verify the information offered to them; likewise they cannot understand what is going on in the country. This breeds anxiety, skepticism and social apathy. The citizens of Russia are absolutely convinced that their country should play a very special role in the world. This delusion stems from the Soviet past, from its stereotypes of thinking and its successes.<sup>21</sup> The elites go out of their way to maintain mobilization sentiment and an emotional upsurge. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the ratings of people in power are steadily going up.

### *Conclusion*

Academic elite alone has enough experience, knowledge, competence and reputational resource to play an important role in myth-making. It took orders from the establishment to produce technologies in the form of expert conclusions, publications, etc. Its members control public discourse, join discussions, offer their arguments and insist on the official and ideologically verified position of the political elites. At the same time, today bureaucrats, civil servants and cultural figures are deeply involved in the political process designed to support certain myths. The composition of the symbolic elites, that is, the subjects of myth-making, is highly varied. Time has come to look closer at their quality and motivations.

The question is—"What should be done to lower the level of mythologization of public consciousness?" We should develop the institute of civil society, abandon media censorship, give our citizens a chance to freely generate and express their opinions. Democracy and modernization are impossible in a society dominated by clan relationships, traditionalism and reliance on the myths inherited from the Soviet past.

It is highly important to change the principles of replication and functioning of the elites, personnel policy should be open and social lifts should start working. In fact, the antagonistic nature of the elites and the fairly self-contained road to the top produce symbolic interactions by creating new myths in the public space.<sup>22</sup> Russia has entered a period of complicated social changes and is facing huge systemic problems: fairly tense relationships with Georgia, instability at the Ukrainian border, widening sanctions imposed by the EU, the U.S. and other countries, and military presence in Syria. Caught in a cobweb of growing international pressure, Russia should pursue a balanced and efficient policy. The political elites should harmonize the interests of power and society to create adequate conditions for all. They have all the necessary resources required to check the negative developments in the country, abandon the militant rhetoric and start talking to different groups inside the country and, later, to the rest of the world.

---

<sup>20</sup> See interview of L. Gudkov. Website of Levada-Center, available at [<http://www.levada.ru/2015/12/16/lev-gudkov-ob-effektivnosti-propagandy-v-rossii/>], 5 February, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> See: A. Salgiriev, M. Betilmerzaeva, V. Gaziev, M. Soltamuradov, "Political Stratification within the Elites (A North Caucasian Case Study)," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 17, Issue 3, 2016, pp. 30-37.

Pluralism, independent media, high-quality education, abandonment of repressive measures towards the opponents will stabilize the political process. A new generation has come to the stage, yet the nature of power has not changed; meanwhile social institutions are being transformed, albeit slowly.

---