

Research Article

Understanding impacts of “Russian Orientalism” on post-Soviet elite-management in the Republic of Bashkortostan

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Abstract: The “Russian Orient” has as emerged as a popular area of study for specialists and political analysts with a predominant interest in Russia and Eurasia-related affairs. My primary aim in this work will be specifically to look deeper into this concept of the “Orient” inside Russia’s vast geography. Simultaneously, I will place emphasis on the Russian “otherization” process within this huge spatial realm, drawing upon a remarkable case study on Bashkiria, or to use its current official name, the Republic of Bashkortostan, in the Russian Federation. I will pose one general question to garner information on the current situation in Bashkortostan, being “How can we understand the political elite management process in this Federative Republic as a successful part of a general Russian-led Orientalist project?” In trying to find an answer to this question throughout the work, like in the imperial era, and as observed in the Soviet centralized totalitarianism, the post-Soviet state understanding in Russia will be treated as a kind of a “success story” in terms of its incorporation of large and varied segments of its population into its “orbit”.

Keywords: Orientalism, Russian Orientalism, Bashkortostan, Bashkir identity, political elites, Khamitov

Sovyet sonrası Başkurdistan Cumhuriyeti elit yönetiminde “Rus Oryantalizmi”nin etkilerini anlamak

Öz: “Rusya’nın Doğusu” terimi, Rusya ve Avrasya ile ilgilenen alan çalışmaları uzmanlarının ve siyasi analistlerin popüler konularından biridir. Benzer şekilde, bu çalışmadaki temel amacım özellikle Rusya’nın geniş coğrafyasında söz konusu “Doğu” kavramının derinliklerine inmek olacaktır. Bu bağlamda, Rusya Federasyonu’nun devasa mekânsal alanında, şu anki resmi adı Başkurdistan Cumhuriyeti üzerine dikkat çekici olduğunu düşündüğüm bir vaka çalışması yardımıyla Rusya’nın “ötekileştirme” sürecine vurgu yapılacaktır. Başkurdistan’ın şu anki durumu hakkında şu genel soruyu soracağım: Anılan Federatif Cumhuriyetteki siyasi elit yönetim sürecini Rus liderliğindeki Oryantalist bir projenin başarılı bir parçası olarak nasıl anlayabiliriz? Bu soruya cevap bulmaya çalışırken post-Sovyet sonrası Rus devlet anlayışı, imparatorluk yıllarında başladığı ve Sovyet merkezileştirilmiş totaliterciliğinde devam ettiği gibi, nüfusunun büyük ve çeşitli kesimlerini “yörüngesine” dahil etmede bir tür “başarı öyküsü” olarak kabul edilecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Oryantalizm, Rus Oryantalizmi, Başkurdistan, Başkurt kimliği, Siyasi Elitler, Hamitov

Great-Russian chauvinism appears in the form of a striving to liquidate the Bashkir republic, basing its argument on the fact that the Bashkirs do not represent the predominant nationality of the republic (Carr 1957, 234)

Introduction

In the long imperial history of Russia, one part of its “Orient” lay within the conquered territories in the Caucasus, Idel/Volga or Central Asia (Turkestan). If considered usable at different times in historical process, Russia did not hesitate to make skilful use of their “self-confident European” or “colonial” character against their “inferior” or “culturally backward” eastern or southern neighbours, like in the case of the Soviet Orient – the *narody sovestkogo Vostoka* under the “modernizing” Party (Cronin 2015, 647–662). Hence, mainly in the first half of the 19th century, at the time when the first Orientologists were starting to propound their ideas in the related faculties, we began to see that between the “West” and “East”, “Russia’s dual position – dominating and dominated,

orientalized and orientaling” – being regarded also as one of the main determinants behind the “conceptions of Russia’s mission” into its Eastern territories (Knight 2002, 300). This special Russian status will be evaluated in this work in connection with a civilizer, superior and/or “combiner” mission between “Orient-Occident”, backed strongly by all of the elements of politics, economics, literature, etc. over “others”, usually referring to some “backward” societies in the Russian Orient.

Despite the presence of the broad realm known as the “Russian Orient” (Tolz 2011), the primary emphasis in this study will be in line with the Russian “otherization” process, making use of a special case study of Bashkiria, or to use its current official name, the Republic of Bashkortostan. I will ask one general question to clarify the current situation, being “How can we understand the elite-management process in the Republic of Bashkortostan as a successful part of a general Russian-led Orientalist project?”

Like in the imperial years, and as observed in Soviet centralized totalitarianism, the post-Soviet state can be regarded as a gigantic body that “continues to ‘incorporate’ large segments of the citizenry into its orbit, provide it with important resources, and undermine the legitimacy of the social actors with the help of controlled instruments of public agenda setting” (Lankina 2002, 1050). Bashkortostan will therefore constitute a valuable case study subject, allowing the moves of a desperate constituent body inside a larger union to be understood. Bashkortostan (along with Tatarstan) has been always considered “as a model of winning multi-ethnic states, mainly for the ability to bring together Christians and Muslims to live peacefully” (D’Agostino 2016, 32–33). That said, when compared to its most similar neighbourly brother in the region, namely Tatarstan, Bashkortostan can be seen as a historical victim of its conciliatory policies.

“Having been ‘colonized’ by a Tatar bourgeoisie (and thus unable) to develop their own language”, the people of Bashkir are sometimes seen as “a perverted form of Tatar” (Carr 1957, 232). In fact, beginning with the Russian invasions of their region in the 16th century, and after their voluntary involvement in the Russian expansion, “Bashkirs were driven off far and wide into the forests and mountains while the settlers appropriated their lands and their animals”. In this way, “the competition for the land between advanced Russian and backward Bashkir peasants” continued (Carr 1957, 225, 231). Meanwhile, the main ideas and tendencies of the local people and the evolution of their warlike attitudes into “loyalty to the state” over time served to allow an understanding of the issues historically and politically.

Coming to today, the current Republic of Bashkortostan – a region bordering Siberia –has since the Soviet times had an economy that is based on oil (accounting today for around 45percent of its industrial product), with the chemical and energy sectors being added more recently. The population of Bashkortostan is currently 30 percent Bashkir, 36 percent Russian and 25 percent Tatar. *Bashneft* is still the region’s largest petroleum company, producing more than 15 million tons of oil per year, and one of the few oil companies in Russia that is expanding (D’Agostino 2016, 34). The former head of the Republic of Bashkortostan, Rustem Zakievič Khamitov – a 62-year-old engineer known for his technocratic and reformist line and his special interest in foreign investment – surprisingly resigned from his post on October 11, 2018, to be replaced by another technocrat, the 55-year-old Radiy Faritovich Khabirov, who was appointed as the Acting Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan. Khamitov declared that he demanded himself his resignation from Russian President Vladimir Putin, with his saying that:

[...] regional leaders of a mature age should make decisions on the termination of their activities in a timely manner, and should resign with dignity, not under pressure from the higher levels or from below, nor due to extraordinary circumstances, but after careful consideration and without conflict.¹

We do not know exactly whether any “extraordinary circumstances” had played a role in his decision, but in the latter days of his term in office, Khamitov started to be subjected to harsh protests from the public. In one such demonstration on July 2017, hundreds of people amassed in the capital Ufa to demand his resignation from the Kremlin, carrying placards that read “We’re fed up!” citing the “closure of schools, the high child mortality rate and poor health care.”² It would not take much of a stretch of imagination to believe that the Kremlin had made some pre-emptive moves before the demonstrations could harm the stability of one of the key Republics in the Russian Federation.

Unlike his predecessor Rakhimov, who had been elected to office, Khamitov was appointed to his position in 2010, and the Russian government changed the bestowed title from “President” to “Head” of the Republic in order to signify the diminishing autonomy of the regional republics. As would be expected, in the last Presidential Elections in the Russian Federation (RF) in 2012, general support

¹ See, “Official website of the Government of the Republic of Bashkortostan” in <https://www.pravitelstvorbu.ru>. (last accessed on February 10, 2020).

² From the article “Protesters Call for Resignation of Kremlin Appointed Head of Bashkortostan” in RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty in https://www.rferl.org/author/rfe-rls-tatar-bashkir-service/ykt_qp (last accessed on February 10, 2020).

for Putin was at 63.6 percent, whereas in the Autonomous Republic of Bashkortostan it was 80.13 percent.

In such an environment, Bashkortostan's situation is seen as "complicated by its ethnic make-up" by many experts in the field (Gorenburg 1999, 247). With its unsupportive demography, the desperate situation in the Republic has been perpetuated due even to such "brotherly neighbours" like Tatarstan that has seemed to maintain an effective role politically, economically and socially in the Bashkirian territories. Underlining some historical facts, Carr states that for most of the pre-Soviet years, "the Bashkir population was almost totally illiterate, that there was no Bashkir written language, and that, apart from a tiny handful of Bashkir intellectuals, anyone in the territory possessing even rudimentary education or administrative capacity was a Russian or a Tatar" (Carr 1957, 223). The Russian Orientalist ideology has been nurtured by such contentions in its "Orient" and by the traditional policies of "divide and rule", with the ultimate goal of maintaining and reinforcing the hegemonic superiority. Elite-management is therefore a key concept in the relations between Moscow and Ufa.

Thus, throughout the paper, in response to the main question posed above, we will seek to understand how the centralist exceptionalist power in Moscow, which had once allowed a nationalist leader in Bashkortostan (namely, first and only post-Soviet Bashkir President Rakhimov between 1993–2010), could so easily replace this elected figure as an expired President with an appointed technocrat (namely Khamitov, the Head – not President – since 2010 of Bashkortostan), and then with another (this time a younger) technocrat, Khabirov in 2018. Accordingly, we will analyse how these current policies are compatible with the traditional Russian Orientalist line applied to its subjects.

Methodological approach: Understanding the discourse of Orientalism and the constructed power of Russian exceptionalism

Orientalism, in its famous definition by Edward Said, is "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and most of the time 'the Occident'" (Said 2003, 3). Hence, as stated by Said and his followers, through "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions (...) and so on", Orientalist discourse is accepted as a functional tool for understanding the general project of "domination and/or imperialism" (Said 2003, 2–3). In this case, Orientalism, may be analysed also "as a discourse wherein the orient is identified as the other" – being a discourse that is highly related with the concept of "power" or as a hegemonic view of the powerful over of the inferiority of the Other, usually of the "East" (Ramakrishnan 1999, 138). Said's critique can be

understood consequently as “a discourse of domination”, and “beyond identifying a body of literature as ‘Orientalist’, seeks to relate it to theories of discourse and power”, especially through work of Michel Foucault (Halliday 1993, 148–149; Foucault 1980).

It is well understood that Said’s Orientalism is mainly a “British and French cultural enterprise”, and that “he dealt with Germany only in passing and with Russia hardly at all” (Cronin 2015, 651). That said, the powerful discourse and dichotomies found within the approach make it an attractive variant that deserves particular attention in the special case of Russia for its entire history. Thus, from the imperial era up until the advent of the USSR, and then finally to the period of the current Federation in the post-Cold War years, relations between Moscow (in the imperial years, St. Petersburg) and some of its federative bodies served as good examples of the “Other” under the authority of a “Superior” centre (Khalid 2000, 694). From the Russian side, according to such key scholars as Prof. Vitaly Naumkin – an active Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS), and the Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies in RAS who served as the Chair at the Faculty of World Politics, Moscow State University – “the Russian word for Orientalism – *vostokovedenie* – has always had only one meaning, and is never referred to anything but only to ‘Oriental studies’” (Naumkin 2004, vii-viii). For Bustanov, it should be kept in mind that “after 1917, Soviet Oriental studies emerged as a state-organized discipline with a clear political agenda” (Bustanov 2015, xi-xii).

In fact, the evolution of Russian self-esteem, the starting point of which may date back to the advent of imperial Russia under Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century, was also in line with the “us/them categorization” denoted in Said’s Orientalism which tells us about the West that

managed to establish authoritative and dominant knowledge about the Orient and its peoples, [and thus] to study the Orient was ultimately [based on] a political vision whose structure promoted a binary opposition between the familiar (the West/us) and the strange (the Orient/them) (Abrahamsen 2003, 200).

The main idea behind the Orient/Occident dichotomy to Russia, in which Russia was neither fully western nor eastern, but rather “inserted between the West and East”, has been a well-used pretext for Russian rulers and representatives of the Academia in the world-leading Institutes of Oriental Studies in St. Petersburg, Kazan and Moscow. Knight argues, as one such scholar writing on Russian Orientalism, that “like its Western analogues, Russian discourse on Asia was predicated on an assumption of cultural superiority and interwoven with an array of tropes denoting the indolence, despotism,

deviousness, and depravity of the Asiatic 'other'" (Knight 2000/Fall, 709–710). In Russia, the "others" were the "all around-in ethnic enclaves penetrating deep into the heartland of Russian settlement, in scattered settlements and in vast stretches of borderland in which ethnic groups met and interacted over the course of centuries" (Knight 2000/Spring, 99).

Indeed, from a methodological point of view, we can follow the path of critical discourse. For the case of the Russian Orientalist attitude, some connections may be found with some "speech acts routinely and unconsciously using homeland-making phrases; small unnoticed words such as 'we', 'the' people, 'this' country, 'here', 'society' and so on" (Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen 2006, 176–177). This underlines the significance of the discourse and considerable dichotomies, resulting in what it can be referred to as "practical Orientalism", being "is the translation of hegemonic discourses into everyday practices so that they enter into the habitual spaces of ordinary experience" (Haldrup, Koefoed and Simonsen 2006, 183). In this way, the construction of Otherness may turn into an "embodied practice". As Knight argues, "about Empires in general and the Russian Empire in particular", they provided the "means for precisely such an intermingling, hybridization and assimilation" through such embodied practices, and via a practical kind of Orientalism (Knight 2002, 302–303).

Supposedly, Academia and the first Orientologists, since their emergence in the imperial years, actually backed the Russian hegemony in its constructed region with the "depiction of Europe as threat to Russia" and with its "eastward-facing" identity (Schimmelpenninck 2010). Russia was seen to continue to behave as a superpower-like statist leader that behaved with an understanding and appreciation of its "East". Accordingly, we were to see also, socially via the territorial expansions and the new invaded lands, a natural amalgamation of Russian society with other communities, such as the Tatars, bringing added values to the national identity. So once the strong Russian nation state becomes the reality, it is accepted by everyone, with all of its nationalist features, its economic successes, and its social and political gains, and emerges as the main determinant also in the fluidity and sociality of the individuals within. This may also open the way easily for "Us" (Russians) to be considered different to "Them", according to some political/social/economic agenda. In this way, sometimes a state on the European continent, or sometimes an ethnic identity on the Kazakh or Bashkir steppe, may transform into the "Other" in this way of thinking. However it should be kept in mind that despite Russia not being considered a full member of the so-called "Occidental world", it nevertheless has

not hesitated to approach its Orient as a moderate “modernizing” or “civilizing” Leader.

Going Deeper into history for the Bashkir identity

The Bashkirs held their land under the Mongol Khanate of Kipchak from the 13th to the 15th centuries, until the area was invaded by the Russians in 1552, who then “founded Ufa in 1574 and thereafter began colonization of the area, dispossessing the Bashkirs.” This resulted in several Bashkir uprisings that were harshly repressed, and as early as 1629, some Bashkirs began to “enroll in Russian service.” Bashkirs as *inorodtsy* or “alien origin people” served long and successfully in the Russian army, especially up until the end of the 19th century (Baumann 1987, 489–491). Their successful warrior characteristic, loyal to the Russian rulers, was a distinctive feature of the Bashkirs, and led to additional linkages between Russians-Bashkirs whose related histories have been subjected to deep analysis by various leading scholars (Donnelly 1968; Akiner 1986; Togan 2003; and Schimmelpenninck 2010).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the culturally, politically and economically developed neighboring Kazan province had a superior position compared to Bashkiria. Due to its complicated demography and administrative units, the region was known in different circles as the “Kazan Province”, “the Ufa governor generalship” or the “Orenburg Province”, until finally, after 1881, its central part started to be known as the “Ufa Province”, but regardless of the name, the Russian suzerainty remained unchanged in the rule of this structure.

The Bashkir lands were in fact the centre of the most important mining and smelting operations in Russia. The considerable mineral resources led Russian forces to exploit the land to the maximum level, and to force the Bashkir peasants to work the mines and factories as what would resemble “slave labour”. The Bashkirs came to object to the seizure of their land, and in the 18th century in particular there were several uprisings against Russian imperialism, such as the famous *Pugachev* rebellion of 1773 that was strongly supported by the Bashkirs, who fought under the leadership of their own Salavat Yulai (Yalçın 2005).

As Tepeyurt argues, “beginning with the enlightened policies of Peter the Great, the Russian authorities began to consider the natives as ‘others’ and increasingly took a condescending and often hostile attitude toward the indigenous people”. He continues:

The Russian government attempted to assimilate Bashkirs and other non-Russian peoples of the region, including measures to sedentarize the nomadic Bashkirs, and attempted to proselytize Orthodox Christianity among them. In the long term, such efforts had mixed

results. On the one hand, by the early nineteenth century most Bashkirs had shifted from pastoralism to agriculture, and became loyal Russian subjects, fighting in the Russian army against Napoleon. On the other hand, they became increasingly Islamicized. [...] The Russian policies of repression and the sedentarization of the Bashkirs inspired and enabled their full embrace of Islam [...] Their rebelliousness had been broken, but their resistance to Russian assimilation gained another dimension as a national group. Consequently the imperial policies of the Russian authorities had modernized a native group and connected them to the wider world (Tepeyurt 2001, ii-iii).

At the end of the day, it can be claimed that “imperial officials did not simply seek to govern the Bashkirs, but rather to transform and rationalize life in Bashkiria,” meaning that as a civilizer or superior ruler, the Russian state “quite explicitly believed they were extending the benefits of European – not specifically Russian – civilization to what they perceived as backward, Asiatic Russia” (Steinwedel 2016, 105–107). For some key rulers like Stalin, the notion that the “Muslim areas of the Russian Empire were inhabited by ‘culturally backward peoples’” must be helped in ensuring their survival “from medievalism and national oppression” (Khalid 2001, 153). This brought for the Bashkirs also a rapid “Russification” or sometimes “Tatarization” of their schools (Carr 1957, 228)

The beginning of the 20th century and the revolutionary years were critical also in Bashkirian history. Under the leadership of such young elites as Zeki Velidi Togan, known more commonly as Validov, “the idea that this land should be a national territory for Bashkirs” opened the path to the Bashkir Autonomous Republic in 1919, although it would be overthrown shortly after its formation by the Bolsheviks (Togan 1999). These national feelings of the Bashkirs in the early years of the 20th century were bound to certain factors by notable historian E.H. Carr. He argues that “the Bashkirs, unlike the Tatars, made good soldiers, and were under the Tsarist regime regularly enrolled for military service”, bringing them “special rights” and enabling “them to retain some sense of separate national identity” (Carr 1957, 219).

Secondly, “the beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a small group of educated Bashkir intelligentsia, which was connected with the class of well-to-do Bashkir landowners and that developed embryonic nationalist aspirations.” Finally, this intellectual rise was seen as compatible with the dreams of “future Bashkir autonomy within the Russian Empire that would lead to total emancipation from the Russian and Tatar languages and cultures, with the support of Bashkir nationalists who “seem to have consistently hated and feared the Tatars more than the Russians” (Carr 1957, 219).

The Bashkir Autonomous Republic in 1919 was among the first such republics in the Soviet Union. Famous historian Richard Pipes documented how the Bashkir people had been weakened continuously at the beginning of the 20th century, when under the effect of the revolutionary years, hopes were still fresh for an independent Bashkir state. For Pipes, the Bashkir lands were too economically valuable to leave in the hands of its people, as some famous Western Orientalists have argued for other Asian territories. Consequently, repressions and clashes began to escalate in 1918, such that by 1926, according to a census in the region, the Bashkir population had been reduced to 700,000, down from an estimated 2,000,000 prior to 1920 (Pipes 1950, 318). The following quote by Pipes summarizes the situation in the 1920s very well, and provides a background to the dilemmas of the Bashkirian elite today:

By means of the Party, the Russians deprived the Bashkirs systematically of control over their army, secret police, and government, until the Bashkirs were stripped of all authority over their homeland. Instead of the greater independence which they hoped to gain, they lost even that privilege of self-rule which they enjoyed in Tsarist Russia. In this contest, the Communist Party, which acted as the tool of the colonist against the poor Bashkir, played anything but the role of an impartial leader of the oppressed of all nationalities (Pipes 1950, 319).

This decline in population numbers and the *de facto* de-Bashkirization of Bashkiria seems to have left its mark on the structures of the present day, with ethnic Bashkirs accounting for only around 30 percent of the population of the Republic, “only three-quarters of whom speak Bashkir as their native language”, and where the Bashkir elites have been “especially cautious in promoting sovereignisation so as not to alienate the Russian and Tatar majority” (Gorenburg 1999, 263). In what remained of the Soviet era, attempts were made to compensate for all the “national inequalities and national animosities in the USSR” with “powerful instruments of centralization” and industrialization, and therefore with “*russification*, since Russian was the only conceivable common language and the only language possessing technical literature and a technical vocabulary” (Carr 1957, 231). Thus, the new Soviet society, in which the Bashkirs were also included, was a community “of the five-year plans to which all nationalities were admitted on equal terms, but which had nevertheless a distinctively Russian base” (Carr 1957, 232).

Bashkortostan's first decades in post-Soviet times: rising national awareness among the Bashkirian elite

After the collapse of the USSR, as expected, the former communist elite retained power in Bashkortostan. Murtaza Rakhimov, the director of an Ufa petrochemical plant, after the collapse of the communist party, quickly consolidated his authority through the removal of his rivals. He served as President between 1993 and 2010 – as highly controversial, highly ethnic and nationalist period, but mostly free from harsh Russian domination. Ontologically, the Bashkir political elite should be considered a fairly unified entity, centred on the executive branch (President), who appoints the heads of administrations of cities, *raiony* and districts within cities. As we will see throughout the following sections, the term “President” was changed to “Head” in 2010, although the Head is still considered the sole superior above all the other political elites. As mentioned in official sources,

the Head of the Bashkortostan Republic is the highest official in the Bashkortostan Republic, and chairs the Government of the Bashkortostan Republic. The term of office for the Head of the Bashkortostan Republic is five years. The authority of the Head of the Bashkortostan Republic is set by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, by federal laws, by the Constitution of the Bashkortostan Republic and by the laws of the Bashkortostan Republic.³

That said, the nomination for the Presidency-Head comes from the Russian President (Putin), who has the right to nominate candidates for regional leadership positions under a 2004 law that cancelled gubernatorial elections.

Gorenburg summarizes the first years of Bashkortostan well in his article, explaining different stages of Bashkirian post-Cold War policies in its transition into a successful autonomous body. Thus as he argues, in the first period, from 1991 to 1995, it can be observed that for the elites, as a result of the “demographic status” and because “ethnic Bashkirs were in too weak a position to publicly press claims determination because of their as only the third largest group in the republic” (Gorenburg 1999, 252), ethnic or nationalist matters were in the second place, while leaders chose to “fashion a campaign that emphasized economic sovereignty” (Gorenburg 1999, 253).

The “Bashkir World Congress” held in Ufa in June 1995 was seen as a turning point in the discourse of the elites regarding nationalist and/or ethnic feelings. President Rakhimov spoke at that Congress demanding the “expansion

³ From the official webpage of the Head of Bashkortostan at <http://glavarb.ru> (last accessed on February 10, 2020).

of native language education”, and the “rebuilding of threatened cultural traditions and a reversal of the assimilation of Bashkirs by more numerous ethnic groups” (Gorenburg 1999, 254). He also called on Russia to help Bashkirs everywhere in the Federation to “reverse the numerical decline of the Bashkir population”. In fact, as Gorenburg argues Bashkir “politicians who had for years side-stepped nationalist concerns in speeches came out sounding like moderate nationalists” (Gorenburg 1999, 254-255).

So “after a cautious start, Bashkir leaders have started to pursue an increasingly broad programme of Bashkir ethnic revival”, and with the election of Rakhimov and afterwards, for commentators like Gorenburg, the ethnicization (i.e. Bashkirization), daily politics was at one of its highest levels when compared to similar autonomous republics at that time (Gorenburg 1999, 265). Among the ethnic policies were those calling for “the replacement of many non-Bashkir officials with Bashkirs”, the expansion of “the socio-economic infrastructure in Bashkir-populated regions”, preferential treatment of Bashkirs in employment, “establishing quotas for Bashkirs applying to universities” and “establishing mandatory quotas for Bashkirs in all spheres of employment.” These were accompanied by calls for cultural policies through which the Bashkirian language would be attributed equal weight with the Russian and Tatar languages at both administrative and educational levels (Gorenburg 1999, 265).

Firdaus Khisamitdinova, Bashkortostan's Minister of Education at the time, who “made the provision of Bashkortostan-produced textbooks a major priority in her administration,” had the following to say in an interview in the summer of 1997:

Before, we didn't even know our own mushrooms – we learned everything only from Moscow. We want to teach children to love their own Bashkortostan! In geography, for example, before we learned about the whole world and all of Russia, but not about our own homeland of Bashkortostan. People living in Ufa were unable to learn anything about the rest of Bashkortostan (Graney 1999, 615).

It can also be said that as the “titular ethnic group did not comprise the dominant majority of the population,” being strong only at a governing elite level, the leadership did not completely abandon their “cautious” positions (Gorenburg 1999, 270). Subsequently, the formal ethno-federalism of the Soviet times was perpetuated as the “autonomy of the local elites” after 1991, and this served firstly the interests and autonomy of the governor. On the other hand, despite these cautious moves, what seems to be being consolidated in these republics like Bashkortostan, then, is “not democracy, but an ethnically exclusive autocratic system of machine politics that political opponents have dubbed

ethnocracy, or a kind of regionalization of autocracy” (Hale 1998, 3–4). Behind the democratic façade, no opponent stands a chance, and sometimes the “ethno-centric autocracy” that has undermined even the internal Russian elements has become a reality.

Can these first nationalist sentiments in Bashkortostan be regarded as an antidote to Russian Orientalism? This may be another point for discussion, but what can be said at the outset is that there is no pretext for anti-democratic tendencies in the name of protecting a special group from the “others”. It is evident that in an oil- and industry-rich strategic region like Bashkortostan, before democratic preconditions, economic potential may sometimes come first and for the sake of stability, Moscow would seem to prefer also “tacit approval” for such autocratic rule for a while (Gravinghot 2002, 190).

On the other hand, in response to the question of “why the Russian central administration chose to give such tacit – but also risky – approval to these brave ethnic moves by Bashkortostan” (aside from the fact that the start of the post-Soviet era the Russian central authority lacked the necessary strength to enter into arguments with the regional elites), Yalçın comes up with a satisfactory explanation: “Moscow, fearing that Tatarstan might emerge as the hegemonic power in the Middle Volga, sought to strengthen the position of Bashkortostan against Tatarstan. This ‘divide and rule’ tactic characterized Moscow’s negotiations with Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the post-Soviet era” (Yalçın 1999, 3). Such an attitude may also be in harmony with the imperial logic of rational Russian rulers, especially in their relatively weaker state in the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s.

Russian Orientalism revealed – Bashkortostan under its new “Head” Khamitov

As many commentators share, the Putin era saw the return of a strong Russian state that put Russia and Russians first, as had been the case in the imperial and most of the Soviet eras. When compared to the Yeltsin era, and such famous advice as “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” during a trip to Kazan and Ufa, Putin’s centralized system is definitely closer to the traditional Russian hegemonic ideal that goes hand-in-hand with a possible Orientalist agenda. We will see that for this reason, in the name of maximizing the power of the central government vis-à-vis the regions, the outcome of Putin’s federal reforms aimed to diminish or completely obliterate the personal power of the regional leaders who had rapidly switched to following their own agenda during the Yeltsin administration (Yalçın 1999, 50). As a result, the “unbalanced system in which regional governments were given vast amounts of autonomy in return for their

support of and unity with Yeltsin's national government" came to an end with Putin's 'vertical power' that "transferred regional power back to the center" (Shah, 2).

In July 2010, following a three-hour closed-door meeting with Putin, longtime Bashkir President Rakhimov resigned, only months after the long-serving President of Tatarstan, Shaimiyev had left office in April 2010. The suggestion that "their departures provided an opportunity for Moscow to reconsolidate control over the two regions and integrate their substantial energy resources into the larger state-owned firms like Gazprom and Rosneft, and pointing to increased confidence on the part of the Kremlin to contain any potential outbreak of violence in the country's restive Muslim region"⁴ can be considered accurate.

Rustem Khamitov, the new Head "appointed" to Bashkortostan, states in his personal biography:

I came upon politics on the wave of perestroika at the end of the 80s and was elected to the Supreme Council of the Republic. I was very active, offered many ideas and once I was noticed, people started to promote me. I never was an office seeker, I never carried out the intrigue against anybody; I just did my job and was always either invited or directed to a new position: this is what happened with the Emergencies Ministry, and with the tax and water resources agencies, and this is what happened now.⁵

One of the first acts of this "invited and directed" figure in 2011 was, not surprisingly, to abolish the compulsory Bashkir language courses, which led to some political protests and demonstrations (Mihailov 2016, 75), and protests by Bashkir activists in front of the FSB building in Ufa. "Activists from the Bashkir Youth Union (BYI) launched a hunger strike on March 3 to protest the alleged 'police pressure' against Bashkir nationalists, and to demand the release of former BYI leader Artur Idelbayev and Bashkir activist Ayrat Dilmukhametov" (Coalson 2011). Direct interventions by Khamitov brought an end to the protests, including around 150 hunger strikes.

Vladimir Ryzhkov, an opposition politician, in an analysis of the period, stated that

⁴ See the Stratfor Analysis entitled "The End of Bashkir and Tatar Independence" in <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/russia-end-bashkir-and-tatar-independence> (last accessed February 10, 2020).

⁵ From the personal webpage of the new/current Bashkir President Khamitov in <http://glavarb.ru/eng/hamitov/osebe/> (last accessed February 10, 2020).

the very ideology that Putin is imperial [...], *de facto* he is building a new Russia on this bureaucratic-police vertical as an empire, [...] installing in [places like to Bashkortostan] *de facto* appointed governors, removing any influence of local societies over the power structures [...] all controlled from Moscow" (Coalson 2011).

It is no secret that Moscow, under Putin, does not hesitate to make use of religious or spiritual relations, given the importance of Islam in the modern form of the Bashkir identity. It is also true that Catherine II the Great, as another key figure, was fully aware of this value, and that's why "the Empress of All the Russias permitted the establishment of a *Muftī*, and revoked the prohibition on the building of mosques." Today, Putin similarly organizes regular meetings with religious figures and the heads of the Spiritual Board of Muslims in Ufa (D'Agostino 2016, 32). Thanks to Talgat Tadzhuiddin, the Grand *Muftī* of Russia (but for most commentators, no more than an *apparatchik* of Moscow), Putin's endeavours to stabilize the Russian hegemony within Russian Islam has become easier. This goes some way to explaining some of the regularly more interesting statements from Tadzhuiddin, such as his comment during the IV Bashkirs' *Qoroltai* soon after the Russian military intervention in Syria. He reported there "what he said to President Putin a few days before: 'Vladimir Vladimirovič, perhaps we should do to Syria and Israel what we have done to Crimea? [...] We ought to take [them]. May Russia extend to Mecca'" (D'Agostino 2016, 32–33).

The end of the Khamitov period, however, was as sudden as its beginning. Towards the end of his term in 2017, and also into 2018, protests calling for his removal on the streets of Ufa and in other Bashkortostan's cities escalated. Khamitov declared that based on his own choice (not as a result of some "extraordinary events", but mainly due to his old age), he had tendered his resignation to the Kremlin, which was accepted on October 11, 2018. Another term under another (this time younger) technocrat began, and there are many scholars and area specialists who are keeping a close eye on how Acting Head Khabirov can contribute to the perpetuation of Bashkir history.

Conclusion

Khamitov, speaking at a Conference, said that "over the past 450 years since the voluntary joining of our region with Russia, Bashkortostan has accumulated many centuries of valuable experience in the cohabitation of peoples." ⁶ Evidently, this voluntary engagement with Russia was achieved on the condition

⁶ From the speech by R.Z.Hamitov, the President of the Republic of Bashkortostan, at the "IX Congress of Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia", see, <http://www.cdum.ru/en/news/60/2989/> (last accessed 10 February 2020).

that Bashkortostan would be allowed to maintain its territorial integrity and Islamic faith; and still these preconditions are on the table in Bashkir-Russian relations. On the other hand, Steinwedel touches on a significant dimension, suggesting that throughout this journey of the Bashkirian elites alongside Russia, “efforts to restructure and rationalize Bashkir life have intruded deeply into Bashkirs’ lives. For a century, imperial officials had discussed forcing Bashkirs to give up their semi-nomadic pastoralism in favor of settled agriculture in order to make them more governable and productive”, although “the combination of service, status and education in Bashkiria, however, allowed a non-Russian elite to live relatively well” (Steinwedel 2016, 105–107).

For the post-Soviet situation of Bashkirian elites, it would be fair to say that as the first and only elected President of Bashkortostan, “Rakhimov tried to resist by playing the nationalist card” (Petrov, 2010), but his anti-democratic inclinations and solely ethnic-based moves had provided legitimate ground for the traditional Orientalist rulers of Moscow to reform and suppress the “radical other”. This radical “other” (Rakhimov, in this case) was replaced with a new name – Khamitov – (and currently, by the younger Khabirov) who was seen actually as an “agent” or “Kremlin insider” of Moscow by many circles (Goble, 2016).

In fact, these regional experiences explained in this paper show us, Saidian and Foucauldian senses for the explanations of domination and power-relations have repeated as they did in the imperial Russia or in Soviet times. “The history of the Bashkirs” has been “one of conflict and integration” and “of constant, multipolar negotiations about the names and identity of the people, their status and their territory”, claims Steinwedel (Steinwedel 2016, 5). Accordingly, “Russia’s historical role in Eurasia as an oppressive hegemon or bringer of enlightenment” or, “depending on the angle of vision – both at the same time – has proved intellectually fruitful, as have discussions generated by Said and other models of imperial domination” (David-Fox 2006). In comprehending this, it may be useful and more helpful to go deeper into the understanding of the identification of “the other” in relation to some Foucauldian “power” discourse, which could be a source for any continuing theoretical researches in this area.

Hence, while understanding Orientalism in this paper together with the issue of “civilizing the Orient”, we must also emphasize that in the Russian case, throughout the historical periods in question, under the effect of the main wars and conflicts with their European counterparts, and also as a response to the continuing European Orientalism toward Russia in which it is actually treated as another “backward/inferior” or “Asian” society, a specific distance was maintained by Russian circles from the “West”, and the idea of a fundamental

difference between Russia and the West has been always observable also in an intellectual sense. In this regard, taking historical and geographical accounts as a starting point, it can be argued that in policy evaluations of the “Russian continuity”, starting with the Muscovite power of the Czars, and passing through the Russian Empire and Soviet Russia, up until the current final form of the Russian Federation (RF), Russia’s “exceptional position” must be always paid special attention.

In this regard, while Orientalism has long been linked with “Western” sources of power, the case of Russia and its hybrid status as a historical “dominant” state with a strong sense of nationalism and statism forces us to consider a “Russian kind of Orientalism” in its relations with “others”. In this kind of Orientalism, in contrast to the usually unfavourable results of the Orient/Occident dichotomy, “elite management” - as seen in the Bashkirian case - may lead to the relative success in transforming the sense of “otherness” into a feeling of “serving unity”. However it should be kept in mind that like a “Foucauldian Panopticon”, the big Brother (Russia) with his “exceptionalist” and “Orientalist” outlook has always continued to put an eye on their brothers/sisters and has not stopped to determine the main rules of the “unity” among them throughout the history.

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