



Ideas about the Past, Present, and Future of the Digital Generation of the Caspian Region as an Important Part of Collective Memory (on the example of the Astrakhan Region)

Anna P. Romanova (a), Maria M. Fedorova (b)

(a) Astrakhan State University. Astrakhan, Russia. Email: aromanova_mail@mail.ru

(b) State Academic University of Humanities. Moscow, Russia. Email: mf57@yandex.ru

Abstract

The study aims to reveal the main characteristics of the historical memory and, more broadly, the attitude of the young digital generation of the Caspian region to the past, present and future. The study is based on the in-depth interviews conducted in autumn and winter 2019-2020, that involved 20 students of Astrakhan State University. The Astrakhan region with its ethno-confessional and cultural peculiarities represents quite vividly the Russian Caspian region where three world religions and more than one hundred and seventy ethnic groups are presented. The results of the study showed that the Caspian youth prefers to live in the moment, yet it does not know well the events of contemporary time. It has better knowledge of the past, and very vague ideas about the future. The Caspian youth notes a significant impact of the regional specific character on its collective ideas. In general, the interviewees showed quite a high level of tolerance towards the youth of the other Caspian countries, though not everyone considers them to be “their kin”. The range of the characteristics includes both “Ours (Own)” and “Other”, “Different”, “Alien”. The respondents consider the language barrier to be the main obstacle for intercultural communication and the development of the mutual collective memory.

Keywords

Collective Memory; the Past; the Present; the Future; the Caspian Region; Intercultural Communication



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Представления о прошлом, настоящем и будущем цифрового поколения Прикаспия как важнейшая часть коллективной памяти (на примере Астраханской области)

Романова Анна Петровна (a), Федорова Мария Михайловна (b)

(a) Астраханский государственный университет. Астрахань, Россия.
Email: aromanova_mail[at]mail.ru

(b) Государственный академический университет гуманитарных наук. Москва, Россия.
Email: mf57[at]yandex.ru

Аннотация

Исследование посвящено выявлению основных характеристик исторической памяти и — шире — отношения к прошлому, настоящему и будущему — представителей молодого цифрового поколения Прикаспия. В основе исследования лежат данные глубинных интервью, проведенных осенью-зимой 2019-2020 гг. у 20 представителей студенчества Астраханского государственного университета. Астраханский регион в силу своих этно-конфессиональных и культурных особенностей достаточно показательно представляет российский Прикаспий, в котором представлены три мировых религии, более ста семидесяти этносов. В результате исследования выяснилось, что прикаспийская молодежь, предпочитая жить настоящим, тем не менее недостаточно хорошо ориентируется в событиях современности. Более обширную информацию она имеет о прошлом, весьма смутные представления о будущем. Каспийская молодежь в основном отмечает значительное влияние региональной специфики на свои коллективные представления. В целом информанты показали достаточно высокий уровень толерантности по отношению к молодежи других прикаспийских государств, однако далеко не все считают их своими. Палитра образов включает как «Своих», так и «Иных», «Других», Чужих». Главным барьером межкультурной коммуникации и формирования общей коллективной памяти респонденты считают языковое непонимание.

Ключевые слова

коллективная память; прошлое; настоящее; будущее; Каспийский регион; межкультурная коммуникация



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Introduction

The issues of the collective memory have been attracting more and more attention lately. It is being studied from the various angles and in terms of its segmentation (cultural memory (Assman, 2004, 2014), historical memory (Hutton, 1993; Alekseev & Alekseeva, 2018; Boykov, 2010; Emelyanova, 2019; Halbwachs, 2005; Fedorova, 2018), etc.), from the perspective of traumas (Duncan, 2006) and the process of oblivion, it is regarded as a separate problem and a memory of generations (Emelyanova & Drobysheva, 2017; Nora, 1998; Romanova, 2020), including the so-called digital generation (Tappscott, 2009; Fedorova & Romanova, 2020). The digital generation is considered to include mainly the youth born at the turn of the century and in the following years. The issue of the specific character of the regional collective memory has been also raised recently. Both the collective memory of certain regions (Dementyev, 2019; Borisova, 2019), and a metaproblem of the existence of a special regional collective memory (Makarov, 2008) are studied. In the article, we, like some other authors (Erokhina, 2009), combine two aspects of studying the collective memory: regional memory and generation aspects. We are studying the collective memory of the digital generation of the Caspian youth on the example of the students of the Astrakhan region. Among the three Caspian regions of the Russian Federation, the Astrakhan region is the most multicultural and multi-religious, the most representative from the point of view of structural transformations, possessing all three world religions, demonstrating dynamic mobility of the students from the Caspian bordering countries. A digital generation, or Zoomer generation, is in fact an indication of the vectoring of the future commemorative processes in the Caspian region.

Aim, objectives and methodology

The aim of the study is to reveal the specific character of the development of collective memory of the Caspian digital generation (on the example of the ASU's students).

In order to achieve this aim it is necessary to accomplish the following objectives:

- to reveal the level of historical awareness of the students;
- to determine their attitude to various historical events;
- to reveal the influence of the regional factor upon the attitude to the historical events
- to find out the specifics of the intercultural communication and the level of tolerance of the Astrakhan youth to their peers from the Caspian bordering countries.



To achieve the objectives we conducted a number of biography interviews with 20 representatives of the student community, college students, undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students of Astrakhan State University. The questionnaires were designed in such a way that the attention of the interviewers and respondents was concentrated on two important points. The first one is self-identification (which means identifying oneself as part of a certain generation and understanding its differences from the other ones). The second one is the attitude of a youth to the past of his country, both relatively recent and a more distant one. A number of questions were devoted to the regional specific character including its influence upon the apprehension of history and the attitude of the Astrakhan students to intercultural relations within the Caspian macroregion.

The results of the study

First, we wanted to find out what historical period is best known by the digital generation of the Astrakhan region. The respondents were asked the question: if we divide the periods of Russian history into pre-revolutionary, Soviet, post-Soviet and contemporary (digital) 21st century, – say which period you know best?

The present. The majority of the respondents answered confidently that they knew contemporary time or the time close to it best of all. It might be connected with the fact that in general most of the respondents didn't show much interest in history and were quite critical about their knowledge in this sphere. As it turned out later, their knowledge of the present was also quite vague or they did not have this knowledge at all. We offered the respondents to characterize four relatively modern traumatic and thus very emotionally charged events such as the Afghanistan war, the Chechen wars, annexation of Crimea by Russia and protests in Moscow in summer 2019. Some interviewees practically found it difficult to answer the questions or responded that they only knew that those events had taken place. In general, the modern times are seen as an eventless and dull period by the Caspian youth.

"I don't remember any dramatic events. Though I might be missing something". (Respondent 1).

The fact that these meaningful events take place in other regions is also a reason why they do not settle in the youth's memory.

"I don't know what happened in Moscow. Maybe it didn't affect me". (Respondent 1).

The modern youth doesn't watch TV-news because television is not the main source of information and there must be a special intention for the search in the Internet.

"I don't watch news that's why I don't know...Because it is not interesting for me. In fact, I don't watch TV at all. I get all the information through the Internet". (Respondent 4); *"I'm glad the annexation of Crimea happened but it didn't affect me at all.*



I know little about the Chechen war. I barely know anything about “Moscow case”. (Respondent 6); *“I haven’t heard much either about Afghanistan, or about Chechnya”.* (Respondent 10); *“I hear about the annexation of Crimea for the first time”.* (Respondent 2).

Even if a student knows something about contemporary events or relatively modern events, he receives this information mainly from people surrounding him, his parents and grandparents and in this case, the information becomes important to him personally.

“My grandfather served at that time (the events in Afghanistan). He was a commander. He told me some things about his life. He drove tanks. He was wounded, and he had to resign. At History lessons we were not told anything”. (Respondent 11).

Thus, the modern times are not concretized and the most significant lifetime historical events for the respondents were the Victory Day parade and the Immortal Regiment.

The past. Though the digital generation thinks that it knows the present best of all, during the interview it turns out that the information about the past is clearer and more significant. Almost the majority of the respondents among the most important events name the events of the Soviet period, especially the Great Patriotic War that still remains in the oral traditions of the families.

“The Great Patriotic War had an influence on my family: my great-grandfather participated in the war, he reached Berlin and survived. He came back from the war and thanks to that, my grandmother was born in 1946. This influenced my family in general. I’ve been searching for the documents that can shed light on his path... That’s why I have a really reverent attitude towards it. What concerns the breakdown of the Soviet Union, I am a child born in 1993. According to the stories told by my mum and my grandma that was a period of agitation that’s why for me it is also a part of my family’s history and of my own history as well” (Respondent 7).

Many interviewees have enough information about the pre-revolutionary history of Russia which comes mainly from History lessons at school and mainly concerns the abolition of serfdom in Russia. But the pre-revolutionary history does not pass through the memories of families. To get more information about this you can read our previous article (Fedorova & Romanova, 2020).

The future. A very important part of our study, mainly arising from the previous vectors of the collective memory, was the youth’s attitude to the future. About half of the respondents (mainly the youngest part of them) have very bright and optimistic feelings towards the future. And it mainly concerns the students of the college and younger university students.

“I think it will be a progressive and good future because that’s what our generation is like now. It wants to develop, to do good, to help each other. I think everything will be fine”. (Respondent 1).

Their hope for the progressive development path is connected with the digitalization:



“I hope it will be bright. We have learned how to get information, process it and strive for the best. We follow the news, try to change something. I believe that my generation will learn to use any available resources in a good way, solve problems and make life better” (Respondent 14).

Some interviewees describe the future as something uncertain but with negative elements:

“I don’t know. It’s a hard question. I’m focused on the present: we are living right now and right here, we don’t know what will happen tomorrow. There might be no future at all” (Respondent 3).

And finally a negative apprehension of the future with the elements of the revolutionary scenario is revealed:

“I can’t give a definite answer to the question. I’m scared, to be honest. I can’t plan my life a year or two ahead like my parents could do before. I’m always worried that something will happen soon and that there will be a revolution in our country judging by what I see in the Internet” (Respondent 7).

In other words, the “network thinking” creates very vulnerable relations between the past and the present, the present and the future, and it resembles more “a stretched present” than a temporal horizon that guides our actions.

The region. An important part of our study was a regional specific character of the collective memory. Answering the question whether the region influenced their perception of history almost half of the respondents said that it did not. But the comments to the answers sometimes showed that actually it more or less did.

“No. The region itself doesn’t influence me at all, it has nothing to do with it. I’m influenced only by the people around me: they hold educational events (I’m speaking not only about school, but about the government as well) like Immortal Regiment, excavations, museum exhibitions. If I’m interested I’ll participate in the activities organized by the regional authorities”. (Respondent 14); *“I think, no. Astrakhan is an ancient city with a great history, which is interesting to learn about. It is located on the hill, there were different battles here, there are various remains, which were found by the guys from the college who were part of the search group, and it is interesting to get information from them as well”*. (Respondent 5).

More than half of the respondents think that the region’s multinationality, location along the border and its cultural patterns (mutual holidays, family traditions, etc.) have an impact not only on their perception of history but also on the respondents themselves.

“I think, yes. Maybe it even influences the perception of history... I wouldn’t have been so tolerant to people of other nations, and the history of the neighboring peoples wouldn’t have been so interesting to me”. (Respondent 7); *“In some cases, yes. For example, the holidays of our city can stick in the memory for a long time and after some time they will be recalled. I like taking part in them, I feel comfortable”*. (Respondent 8); *“Some events have happened in Astrakhan. I’m influenced by them too. I’ve been interested in the history of the nations that live here. I myself am a Kazakh,*



and I have participated in the holidays of the Russians, the Chechens, and other nationalities. I've never thought them to be "alien". (Respondent 9); "I think, yes. If Astrakhan didn't have different historical museums, monuments, holidays, gatherings which tell us about things we need to know and to remember. They inform us about history and form spirit in us which helps us remember. Each city and region influences our memory of history". (Respondent 12); "I think, yes... A mixed family also has an influence: I have an understanding that there are other nationalities and cultures besides mine". (Respondent 13).

Moreover, the situation in the region and its influence are not always seen as positive.

"Maybe to some extent: for example, the formation of the habit to live in bad conditions, I mean that things are not always as good as presented. Every positive situation has a negative side. Everything is nice in the picture, but how is it in reality? You just need to stay in this situation and to watch it". (Respondent 15).

We asked our respondents, the Russian citizens, to evaluate their relations with the youth from the Caspian bordering countries and the level of perception of them as "Alien". In general, the assessment of intercultural relations is positive. Nationality in the multiethnic region is not a reason for hard alienation. But the range of attitudes towards the representatives of other Caspian bordering countries is quite broad: from a full acceptance as "Our kin",

"I don't care about the nation. I'm not interested in it. The important thing is the attitude towards me: if one treats me kindly, I'll do the same". (Respondent 2); "I'm friendly with everyone and everyone is friendly with me". (Respondent 11); "I see everyone as one of us. They're not to blame for being born in a certain country, for the politics and conflicts with the others. Even a lion can be kind". (Respondent 12); "I don't understand people who see a person of a different nationality or from a different country, a non-resident, as "a stranger". There is no such thing as being "ours" or "alien", we are all people". (Respondent 18).

to endowing them with some of the features of "Different/Alien".

"It's a difficult question. I've dealt with different people, even with the Iranians. It was both a formal and informal communication. I have never seen the Iranians or the Turkmens as "my kin". Never. Maybe, because of the language which is always the first reason. I have Kazakh and Azerbaijani friends. The Kazakhs are "kin" for me. At least they know Russian. They are from Aktau, Atyrau... - very nice people. The fact that I've lived near the Kazakhs all my life must have influenced me. The Azerbaijani are not "Our" and not "Alien" or "Other" for me. Maybe because my relatives live in Baku. They are already not "Alien" and yet not "Our own". (Respondent 15); "I would say they are not "Alien", but "Different" and they are not always easy to understand. I've experienced good close relations with the citizens of Kazakhstan. They are almost like us. An important thing was that we could easily speak Russian, we were of the same age and we really got on well. With the Turkmens... They are hard to understand, they are "different". And they don't know the language well which also has



an impact. Iran... Religion also plays a great role here. Another thing is that I mainly communicated with the people who were secular. If I met a very typical representative from the point of view of culture, language, religion then he would be “alien”. (Respondent 7); “For me “Alien” is a person who doesn’t speak the same language as me, it is always very hard when a foreigner doesn’t understand the simplest things not saying about proverbial phrases and aphorisms. Not even all the Russians are “my kin” for me”. (Respondent 13); “I think of them as of “alien” but not in a negative way. We have different mentalities, features characteristic of certain nations. I can find a common language with them. I have friends from Kazakhstan who come to Astrakhan and we exchange different news. The fact that we speak the same language makes us closer. The person is “my kin” if we share the same views of life, sense of humor, for example, if we can discuss a political situation, and laugh”. (Respondent 14).

Thus, we see that youth’s perception of the regional history and culture is mainly positive, and that in general the system of active regional intercultural relations is being formed.

Conclusion

Contemporary Caspian digital youth develops its historical and regional collective memory under the influence of the memory politics. On the federal level, it is implemented through school and university programs, on the regional level it is developed through the range of events consisting of holidays, activities, etc. We see that the most memorable things, memory nodes, are formed both by the events of the distant past, and the events of the Soviet period. The latter are formed through family stories and memories which are emotionally colored. The modern events practically do not leave a mark in collective memory of youth despite the fact that they are claimed to be the most known. Thus, the project of the present is “here and now” and it is mainly on the personal level. The project of the future is constructed more vaguely. Nevertheless our youth is more positive about it than the capital’s youth whom we interviewed at the same time and who has a more negative and vague scenario. Upon the whole, we see that the region has an impact not only on the cultural memory but on the perceptions of its inhabitants and the prospect of intercultural relations. The young generation sees its future in the digital world.

Authors’ contributions

Anna Romanova – formulating the problem, writing a major portion of the paper, analysis of the research results.

Maria Fedorova – collecting the data, literature review, wording of the conclusion.



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