

Bartłomiej SECLER

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Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań

ORCID: 0000-0003-1699-6642

## Concept, Typology and Functions of Anniversary Resolutions Adopted by the Polish Sejm and Senate<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The commemoration of events and people is important to build the identity of the nation and political community. The celebration of historical anniversaries is an important element of commemorative rituals embedded in the politics of memory which influences the shape of collective memory. One of the politics mechanisms are the adoption of anniversary resolutions by the Sejm and Senate, the main topic of the article. The aim of the article is to present the main research findings concerning the essence and specific nature of anniversary resolutions adopted by the Polish Sejm and Senate. These include the definition, types and functions that can be attributed to the resolutions. In the above context, the theses and conclusions are based on selected 589 anniversary resolutions of the Polish Parliament adopted 1989–2019. They have been analysed under a research project funded by the National Science Centre.

**Key words:** anniversary resolutions, Polish Sejm and Senate, historical anniversaries, commemoration of past events and people

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### 1. Introduction

The commemoration of anniversaries, as well as public holidays, significantly co-determine the shape and character of any nation. Discussions and disputes pertaining to such anniversaries constitute an important area of public debate. In political terms, they often reveal divisions, a different way of thinking, understanding and interpreting of past events. On the other hand, there are historical anniversaries that integrate political elites and the nation. In one of her articles, Jolanta Załączny refers to Antoni Wiczorkowicz and Edmund Oppman who wrote “the

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past is a bridge to the present and the future, so we should extract those elements from it which are important for the present and have an education capacity. To commemorate the past without taking into account the present does not offer a relevant value” (Załączny, 2018, p. 323). Various rituals are corresponding with the commemoration of the past. In public space, these are symbolic acts that comprise rituals or important, solemn ceremonies, such as state ceremonies. *Modi memorandi. A Lexicon of the Culture of Remembrance* considers rituals to be orderly, repetitive and institutionalised sequences of expressive, communicative and symbolic activities with reference to some non-empirical reality. Rituals provide meaning, significance, and social functions to the current reality (*Modi memorandi...*, 2014, p. 378). Moreover, they play an important role as regards collective memory. Maurice Halbwachs, a researcher studying collective memory, rituals are an essential element of the social framework of memory that perpetuates and transmits institutionalised forms of collective memory, namely cultural memory and official memory (Halbwachs, 2008, pp. 262–322). In the above context, it can be argued that the commemoration through rituals, e.g. historical anniversaries, protects the past from being forgotten. Another memory researcher Paul Connerton distinguishes commemorative practices from other rituals as they make direct reference to people and events that play the role of prototypes existing mythically or historically (Connerton, 2018, p. 420).

It should be emphasised that practices and rituals are part of historical anniversary commemoration, which Anna Wolff-Powęska describes as a *medium of the politics of memory* (Wolff-Powęska, 2009, p. 33). An important aspect of the commemoration is therefore the symbolic recreation of a past event or the reminder of a historical person in the context of an event. Mechanisms of commemoration include, among other things, anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland. They are tools that shape the politics of memory (Nijakowski, 2017, pp. 89–103; Secler, 2017, pp. 115–124; Secler, 2021, pp. 209–225). While commemorating anniversaries, these resolutions emphasise the momentousness nature of a past event and symbolically remind about its significance. The same is true of people commemorated by these resolutions.

The research problem discussed in this publication is examined through questions about the essence of anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate, and their types and functions. The issue addressed is related to the research by the author, which tried to define the place and role of anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate in the Polish poli-

tics of memory. It is worth noting that the politics of memory expressed selective approach to the past. If we assume that memory is an object used by authorities, then the authorities through the instruments of their politics of memory can decide – often subjectively or arbitrarily – what is to be remembered and what to be forgotten. The use of specific historical narratives, where the basic argument is a reference to the past, attempts to strengthen the legitimacy of power or tries to delegitimise political opponents, holding them accountable or condemning them (Nijakowski, 2008, *passim*).

The research is embedded in political science. The theoretical context is subordinated to the above-mentioned politics of memory. The research intends to emphasise aspects of the politics of memory related to the exercising of political power, its functions, and the role it plays in social life. Jan Assmann's concept of the alliance between power and memory, according to which power is capable of stimulating memory. This in turn translates into the narrative of the past and what is left of that narrative. The scholar argues that every authority needs an origin, by which it legitimises itself retrospectively as well as prospectively, for example by erecting monuments, changing school textbooks or undertaking momentous acts that are part of a specific memory policy strategy pursued by the authority (Assmann, 2008, pp. 85–86). In the above context, according to one of the research hypotheses, anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate are a mechanism of the politics of memory as they commemorate past events and people. Moreover, they are also a tool for creating new national heroes, restoring memory, accounting for the past or condemning it.

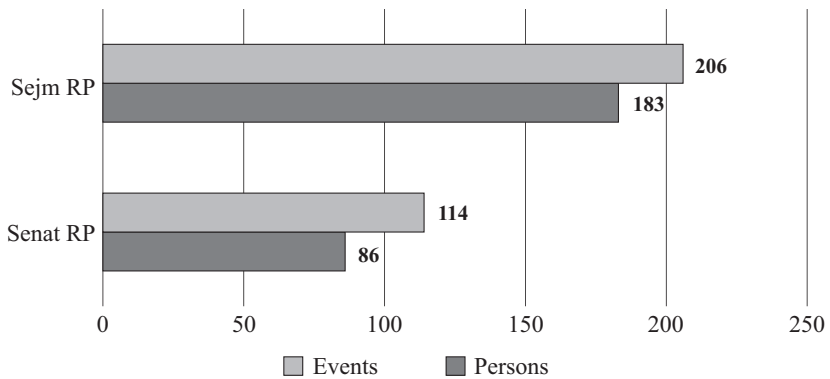
The research covered a period of 1989–2019. It was based on a detailed analysis of 589 resolutions of the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland (Secler, 2022, pp. 16–18).

The article presents the main research findings concerning the essence and specific nature of anniversary resolutions adopted by the Sejm and Senate – their definition, types and functions. This determines the structure of the article, which also includes reflections on historical anniversaries as a medium of remembrance.

## **2. Anniversaries as a medium of remembrance**

When analysing the origins of practices and rituals, as well as their evolution, scholars usually conclude that they are related to everyday hu-

**Chart 1. Anniversary resolutions of the Polish Sejm and Senate adopted in 1989–2019 (breakdown by commemorated events and persons)**



**Source:** Own study.

man existence, fear, anxiety, survival or decision making (Motyl, 2014, p. 65). Rituals are most often defined as traditionally established activities and practices, often defined by rules or norms, with symbolic meaning that accompany specific celebrations, e.g. religious or state ceremonies. Rituals can be very solemn, especially when they are given a symbolic character. It is the symbolism that provides the external framework of rituals. Following Anthony Giddens, they are said to manifest tradition which can be described as a *product of modernity* (Giddens, 2004, pp. 110–114). Tradition provides continuity between the present and the past. In this sense, rituals are celebrated in a specific manner and time according to an accepted procedure (Łuszczynska, 1977, p. 124). Essential functions of rituals translate, among other things, into the symbolic expression of a sense of community in a nation or state. They provide a permanent link between the past and the present, perpetuate past experiences and memories, or highlight landmark moments and historical events for the nation and state (Łuszczynska, 1977, p. 125). Rituals are highlighted and developed in social or political life due to the belief that they sensitise individuals and social groups to important elements of the community's symbolic identity. Examples include attachment to the national emblem or national colours (Łuszczynska, 1997, pp. 125–126).

Rituals are narrower in their nature than celebrations. They are established symbolic activities that comprise a celebration. Rituals are repetitive. Following the *Lexicon of Memory Culture*, they are orderly,

repetitive, and institutionalised sequences of expressive and communicative activities in a symbolic sense, in which reference is made to some non-empirical reality. Rituals give meaning to the present and the society (*Modi memorandi...*, 2014, p. 378). According to É. Durkheim, rituals sustain memory as well as reproduce and reinforce important elements of collective consciousness, while their functions boil down to the reconstruction and reinforcement of the society and the formation of social identity. Commemorative practices that refer to past events and people play an essential role in the formation of this identity, as well as a specific political order. Commemoration through rituals, such as historical anniversaries, protects past events from being forgotten or warns us against repeating them. Moreover, the purpose of commemorative rituals may be to show the present as a continuation of what has happened before (*Modi memorandi...*, 2014, p. 445). As noted above, when considering historical anniversaries, A. Wolff-Powęska calls them *a vehicle of the politics of memory* (Wolff-Powęska, 2009, p. 33). Moreover, Marcin Napiórkowski attributes important forms of *memory synchronicity* to anniversaries of historical events celebrated in the contemporary society (Napiórkowski, 2016, p. 150). He rightly notes that they build collective identity and contribute to the sense of unity. Moreover, historical anniversaries generate landmark dates, since they usually mark socially, politically or systemically important events. Additionally, they introduce a new order which modifies the calendar of holidays (Wolff-Powęska, 2009, p. 33). The establishing of an anniversary, the sacred time of remembrance, is indeed a momentous meaningful act highlighting specific events, while its commemoration is *de facto* incorporating it into the historical order (Napiórkowski, 2016, p. 151). A similar mechanism operates in the case of commemorating people of particular merit for the nation or the state.

The concept of an anniversary requires further clarification. We usually assume that it is a day that falls one, two, ten, five hundred or more years after an event. Anniversaries measure the time since an important event. Dictionary definitions refer to important, round, special, great, national or state anniversaries. Anniversaries that are remembered and celebrated organise the past by recurring in the present and by creating a certain rhythm and meaning (Piotrowska, 2019, p. 249). For the state and the nation, anniversaries that relate to specific events, such as the restoration of independence, battle or war, as well as anniversaries associated with the commemoration of distinguished people, are indeed important. As noted above, the vehicle for commemorating events and people

include anniversary resolutions adopted by the Sejm and the Senate of the Republic of Poland.

### 3. The essence of anniversary resolutions of the Polish Sejm and Senate

A representative system is one of basic forms of exercising power. In the Polish political system, the fundamental role in this respect is played by the Sejm and the Senate. They are vested with four basic functions: constitutional, legislative, creative, and controlling (Kruk, 2008, p. 17). Discussions on the essence of parliamentarism also point to functions that are not formal, e.g. the shaping of political culture or the creation a space for debate on the most important political, social and other problems in the parliament. In the Polish constitutional order, the main activity of the Sejm and the Senate is to adopt resolutions. In the literature on the subject or encyclopaedic studies, a resolution is most often defined as a form of legal act that contains a decision of a collegial body (*Encyklopedia prawa*, 2007, p. 882). At the same time, it is worth emphasising that the essence of resolutions adopted by the Sejm and Senate does not necessarily imply their normative character, hence the conclusion that they may not be perceived as a uniform category (Bień-Kacała, 2008, pp. 138–139). One of the forms of resolutions adopted by the Sejm and Senate are those that express the position of the two chambers of parliament on a certain issue. These are referred to as commemorative resolutions (Maroń, 2014, p. 255). Commemorative resolutions serve, among other things, to commemorate historical events and people. However, such commemoration does not always result from a desire to celebrate a historical anniversary. Hence – while conducting the research – already at the stage of conceptualisation, the term ‘anniversary resolution’ was used, as it has a narrower meaning in relation to commemorative resolutions.

While taking into account the specific nature of commemorative resolutions and distinguishing anniversary resolutions, it is assumed that they express the will of the Sejm and Senate to commemorate historical anniversaries related to events and people. In the opinion of the promoters, a resolution is fundamentally important for the history of the state and the nation. Essential features of the anniversary resolution include its non-authoritative, non-binding and symbolic character. Nevertheless, as research has shown, some anniversary resolutions cause political, so-

cial, and sometimes also international reverberations. Examples include resolutions on commemorating the 70th anniversary of the USSR's aggression against Poland (2009 resolution) and the 73rd anniversary of the Volhynian massacre (2016 resolution). Political disputes on the content of these resolutions had a common denominator, i.e. the recognition of events commemorated as genocide (Secler, 2017, pp. 209–225).

In addition to the legal aspect mentioned above, it is also worth emphasising the political significance of resolutions. Assuming that anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate are the instrument of state power and the form of expressing their attitudes towards the past, the resolutions should play a meaningful role in the implementation of specific political goals. This applies to goals that are long-term, strategic in their nature, as well as oriented towards current politics. The use of historical argumentation in political rhetoric has specific implications. While implementing their political agenda, the authorities select historical anniversaries to be commemorated and this also has specific implications. This often boils down to disputes and political divisions over the past, dominated by accusations of the misuse or rewriting of history. In this context, it seems legitimate to ask a question about the space for dialogue and consensus to commemorate historical events and national heroes. A general action above political divides would be justified here provided the authorities emphasise the significance of historical anniversaries when adopting anniversary resolutions. Moreover, this can also be seen from the perspective of the importance attached to the implementation of the politics of memory.

The analysis of the 589 anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate, as well as the manner in which they were processed and adopted, helped to distinguish six criteria and develop a typology of anniversary resolutions. These criteria are as follows: 1) subject criterion; 2) object criterion; 3) time criterion; 4) spatial criterion; 5) purpose criterion; and 6) decision criterion (Secler, 2022, pp. 107–108).

According to the subject criterion, a distinction is made between institutions of state authorities that adopt resolutions. Thus, the following should be specified: 1) anniversary resolutions of the Sejm; and 2) anniversary resolutions of the Senate. It should be noted that an anniversary resolution may also be adopted by the National Assembly, but formally, in such a case, two resolutions of the same content are published in the official journal – one as a resolution of the Sejm and the other as a resolution of the Senate.

According to the subject criterion, anniversary resolutions are divided into: 1) anniversary resolutions related to events; 2) anniversary resolutions related to people. It should be added that in political practice, the choice of commemorated events and people depends on political decisions. There is therefore single parliamentary chamber, no transparent rule for selecting commemorated events and people and anniversaries associated with them.

The time criterion covers a historical period to which the subject of the anniversary resolutions relates. An analysis of the content of the anniversary resolutions collected for the study helped to distinguish: 1) anniversary resolutions related to the period from the establishment of the Polish state until the First Republic; 2) anniversary resolutions related to the period of the First Republic; 3) anniversary resolutions related to the period of the Republic under the Partitions; 4) anniversary resolutions related to the period of the Second Polish Republic; 5) anniversary resolutions related to the Second World War; 6) anniversary resolutions related to the period of the Polish People's Republic; and 7) anniversary resolutions related to the period of the Third Polish Republic.

The fourth spatial criterion enables to distinguish: 1) anniversary resolutions of national (internal) scope; 2) anniversary resolutions of international (external) scope; 3) anniversary resolutions of a combined national and international scope. In this context, while referring directly to the content of a number of anniversary resolutions, it is worth noting that promoters of resolutions often emphasise the importance of events and people as regards their impact on historical events.

The fifth criterion relates to the purpose. We can distinguish: 1) anniversary resolutions that commemorate events and people; 2) anniversary resolutions that constitute a reconstruction of the past; this should be understood as to the reconstruction of historical facts in the wording of the resolution (usually resolutions specify historical context of anniversaries commemorated, historical background or biographical aspects of people commemorated); 3) anniversary resolutions that restore memory and/or counteract forgetting (this type of resolutions are often calls and appeals made by resolution-makers to undertake specific actions recalling past events and people or efforts to protect and promote their memory); and 4) anniversary resolutions settling accounts with the past and/or condemning it (objective is usually manifested in specific, uncompromising attitude to past events or people, for example the introduction of the martial law in Poland in 1981).



The sixth decision-making criterion takes into account the manner in which anniversary resolutions are adopted: 1) anniversary resolutions adopted by acclamation; and 2) anniversary resolutions adopted by voting. The first method of decision-making applies only to the Sejm and translates into a far more solemn commemoration of a historical anniversary than the adoption of a resolution by voting. Especially in the face of strong divisions and polarisation of the political arena, arriving at a common position and adopting a resolution above political divides seem extremely valuable as they integrate political elites.

The analysis of the anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate attempted to define their functions. The theoretical context of the politics of memory was an important factor, as well as cited above J. Assmann's concept of the alliance of power and memory. The research distinguished six functions of anniversary resolutions: 1) cognitive; 2) identity; 3) integrative; 4) emotional; 5) mobilising; and 6) legitimising and delegitimising (Secler, 2022, pp. 113–114).

The first of these – the cognitive function – assumes that anniversary resolutions are a vehicle carrying information about past events and people. It can therefore be concluded that the commemorative acts of the Sejm and Senate disseminate knowledge. Moreover, the resolutions can be a vehicle for learning about the past and reflecting on it from the perspective of the present and the future. Through their identity function, anniversary resolutions give meaning to the past in the present and define its meaning for the future. This is because the content of anniversary resolutions promotes certain values or patterns of behaviour which can influence collective and individual memory. Additionally, according to the integrative function, anniversary resolutions show the bond between individual citizens and the state. The basis of the function comprises common history and experience of the past, as well as the memory of events and people. The emotional function – through the content of anniversary resolutions – evokes a certain reaction in the recipient, e.g. joy at a specific event from the past or, on the contrary, a sense of injustice. Hence, all the disputes focus on the past, memory, and emotions. Another mobilising function inspires and motivates individuals and institutions to undertake further commemorative initiatives in relation to events and people. The legitimising and delegitimising function of anniversary resolutions aims at justifying and sanctioning a given political order or disapproving a particular political system, regime, leadership, authority and related institutions, etc.

It should be noted that the catalogue of the functions is by no means exhaustive due to a great variety of anniversary resolutions. In this context, it is also worth pointing out that analyses of subsequent terms of the Sejm and Senate (after 2019) may provide new knowledge and extend the list of functions or modify the existing ones.

### Summary

In conclusion, anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate of the Republic of Poland are an instrument of power used to implement the politics of memory and, consequently, shape collective memory. Moreover, such resolutions are political instruments for commemorating historical anniversaries related to past events and people. The political authorities use anniversary resolutions to interpret the past, highlight and emphasise the role of specific historical events, as well as shape the historical awareness of the Polish society. Due to their subject and content, resolution initiatives sometimes trigger disputes and domestic or international political conflicts. In the formal (legal) sense, i.e. in the by-laws of the Sejm and Senate, the anniversary resolutions under research are defined as commemorative. It is worth adding that the catalogue of commemorative resolutions is much broader and does not include only acts commemorating events and people. Considering the above, anniversary resolutions are primarily important from historical and political points of view. By commemorating historical anniversaries, the two chambers of the Polish Parliament not only highlight remembrance of the past, but also express their position on issues that are important from the historical point of view for the Polish nation and the state.

The analysis of the specific nature of anniversary resolutions adopted by the Sejm and Senate has shown that they belong to a highly differentiated genre. On the one hand, one may get an impression that they constitute a collection of unstructured documents, while on the other hand, the anniversary resolutions of the Polish Parliament can be grouped and defined by their goals and functions. An important feature of anniversary resolutions is the use of numerous historical and symbolic analogies, metaphors, or references to authorities. An extensive analysis of their content is the best exemplification of this (see Secler, 2022, pp. 115–240).

Findings of the research into anniversary resolutions of the Sejm and Senate are an important contribution to memory studies within political

science as well as other scientific disciplines. From the political science point of view, the resolutions can be seen as an important factor of political volatility. In a certain way, they witness changes taking place on the Polish political scene and the diversity of view among parliamentarians depending on the current set up of the political arena. In this context, the research findings may also help to provide scientific explanation of political phenomena and processes related not only to the politics of memory.

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Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieje konflikt interesów.

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### **Wkład autorów**

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### **Authors contributions**

Conceptualization: Bartłomiej Secler

Formal analysis: Bartłomiej Secler

Methodology: Bartłomiej Secler

Writing – original draft, review and editing: Bartłomiej Secler

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## Pojęcie, typologia i funkcje uchwał rocznicowych Sejmu i Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej

### Streszczenie

Upamiętnianie wydarzeń i postaci ma istotne znaczenie dla budowania tożsamości wspólnoty narodowej oraz politycznej. Związane z tym obchody rocznic histo-

rycznych są ważnym elementem rytuałów komemoratywnych wpisanych w praktykę polityki pamięci, która wpływa na kształt pamięci zbiorowej. Jednym z mechanizmów polityki pamięci są uchwały rocznicowe Sejmu i Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, którym poświęcony jest niniejszy artykuł. Celem publikacji jest prezentacja głównych ustaleń badawczych w zakresie istoty i specyfiki uchwał rocznicowych Sejmu i Senatu Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, przede wszystkim ich definicji, typów oraz funkcji, które można im przypisać. Tezy oraz wyprowadzone wnioski w powyższym kontekście, opierają się na wyselekcjonowanych 589 uchwałach rocznicowych polskiego parlamentu – uchwalonych w latach 1989–2019 – które były przedmiotem analiz w projekcie badawczym realizowanym ze środków Narodowego Centrum Nauki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** uchwały rocznicowe, Sejm i Senat Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, rocznice historyczne, upamiętnianie wydarzeń i osób z przeszłości