
Leadership Change and Protests in Russia's Kalmykia

MOSCOW'S CORRUPTIVE MEDDLING AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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In late March 2019, the head of the Republic of Kalmykia, Alexei Orlov, [resigned](#) and was swiftly replaced—the same day, in fact—by Batu Khasikov, a kickboxer and former Kalmykia representative to the Federation Council, who got the requisite [photo-op](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Khasikov's position was confirmed in September 2019 elections. Later that month, Khasikov named Dmitry Trapeznikov, an ethnic Russian and former leader of the self-proclaimed separatist Donetsk People's Republic in Ukraine, to the post of acting head of Elista, Kalmykia's capital. This appointment sparked extensive and ongoing [protests](#) in a republic located to the north of the North Caucasus that is generally viewed as one of the most stable and quiescent in the Russian Federation.

The protests in Kalmykia reveal several important developments taking place both at the federal and regional levels. At the federal level, this is indicative of the current trend whereby the Kremlin appoints people with little political or managerial experience as regional leaders. Such appointments may backfire against the backdrop of growing political activism in Russian regions. At the regional level, a spark of protest often leads to the voicing of other grievances; in Kalmykia, these issues include a low quality of life, lack of opportunities and jobs, widespread corruption, and decaying infrastructure, among other issues. United by their grievances and "patriotism for their city," a large turnout of protestors of different ages, genders, social backgrounds, and political orientations suddenly became politically active. This rise of protests also demonstrates the power vacuum in Kalmykia, where political elites have lost trust as people increasingly and openly acknowledge their corruption.

A Leadership Change Like Any Other

Orlov, [similar](#) to other regional leaders in Russia's south, built his career beyond the republic he was chosen to lead. For a decade and a half, he was the permanent

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representative of Kalmykia to the Russian president in Moscow, and served briefly as an aide to Kalmykia's prime minister in 2003. His political rise depended on the patronage of his predecessor as Kalmykia's leader, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov (in power from 1993 to 2010). With his nomination and appointment in the fall of 2010 during the Medvedev interregnum, Orlov was tasked with addressing social problems and rampant corruption associated with the tenure of his predecessor, Ilyumzhinov.

Orlov's leadership, however, was characterized by distrust on the part of the population from the beginning. In 2011, a group of Kalmyk parents [appealed](#) to U.S. President Barack Obama about poor conditions at a children's hospital in Elista. The next year, Orlov's attempts at purging a set of bureaucrats with ties to Ilyumzhinov led to fierce blowback against his leadership in the local media, which Ilyumzhinov still controlled; a 2013 internet survey asking respondents who they would support for Kalmykia's leader if elections were held the next day put Orlov's support at just over 10 percent.

By tapping into vast administrative resources, Orlov recovered by the next year and was elected to the position of Head of Republic with 83 percent of the vote in September 2014. This election was [one of 32](#) in Russia's regions held between 2013 and 2015 where the governor resigned prematurely, was appointed as acting head of the region, and subsequently ran for reelection. This past spring, Orlov instead was one of a set of regional leaders dismissed by Putin and replaced by another candidate. The list also includes Chelyabinsk's governor Boris Dubrovsky, who was [implicated](#) in a corruption scandal involving road construction in that region.

Orlov faced similar headwinds. In March of this year, he was [implicated](#) in a corruption scandal associated with the construction of housing for orphans, with the contractor overcharging by roughly 10 million rubles for work on three projects in total. There was also overhang from a long-developing scandal; in July 2017, the republic's First Deputy Prime Minister Peter Lantsanov was [accused](#) of siphoning off state subsidies – an estimated 40 million rubles in total – intended for agricultural producers to a holding account, from which the monies were subsequently stolen. In August 2019, the high court of Kalmykia sentenced the former minister of agriculture – the position that Lantsanov held at the time of the fraud – to seven years in prison for his role in the [2011 scheme](#).

During Lantsanov's trial, former chief of staff to Ilyumzhinov from 1994 to 2009 Igor Shalkhakov [testified](#) that Orlov himself knew of the theft and appropriated 15 million rubles for his personal use and to help pay costs associated with the holding of the March 2012 Russian presidential election. From 2014 to 2016, Shalkhakov was head of Orlov's administration, after which he [resigned](#), having fallen out with Orlov. Despite ongoing criminal investigations into corruption scandals in the republic's government that have cost Kalmykia an [estimated](#) 500 million rubles, Putin [thanked](#) Orlov for his work and awarded him the Order of Friendship for his service to the country two months after his resignation. Orlov was subsequently nominated by Khasikov as a candidate to be senator from

Kalmykia to the Federation Council, a choice which surprised people in Kalmykia but which was rumored to have been influenced by the Kremlin.

September Elections, October Protests

From March until September, Khasikov served as acting head of the republic. Prior to this appointment, Khasikov worked as an advisor to the director of a federal agency Rosmolodezh (Russian Youth) and was a deputy to the Khural, Kalmykia's parliament. He also co-founded Fight Nights Global, a martial arts tournament. He fought his last professional fight in 2014 while serving as a senator from Kalmykia to the Federation Council. He purportedly spent more time in the gym than at the Council, raising the eyebrows of his fellow representatives. Khasikov's appointment was similarly received in Kalmykia, where many consider him an outsider who has neither managerial experience nor knowledge about the situation in the republic.

During his tenure as acting head, Khasikov tried to present himself as a man of action, in contrast to Orlov's management style. The republic has hosted several federal-level ministers and officials this year, including Deputy Prime Minister Vitaly Mutko (formerly Minister of Sport during the Sochi Olympics), Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Maksim Topilin, and Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov. Further, Putin met with Khasikov in the Kremlin on July 31, which was widely publicized in the Kalmyk media; Khasikov reported on his progress and asked Putin for financial support to address key local issues, including improving the quality of drinking water and turning cattle breeding into a profitable industry. This demonstration of support for the acting head by the Kremlin was doubtless aimed at generating votes for Khasikov. His candidacy was further promoted by Sangadzhi Tarbaev – Khasikov's spin doctor, friend, and former business partner at Fight Nights Global – who in an [interview](#) with a local TV channel called on the populace to support Khasikov by pointing out that he has the trust of Putin.

Kalmykia was one of 16 regions where governor elections were held on September 8, 2019. Khasikov easily won the vote. Though the high level of support was possibly attributable to electoral fraud (at 82.9 percent, Khasikov received the second highest vote percentage of all regional leaders elected), the results of the elections were not challenged by his opponents. Khasikov's main challenger in the election was Natalya Manzhikova, the nominee from A Just Russia who received 8.4 percent. Namsyr Mandzhiev, a member of the Khural, was the putative nominee for the Communist Party. However, he was not registered by the republic's electoral commission by the July 31 deadline, ostensibly because he did not pass the municipal filter, which requires a candidate to collect signatures from municipal legislators (the threshold is nine percent in Kalmykia; Mandzhiev appealed to a higher court to be included on the ballot, but was denied).

Khasikov may not be popular among the older electorate, but he has a certain appeal to younger generations. He is an ethnic Kalmyk, young, fit, reserved, and clearly not a

politician—he has looked uncomfortable when giving public speeches but is quickly learning how to speak smoothly by deploying bureaucratic jargon. In his speeches, he calls on the people of Kalmykia to unite and work harder for the prosperity of the republic. He embellishes his political message with cultural symbolism derived from the Kalmyk epic *Jangar*. For instance, during a [public speech](#) on Republic Day (July 5), a new holiday that he introduced, Khasikov gave the following task to the audience: “Let’s be proud of living in our republic... We live here to turn our republic into a real country of Bumba.” The audience was quick to draw a parallel between their new acting head, whose fighting name is Batu Khan, and Jangar Khan of the epic, who is the sovereign of the fabled country of Bumba. The epic *Jangar* is revered by many Kalmyks as a sacred historical document rather than a fabled tale; in the story, Bumba is a paradise on Earth where people are immortal and live in boundless happiness and plenty – the opposite of today’s Kalmykia.

His promising start was spoiled with the appointment of Trapeznikov as acting head (the equivalent of mayor) of Elista, a choice that has Moscow’s fingerprints all over it given the [congratulatory note](#) Trapeznikov [received](#) from Vladislav Surkov. Trapeznikov, whom Khasikov [described](#) as trained in “the best school for an anti-crisis manager,” faced initial opposition from local NGOs and some residents of Elista, who on September 27 sent a letter to the City Parliament demanding the new mayor’s resignation. The opposition grew more widespread with the first public [gathering](#) to protest against the appointment, which took place two days later at Elista’s Victory Square and was attended by about 150 people. In response, Khasikov [made](#) a video address, reminding the public about the Soviet past when specialists from all parts of the Soviet Union came to rebuild the republic following the Kalmyks’ return from deportation. Khasikov is implying that the ethnically Russian Trapeznikov is a similar sort of expert; however, he hardly has a record in Donetsk of building and harmonizing multinational communities.

Unconvinced by Khasikov’s reasoning for the appointment, more than 300 people took to Elista’s Central Square on October 1. Trying to be non-confrontational, the organizers [called](#) the gathering “Prayers for the welfare of Elista.” However, instead of chanting prayers, people openly voiced their discontent that Khasikov could not find a suitable candidate from Kalmykia for the mayoral post. One of its organizers, the Kalmyk journalist Badma Byurchiev, was fined 20,000 rubles for organizing an “unsanctioned protest.” Several others were also tried and found guilty; their punishment included monetary fines or community service. Only three activists were exonerated by the court. At the time of writing, a dozen more activists are scheduled to be tried at the Elista City court for organizing and participating in this protest. Following an unsuccessful meeting with Khasikov later on October 5, activists called for another gathering – this time a “sanctioned” one – to be held on [October 13](#) at Victory Square; this protest attracted between 2,500 to 4,000 people. It was the largest protest in Kalmykia since 2004, when OMON forces and the police brutally dispersed a rally against Ilyumzhinov’s continued tenure as president.

Subsequent protests were held in Elista on October 27 and November 17, which drew an estimated 3,500 and 1,500 people, respectively, according to organizers. Continued protests are due in part to new revelations about Khasikov's mismanagement of the republic; on October 21, the republic's government published Khasikov's decree of September 21 to appoint Orlov as the new senator from Kalmykia to the Federation Council. Khasikov kept this important, yet unpopular, appointment secret for a month, giving the impression to many that issues of corruption are still prevalent in the republic, despite Khasikov's assurances to the contrary. The protestors' demands have now expanded to include the resignations of Khasikov and Orlov, in addition to Trapeznikov's removal.

Conclusion

Determined to be heard, activists are now trying to reach as many audiences as they can by organizing online, cultivating conversations with members of the republican Khural and Elista City Parliament, as well as posting updates on the issue via social media (the movement has multiple Instagram hashtags, including *#этонашгород* ("This is our city"), *#сертнсергцхятнхальмгуд* ("Wake up, rise up, Kalmyk people"), and *#трапезниковуходи* ("Go away Trapeznikov"). The strategic use of the Internet, the echoes of urban activism as occurring in Moscow, and the level of popular protest in a hitherto politically passive region may have taken some in the Kremlin by surprise. With both sides determined to hold their ground, popular anger may reach a boiling point if no concessions are made. One of two outcomes seems probable at the moment: either the movement will be suppressed by force with grievances swept under the rug, or some sort of compromise will be initiated by the local authorities.

One of the poorest regions in Russia, Kalmykia is a republic where economic vulnerability, pervasive corruption, and political disempowerment have elicited increasing discontent. Moscow's recentralization of power, the appointment of outsiders to work in the republic, and its meddling in local politics are perceived by many people as an attempt by the Kremlin to rid the republic of last vestiges of self-governance. These concerns build on an old fear in Kalmykia of losing its status as a republic and being merged into a neighboring region—a prospect that has historical precedent in the deportation of the Kalmyks and the abolishment of their autonomous republic during World War II and the merging of some ethnic regions in Russia during the 2000s. In this sense, Trapeznikov's case serves as a thermometer that gauges the rising political temperature in Kalmykia. It also indicates that the longstanding issues of corruption and mismanagement that have persisted in the republic will continue despite the recent leadership change.