

The Bellwether Battle for Bashkortostan (Rage Against the Machine)

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On December 7, 2003, Russian voters in some regions will choose not only a parliament, but also a regional leader. For many citizens, the latter contests will mean much more than the former. Nowhere is this clearer than in Bashkortostan, the seat of one of Russia's most notorious political machines. In the eyes of many Kremlin leaders, the regime of Bashkortostan's president, Murtaza Rakhimov, exemplifies everything that Russian president Vladimir Putin's administration is sworn to oppose: an economy closed to big Moscow-based business, open flouting of Russian law, discrimination against Russians who do not know the Bashkir language, and even flirtation with separatism in a bargaining game for resources. Federal-level actors challenged the Bashkortostan political machine in the 1993 regional presidential elections, but lost resoundingly. Powerful Kremlin forces are now reloading for a new showdown. If Rakhimov loses, the event will herald a stunning fundamental consolidation of central power vis-à-vis the regions. If he wins, however, it will indicate that the Kremlin remains as dependent on key regional leaders as the regional leaders are on the Kremlin.

Background on Bashkortostan

Nestled snugly in the western foothills of the Ural Mountains, Bashkortostan is one of Russia's largest and politically most important regions. According to figures accepted even by regime opponents, just one of its flagship corporations, Bashneft', processes 12 percent of all Russian oil and produces 18 percent of the country's high octane gasoline. With more than 4 million citizens, Bashkortostan is among Russia's most populous regions and contains 6 of the country's 225 Duma districts. It also stands out as the most populous of Russia's ethnically designated regions, known as republics. Strikingly, however, the titular Bashkir ethnic group constitutes just 22 percent of the population (according to the 1989 census), whereas 28 percent identified themselves as Tatars and some 39 percent as Russians.

Two issues have dominated Bashkir politics since Rakhimov first assumed power as chair of the regional parliament in 1990—economic reform and “sovereignty.” On economics, the republic leadership has tended to favor a gradual market transition in which the state supports key industries while they adjust to market mechanisms. Opinion

polls and election results have shown strong support for this position in the republic. The Bashkir leader has also successfully fended off the incursion of major Moscow-based financial-industrial groups, some of whom covet Bashkortostan's resources and industrial riches. The bigger issue, however, has tended to be sovereignty, which effectively has meant the supremacy of republic over federal law and the willingness to exercise this independence by either taking or winning financial concessions from Moscow.

The First Battle for Bashkortostan: 1993

December 2003 will mark the 10-year anniversary of the creation of the presidency in Bashkortostan. This move enabled Rakhimov to shed dependence on his former parliamentary peers and to firmly consolidate the political machine that quickly stripped the republic of nearly all open opposition and free media. The first presidential contest was a landmark event in Russian federalism, with Rakhimov employing all of his resources to defeat a strong Moscow-backed rival.

The Bashkir president ran largely on a campaign of sovereignty from the federal center and the claim that his tight control over the economy, shielding it from Muscovite encroachment, had made the republic much better off than its more federally oriented neighbors. Rakhimov's opponent in this election was Rafis Kadyrov, head of the Bashkortostan-based Bank Vostok, one of the wealthiest and oldest banks outside Moscow at the time. An ethnic Bashkir himself, Kadyrov blasted the incumbent on sovereignty, making the issue one of the central elements of his campaign. He said that this policy had brought the republic to the brink of economic disaster by alienating it from the rest of Russia. Alienation, in turn, was manifesting itself in Bashkir firms being denied federal licenses and financing. Kadyrov thus declared that he wanted to turn Bashkortostan "from a center of destabilization of the political situation in Russia to a buttress for the federal government.... If people elect me, then I as president of the republic will consider myself to be a helper of the president of Russia." Kadyrov also differentiated himself from Rakhimov on the issue of economic reform, favoring rapid over gradual economic reform.

Although these two candidates did lay out clear and opposing visions for the future, the outcome hinged at least as much on negative campaigning and the use of what many Russians now call the "administrative resource" (the stuff of machine politics). Virtually all local mass media (especially television, which was and remains state-run) variously portrayed Kadyrov as a Yeltsin lackey, a misogynist, a blood-thirsty power-monger, a party-pooper, a liar, the leader of a hidden Communist network, unpredictable, litigious, a braggart, cocky, rude, and neglectful of people, among many other equally unflattering things. During the run-up to the election, the Bashkortostan government also provided free transportation, discounted food prices in stores, and raised the wages of state employees.

Kadyrov was not without resources, however. As of late 1993, Bank Vostok had more than 40 branches throughout Bashkortostan, giving Kadyrov a corps of eager and devoted volunteers. Further, nearly 25 percent of the republic's population had invested their privatization vouchers at the time in Kadyrov's holding company, Vostok. Moreover, during the pre-election period, Kadyrov promised free bank shares to these investors and

major gifts to religious charities. Kadyrov also enjoyed the support of Bank Vostok's own newspaper, the weekly *Ekonomika i My*, which boasted in 1993 that it had the highest circulation of any paper in Bashkortostan, nearly 300,000. This paper blasted Rakhimov and his sovereignty drive and accused him of corruption. Kadyrov also actively campaigned throughout the republic, issuing numerous leaflets and posters that flooded republic cities in the week running up to the election and that appeared to be more numerous than pro-Rakhimov ones. Some federal media, including state-owned television, were also known to run stories favorable to Kadyrov.

In 1993, however, Rakhimov was able to crush his challenger, receiving 64 percent of the vote compared to Kadyrov's 29 percent. The crucial factors in his victory were genuine popular support for the sovereignty drive combined with Kadyrov's inability to overcome the massive power of Rakhimov's state apparatus. This was especially true in farming villages, which are particularly dependent on the republic's government for important supplies and, because of their often extreme isolation, receive little information other than that given them by the state. The negative campaign against Kadyrov also proved quite effective.

The Interlude

The period between 1993 and 2003 saw the apogee of the Rakhimov machine, which remained virtually unchallenged by a federal central government preoccupied with economic problems and war in Chechnya. Rakhimov sometimes failed even to pay lip service to federal law, as was quite clearly illustrated in the 1998 republic presidential elections. Several candidates lined up to challenge Rakhimov in 1998, among them the energetic and ethnically Russian Duma deputy Aleksandr Arinin and former republic prime minister and Rakhimov rival Marat Mirgaziamov, an ethnic Tatar. Both of these candidates had significant support in the population. Both candidates, however, were disqualified from the race on technicalities by the regional Central Election Commission, which was filled with Rakhimov supporters. Among the technicalities was a provision in Bashkortostan law that the president of the republic must speak not only Russian, but also Bashkir, a language that roughly a quarter of Bashkirs themselves do not speak. This language requirement violated Russian law, which prohibits political restrictions on the basis of such ethnic criteria. After the election, which Rakhimov handily won, the Russian Supreme Court even ruled in favor of Arinin. But Rakhimov's administration simply ignored the court's decision, leaving the Bashkir leader firmly in place. The 1998 republic presidential elections, therefore, can hardly be called a battle.

With the rise of Vladimir Putin in the year 2000, however, the federal central government began an active campaign to rein in republic leaders, reducing their control over local police, courts, and other agencies. As the aim was to reduce centrifugal tendencies and violations of Russian law, Bashkortostan was a prime target. This was all the more true since Rakhimov had joined the Fatherland–All Russia bloc that challenged Putin's favorite party, Unity, in the 1999 parliamentary elections. Unwilling to test the power and will of the new Russian president, Bashkortostan adopted a revised constitution in 2002 that was in much greater (but not total) accord with federal basic law.

In the summer of 2003, however, the parliaments of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan appealed to the Russian Constitutional Court and received a surprise favorable ruling: Only the Constitutional Court has the right to decide the constitutionality of regional constitutions such as Bashkortostan's. Because previous decisions were made by other courts, this ruling provides Bashkortostan's leadership with some legal cover to hang onto (or even restore) republic constitutional provisions that the central government does not like.

The Second Battle for Bashkortostan: 2003

The battle shaping up for 2003 appears to be highly similar to that of 1993, although both pro- and anti-Rakhimov sides have made some tactical adjustments. Although Rakhimov has made a number of concessions, he still has a great deal of influence over the republic's election commission and police. This election commission has recently signaled that it will once again invoke the presidential language requirement in order to filter out candidates. As in 1993 and 1998, Rakhimov also still exercises virtually total control over regional media. His influence has occasionally extended even to federal media. One study, for example, found that his regime has even blocked local delivery of particular newspaper issues containing undesirable articles. In 1999, his regime also once cut the local broadcast of a highly critical federal show on the largest federal television network. He also continues to stand by his policies of the past decade, with supporters stressing specific development projects (such as the building of schools) that they say directly benefit republic inhabitants.

Perhaps Rakhimov's most important survival strategy, however, has been to declaratively join Putin's favorite party, United Russia, even becoming its regional leader and the head of the party's regional list of candidates for the Duma. To demonstrate his strength, he nominated his own loyalists under the party banner in the March 2003 republic legislative race and delivered a United Russia landslide. This tremendous show of political power signals to federal United Russia leaders that Rakhimov can produce a massive republic victory for them in the Duma contest if they back his reelection to the presidency. Their opposition, on the other hand, would almost certainly augur the defeat of United Russia candidates in Bashkortostan's six districts and a poor showing in the overall party-list voting in this populous region. For this reason, many in the Kremlin now reportedly calculate that they are better off backing him than opposing him, even though they would strongly prefer that someone else be at Bashkortostan's helm. Some reports indicate that this "accommodationist" Kremlin wing is the one associated with former presidential chief of staff Alexander Voloshin and his deputy, Vladislav Surkov.

As in 1993, Rakhimov's main opponent is a young banker with federal support. Sergei Veremeenko is former chairman of the board and current co-owner of Mezhprombank, one of Russia's top 10 banks by many measures. As such, he makes no secret of his great wealth, promising to use his own money so as to avoid dependency on oligarchs and to invest personally in Bashkortostan to make it wealthier. Like Kadyrov in 1993, he controls his own newspaper printed outside and circulated inside of the republic. Also like Kadyrov, he enjoys significant support from Moscow-based power structures. Perhaps most strikingly, Veremeenko has joined Rakhimov in cultivating his own ties

with the United Russia Party, becoming an adviser to the chair of the party's central executive committee. This puts the republic race's two main opponents in the same "party" camp. Veremeenko's strongest Kremlin supporters are rumored to be the group of "St. Petersburg Chekists" (linked to former KGB structures) in the Kremlin, including deputy heads of presidential administration Viktor Ivanov and Igor Sechin. There are also indications that Putin's envoy to the Volga macroregion, Sergei Kirienko, is supportive of his bid. Accordingly, central print media have given extensive coverage to his candidacy, often uncritically printing Veremeenko's condemnation of the state of affairs in Bashkortostan. Interestingly, not long before his announcement, a Russian government agency also put out a report comparing economic statistics in Bashkortostan with those in Tatarstan, emphasizing figures that point unfavorably to the former. Such figures give Rakhimov opponents easy ammunition for their campaigns.

Several other notables are running, including Arinin and former LUKOIL executive Ralif Safin. Veremeenko is generally regarded as the main challenger, in part because he has the strongest Kremlin backing. Should Veremeenko be forced out of the race, however, Safin or Arinin could wind up as Rakhimov's main rival in 2003.

Implications

Observers would be well advised to follow the Bashkortostan presidential race carefully as a harbinger of things to come in at least three important realms of Russian politics:

Center Region Relations

If Rakhimov is successfully removed from power in Bashkortostan, this event would mark perhaps the most dramatic breaking of a political machine in Russia to date. Such success against one of the strongest strongmen in one of the most powerful regions in Russia would almost certainly cow remaining powerful regional leaders like Tatarstan's Mintimer Shaimiev into submission. A Rakhimov victory, however, would embolden regional leaders both to build up their own power and to resist Kremlin reforms designed to dilute it.

The Party of Power

If the federal United Russia continues to rely on Rakhimov to win regional votes, and if Rakhimov actually wins, one will have grounds seriously to doubt the stability of any pro-Putin legislative majority that might result. A "party of power" whose voters and Duma representatives are controlled by regional strongmen like Rakhimov cannot be considered a reliable presidential power base for Putin. Indeed, as was noted in PONARS Policy Memo 290, regional leaders were quite successful in diluting or even thwarting key Putin initiatives in spheres directly impacting regional barons' power. If Veremeenko wins, the United Russia that emerges is likely to be a much more disciplined pro-presidential structure.

Democracy

A Rakhimov victory would signal other regional presidents and governors that their best long-run strategy may in fact lie not in unmitigated loyalty to the Kremlin, but instead in the creation of a political machine so strong that it becomes indispensable to Kremlin officials wanting to win votes. This will reinforce or accelerate a trend toward regional autocratization that some have observed in recent years. Veremeenko, if he wins, may not be any more democratic than his predecessor. But at least a precedent for leadership turnover in a contested race will have been set. Of course, this depends on how the turnover takes place. The worst-case scenario would be if Kremlin authorities find a way to give Rakhimov a taste of his own medicine, forcibly removing him from the race; this would quite likely foreshadow the rapid spread of Bashkortostan-style “machine democracy” across the whole country, depriving ever more voters of any meaningful political choice.

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