

# Russian State Nationalism vs. Local Nationalisms

## The Case of Tatarstan

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Tatarstan, an autonomous ethnic republic within the Russian Federation where traditionally Muslim Tatars make up just over half the population, was at the forefront of nationalist mobilization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. From 1990 to 1993, against the background of political rivalries in Moscow (first between Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, then between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament) the republic's leadership enjoyed virtual independence and consolidated its position vis-à-vis the federal government to win extraordinary concessions in a power-sharing treaty between the republic and the federal center. The republic's leadership insisted on being an equal partner to Moscow, retained a substantial share of federal taxes for the local budget, and ensured that local laws sometimes overran federal law. Internally, Tatar ethnicity and proficiency in the Tatar language had a substantial impact on one's career opportunities. For instance, until recently, three-quarters of members of the local legislature (*gossovet*) were ethnic Tatars, even though Tatars form barely a majority of the republic's population.

During the tenure of Russian President Vladimir Putin, these powers have been slowly but surely reduced. Republican laws found to contradict federal law have been abolished, fiscal discipline has been enforced, and the ethnic composition of the *gossovet* has been revised in the Moscow headquarters of the ruling party, United Russia.

While it is quite clear why Russian federal leaders would want to make these changes, it is not immediately obvious how they could do so without encountering substantial resistance from either the republic's leadership or the popular leaders of the nationalist Tatar movement. This memo uses the example of Tatarstan to account for the ease with which the federal center has regained the ground lost a dozen years before.

### **Marginalization of the Nationalist Movement by the Late 1990s**

In the 1990s, President Mintimer Shaimiyev of Tatarstan, an experienced Communist *apparatchik*, played a subtle game with the popular nationalist movement. On the one hand, he used it as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with Moscow over a power-sharing treaty to win more concessions by presenting himself as a nationalist leader. On the other hand, he faced the dramatic example of Chechnya, where leaders of the republic's nationalist movement ousted and replaced members of the old Communist elite, such as himself. Eventually, Shaimiyev was able to subdue and marginalize the nationalist movement and secure his own grip on political power in the republic, even as he boosted the status of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation. Although the status of the republic was temporarily elevated, elimination of the nationalist mass movement tipped the balance of power toward the federal center by the late 1990s. Consequently, it was hard for the republic's leadership to rely on the power of nationalism when President Putin started to revise the relationship between Moscow and ethnic republics like Tatarstan.

### **The Intimidating Example of the Chechen War**

The example of Chechnya was also important in that Putin's resolution in fighting the second Chechen war inhibited the leadership of Tatarstan from rekindling nationalist mobilization. In trying to resolve the Chechen standoff, Putin chose a tough approach that did not cost him popular support. For President Shaimiyev, this made a possible reinvigoration of the Tatar nationalist movement he had undermined a doubly dangerous strategy, as he risked the retaliation of both nationalist leaders and the consolidated center.

### **The Proliferation of Radical Islam**

The emergence of radical Islam among a once thoroughly secular people is an underappreciated factor. Tatar leaders might use their Islamic identity for instrumental reasons on the global stage and did so on numerous occasions. Although ethnic Tatars dominate in the local government, they remain marginalized and stigmatized beyond the boundaries of their ethnic republic. Few opportunities in Russia, plus an interest in boosting their status, prompt a search for useful contacts in the Islamic world. Islam in the secularized post-Soviet context is an important asset for Tatar

leaders, and may prove instrumental for achieving their economic and symbolic interests. Some local companies have long established businesses and business links in Muslim countries. The chill in U.S.-Arab relations is seen by some in Tatarstan as a lifetime opportunity to secure Arab money. Emphasis on Islamic solidarity may be interpreted as a tool to ensure a privileged position in a world that has been denying Tatars such opportunities. The pressure of the federal center to curb the powers of the local government may exacerbate the situation in the republic even though the leadership is afraid of, and attempts to distance itself from, radical political Islam. Tatar leaders would like to promote a modernized version of Islam compatible with Western civilization. At a minimum, they would like to ensure their political control over the republic's Muslim clerics. Their attitude toward traditional religion is not unlike President Shaimiyev's attitude toward the nationalist movement that he so skillfully used to promote his and the republic's interest in the 1990s even as he subdued and marginalized it.

While the ruling elite of Tatarstan is anxious to bring expressions of Islamic identity under their control, one cannot help but wonder how adequate their control is in the absence of guaranteed cooperation from the republic's Spiritual Board of Muslims. Currently, there are a total of 21 mosques registered in the city of Kazan alone. There are 14 Islamic schools of different levels in the republic, including the Russian Islamic University (founded in 1998) which educates about 1,400 students. Official curricula do not necessarily always correspond to their actual content, and manuals published under the authorship of local imams can camouflage texts of Middle East ideologues. Unregistered private schools that function without any local government control also exist.

Before a United Muslim Congress in 1998, Tatarstan hosted a number of Islamic centers that struggled with one another for influence and power. A number of Tatar clerics received religious education in the Middle East. Moreover, foreign Islamic charities financed the building of new mosques and sent Islamic literature to the republic. It was in this context that the initial penetration of fundamentalist ideas occurred. The local government revised its policies with respect to foreign Islamic influence in the late 1990s, yet this legacy of the chaotic 1990s has turned out to be long-lasting. Even the leadership of the republic's Spiritual Board of Muslims is openly suspected of having links with Middle Eastern fundamentalists. Sources close to the local government report that the first prayers in the new Kul Sharif Mosque, opened with pomp and fanfare last summer during the Kazan millennium celebrations, were patterned after the Saudi (Wahhabite or Salafite) style rather than the local (Hanafite) tradition.

Tatar leaders cannot afford to lose control over this situation and therefore must cooperate with the federal center in their struggle with radical forms of Islam. For its part, the federal center is eager to oblige,

resulting in a crackdown on Islamic zealots. Thus, in January 2005, several dozen members of the international Hizb ut-Tahrir party (the Party of Islamic Liberation) were arrested in Tatarstan. A side effect of this marriage of convenience between Moscow and Kazan is that the balance of power has further shifted toward the federal center. In fact, the Kremlin feels so confident these days that it is not afraid of returning to the republics some of the powers that it had earlier taken away.

With local nationalism subdued and idle, the ideology of Russian state nationalism promoted by the Putin administration seems to be gaining momentum even in ethnic republics, where increasing shares of the population positively identify themselves with the Russian state. This is, perhaps, inevitable, so long as the only viable alternative frame of mobilization remains Islamic fundamentalism.