

CONTESTED AUTONOMY: TATARSTAN UNDER PUTIN (2000-2004)

TARTIŞMALI OTONOMİ: PUTİN DÖNEMİNDE TATARİSTAN (2000-2004)

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to try to understand why central attacks on the Tatarstan's autonomy have failed to produce a significant popular backlash in that republic. Why did Tatarstan, defying most expectations, not go the way of Chechnya, to which it was often compared in the 1990s? Kazan-based observers generally explain Tatarstan's apparent lack of passionate displeasure in economic terms: Because Tatars feel they have not benefited materially from sovereignty they sense nothing has been lost with the revocation of this status. This interpretation reflects a disappointment in the 1990s market reforms and the sense that life today is less secure than it was under Soviet rule. While this explanation helps to illuminate part of the story, there exists substantial evidence to suggest that non-material factors also play a significant role. As I contend in this paper, fundamental issues of history and geography play a role in shaping outcomes. Specifically, a constituent region of the Russian state for nearly half a millennium, Tatarstan today is place that is seen by a majority of the republic's citizens, Tatar and Russian alike, as an inextricable part of a greater multinational expanse, part of a greater multinational dialog.

Key Words: Sovereignty, Autonomy, Tatarstan, Russia, Putin

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı Tataristan'ın otonomisine karşı yapılan saldırıların niçin halk nezdinde ciddi bir tepki oluşturmadığını anlamaya çalışmaktır. Dahası Tataristan, çoğu beklentinin aksine 1990'lar boyunca sık sık kendisiyle karşılaştırılan Çeçenistan'ın izlediği yolu niçin izlememiştir? Kazan merkezli gözlemciler Tataristan'ın tepkisel anlamdaki bu eksikliğini daha çok ekonomik kavramlarla açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu çerçevede ortaya atılan argüman, Tatarların egemenliğin maddi açıdan bir sayda getirmediyine ve bunun geri alınmasının da pek bir kayıp olmayacağına inandığı yönündedir. Aslında bu algı, 1990'larda piyasa reformlarına yönelik düş kırıklığının ve bugünkü yaşam koşullarının Sovyet dönemiyle karşılaştırıldığında daha az güvenli olduğu yönündeki algının bir yansımasıdır. Bu açıklama meselenin bir kısmını aydınlatmaya yardımcı olsa da, diğer bazı faktörlerin de bu doğrultuda önemli rol oynadığına dair ipuçları bulunmaktadır. Çalışmada da belirtildiği üzere tarihi ve coğrafi unsurlar, eğilimleri ve dolayısıyla da çıktıkları şekillendirmektedir. Özellikle yaklaşık beş yüzyıllık bir süre boyunca Rus Devletinin tamamlayıcı bir unsuru olan Tataristan, bu cumhuriyetin vatandaşlarının - Tatar ve Ruslar - büyük çoğunluğu tarafından benzer şekilde daha genel çerçevedeki çok uluslu bir diyalogun birbirinden ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Egemenlik, Otonomi, Tataristan, Rusya, Putin

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In the days following Boris Yeltsin's abdication of the Russian presidency, the question "What can we expect from Putin?" dominated headlines in Tatarstan. Tatarstani President Mintimer Shaimiev predicted,

*"Putin will follow the principles of further democratization. For that, multinational Russia must consider the interests of the republics – that much is clear. There's not a single head of state who wants an unnecessary headache ... it is unacceptable to put pressure on the ethnic republics – otherwise it could be fatal."*²

At the time, Shaimiev's words were read neither as mere hubris nor simply a veiled threat. Rather, they reflected a broader understanding of a power balance favoring Tatarstan, along with other ethnic republics of the Russian Federation, vis-à-vis Moscow. After all, it was this oil-rich, Muslim-dominated region that in 1990 formed the vanguard of Russia's "parade of sovereignties."³ It was Tatarstan that in 1992 joined Chechnya in refusing to sign the Federation Treaty, an act the Kremlin viewed as tantamount to separatism. It was Tatarstan that, later that same year, hosted a referendum in which a majority of Tatarstanis agreed that the republic is a "sovereign state, subject to international law", attributes subsequently written into its constitution. And it was Tatarstan that in 1994 leveraged from Moscow a treaty recognizing the former as a "State ... united with the Russian Federation."

The 1994 pact, touted by Kazan as its *coup de grace*, signified the first of more than 40 such power-sharing arrangements in which Moscow relinquished to its regions varying degrees of autonomy, ethnic republics negotiating the greatest amounts.⁴ However contradictory the treaty between Kazan and Moscow, it helped to avert armed conflict at a time when warfare seemed imminent.⁵ For the remainder of the decade, Tatarstan operated largely independently of Moscow, directing its own economy, cultivating its own diplomatic relations – most notably with Turkey and the Middle East – and redeveloping a Tatar culture influenced by centuries of russification. By the time Vladimir Putin arrived on the scene, the republic had become, according to Stepanov, a "quasi-independent nation state."⁶

Shaimiev's prediction also reflected a scholarly consensus that sub-state nationalist claims to autonomy or sovereignty, once set in motion, generally are irreversible: A metropolitan capital's encroachments on a minority group's

² Quoted in Aiaz Khasonov, "Kakoi Put' Vyberet Rossiia?", *Respublika Tatarstan*, 14 January 2000, p. 1.

³ See Jeffery Kahn, 2000, "The Parade of Sovereignties: Establishing the Vocabulary of the New Russian Federalism", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 58-89.

⁴ See Peter Söderlund, "The Significance of Structural Power Resources in the Russian Bilateral Treaty Process 1994-1998", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 36, 1998, pp. 311-24.

⁵ According to reports, Moscow ordered tanks to Tatarstan's western border on the eve of the 1992 referendum, and within months after signing the 1994 treaty with Tatarstan, Yeltsin commanded an invasion of Chechnya. See Ravil Bukharaev, *The Model of Tatarstan under President Mintimer Shaimiev*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Farid Mukhametshin and Liubov' Ageeva (Eds.), *Respublika Tatarstan: Noveishaia Istoriiia*, (Kazan: Medikoservis, 2000).

⁶ Valery Stepanov, "Ethnic Tensions and Separatism in Russia", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2000, p. 315.

previously gained freedoms most frequently intensify separatist demands.⁷ Central to this body of literature is the supposition of an essential connection between ethnicity and territory. For instance, Conversi writes that "separatism becomes the only option for a human group wishing to maintain its identity" in the face of assimilatory centralization. He concludes, "No multiethnic state is entirely safe from the Bosnian model."⁸ This line of thinking was particularly prevalent in the post-socialist Russian context, where ethno-federalism, though a Soviet relict, most often was viewed as the only means of maintaining the country's territorial integrity. Slocum, for example, in a discussion of Tatarstan in the late 1990s, cautioned against the desire among certain Moscow-based politicians to reconfigure Russia as a "purely territorial," i.e. non-ethnic, federation, asserting that movement in that direction would spawn "active resistance, even armed rebellion. At that dreadful point, the world community of states will again face the situation it faced with Chechnya."⁹

Yet in spite of such warnings, the situation has not played out according to *either* scenario sketched by Shaimiev. First, amid a broader recentralization of the Russian Federation, Moscow most definitely has "put pressure" on its ethnic republics, forcing upon them numerous changes to their constitutions and going so far as to invalidate their right to elect their own presidents.¹⁰ In Tatarstan, as this article illustrates, the center has targeted the politico-judicial, economic, and, most worrisome for Tatar national leaders, cultural spheres. And second, although Shaimiev imagined a strict if/then situation, Putin's "pressure" on Tatarstan has not given him an "unnecessary headache." In fact, perhaps most striking in this case is the mildness of the Tatar response. In contrast to the early 1990s, when large anti-Muscovite demonstrations were common, no significant protests have taken place in the republic since Putin assumed power; and Kazan's political elite, including a president who once brazenly defied Moscow, has not attempted to mobilize its citizenry against the center.

Focusing on changes during Putin's first term (2000-2004), the fundamental purpose of this article is to try to understand why central attacks on the Tatarstan's autonomy have failed to produce a violent backlash in that republic. Why did Tatarstan, defying most expectations, not go the way of Chechnya, to which it so often has been compared? Kazan-based observers, as explored in this article, generally explain Tatarstan's apparent lack of passionate displeasure in economic terms: Because Tatars feel they have not benefited materially from

⁷ See Marvin Mikesell and Alexander Murphy, "A Framework for Comparative Study of Minority-Group Aspirations", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 81, No. 4, 1991, pp. 581-604.

⁸ Daniele Conversi, "Reassessing Current Theories of Nationalism: Nationalism as Boundary Maintenance and Creation", In John Agnew (Ed.), *Political Geography: A Reader*, (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 329.

⁹ John Slocum, "A Sovereign State within Russia? The External Relations of the Republic of Tatarstan", *Global Society*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1999, p. 74.

¹⁰ See Gordon Hahn, "The Impact of Putin's Federal Reforms on Democratization in Russia", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2003, pp. 114-53; Elena Chebankova, "Putin's Struggle for Federalism: Structures, Operations, and the Commitment Problem", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2007, pp. 279-302.

sovereignty they sense nothing has been lost with the revocation of this status. This interpretation reflects a disappointment in the 1990s market reforms and the sense that life today is less comfortable, less secure than it was under Soviet rule. While this explanation helps to illuminate part of the story, there exists substantial evidence to suggest that non-material factors also play a significant role. As I contend in this paper, fundamental issues of history and geography play a role in shaping outcomes. Specifically, a constituent region of the Russian state for nearly half a millennium, Tatarstan today is place that is seen by a majority of the republic's citizens, Tatar and Russian alike, as an inextricable part of a greater multinational expanse, part of a greater multinational dialog.

This article is comprised of three parts. Part one offers three reasons why Anglophone scholars failed to anticipate the Tatarstani response to the recentralization of the Russian Federation carried out under Putin: a general *conceptual* confusion surrounding sovereignty, a *theoretical* lens that essentializes ethnicity, and a *praxis* that under-appreciates in-depth regional perspectives. Part two, based on my extensive reading of Kazan-based newspapers published during Putin's first term, documents and discusses how Moscow's campaign to meld a "unified political space" has disabused Tatarstan of its pretensions to sovereignty; special attention is given to encroachments on the Tatars' cultural autonomy. Putin's federal reforms have been well documented by other Anglophone observers,¹¹ but these investigations largely ignore primary resources available in the regions that, if scrutinized, would provide a clearer picture of center-region and interethnic relations in contemporary Russia. This section can be seen as a partial correction to that tendency. Part three draws on primary research, including semi-structured interviews I conducted in Kazan, to provide some insight into Tatarstan's response to central encroachments on its autonomy. After presenting the material explanations generally proffered by local observers, I provide additional evidence that a specific geo-historical context, giving rise to complex issues of identity, is equally important in understanding the case of Tatarstan under Putin.

1. Anglophone Shortcomings: Concept, Theory, Praxis

At least three mutually reinforcing factors, contributing to what I term the "conflict paradigm," can be identified in explaining why Anglophone observers failed to anticipate Tatarstan's mild response to Putin-era recentralization of the Russian Federation. The first is a *conceptual* confusion surrounding the Tatarstani sovereignty discourse. Though recent social constructivist thought, as discussed by Graney in her otherwise authoritative account of post-socialist Tatarstan,¹²

¹¹ See Cameron Ross, "Putin's Federal Reforms and the Consolidation of Federalism in Russia: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back!", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 36, 2003, pp. 29-47; Elizabeth Teague, "Putin Reforms the Federal System", In Cameron Ross (Ed.), *Regional Politics in Russia*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 207-17; Chebankova, 2007; Hahn, 2003.

¹² Katherine Graney, *Of Khans and Kremfins: Tatarstan and the Future of Ethno-Federalism in Russia*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009).

emphasizes the performative and symbolic features of sovereignty, the concept foremost is defined by international legal norms that carry distinctly material consequences. State sovereignty, following from the noninterference principle established in the seventeenth-century Treaty of Westphalia and developed thenceforth by the international system, denotes internal supremacy over a defined political territory and external independence from other state actors.¹³ As social constructivists correctly point out, "situations of 'perfect' sovereignty never exist"¹⁴ – increasingly mobile capital flows, ecological challenges that transcend state borders, and other forces associated with globalization undermine notions of supreme territorial independence, as do sub-state nationalist movements. Nonetheless, as witnessed in recent conflicts over the status of Kosovo and South Ossetia (among others), the juridical normative power of sovereign borders, maintains its conceptual primacy in the international state system. As Agnew summarizes, "To permit more than one sovereign to function within one territory would create *imperium in imperio*, a dispute over jurisdiction."¹⁵

In the case of Tatarstan, the conceptual confusion originated in Kazan, where the political leadership, in clear contradiction of international norms, insisted that its sovereignty claim posed no threat to the territorial integrity of Russia. Shaimiev's assertion that "[w]e do not intend to split up with Russia"¹⁶ may be explained in one of two ways: 1) Either the republic in fact aspired to authentic *territorial autonomy* within a flexible federative structure, *not sovereignty* as it is generally understood in international law; or 2) assurances of maintaining the territorial integrity of Russia were disingenuous. As I have argued previously, Kazan most likely aimed for the former, but, already previously possessing *de jure* autonomy within a *de facto* unitary Soviet polity, was "compelled to pursue the next category in the spectrum of independence, i.e. sovereignty."¹⁷ Western scholarship on Yeltsin-era Tatarstan, however, largely ignored and failed to unravel the internal contradictions lacing the discourse surrounding Kazan's sovereignty script, leading to a situation in which they viewed potential central encroachments on the republic's previously gained freedoms as inevitably leading to conflict.

Second, a *theoretical* lens that sees nations as relatively recent constructions further contributed to the conflict paradigm. According to predominant modernist theory, nations arose only after the French Revolution with its concomitant emphasis on the rights of "the people." However diverse their ideological stances, from liberal (Ernest Gellner) to Marxist (Eric Hobsbawm) to realist (Walker Connor), leading modernists agree that the nation, though

¹³ For an expanded discussion on sovereignty in relationship to Tatarstan, see Matthew Derrick, "Revisiting 'Sovereign' Tatarstan", *Journal of Central Asian and Caucasus Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 6, 2008, pp. 75-103.

¹⁴ Graney, 2009, p. xxv.

¹⁵ John Agnew, "The Territorial Trap", in John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge (Eds.), *Mastering Space: Hegemony, Territory, and International Political Economy*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 87.

¹⁶ Quoted in Mukhametshin and Ageeva, 2000, p. 337.

¹⁷ Derrick, 2008, p. 94.

invariably combing various ethnic elements, is *constructed* almost exclusively in ethnic terms. Gellner famously defines the modern nation as an "imagined community," united by a standardized language and, most often, a common religion; the nation is differentiated from pre-industrial authentic community, tied to a locale and unaware of broader linguistic or confessional ties.¹⁸ According to Hobsbawm and Ranger, traditions were "invented" by economic and political elites who, in co-opting nineteenth-century romanticism that stressed "ancient" ancestral ties to the land, sought to control masses for their material gain.¹⁹ Arguing that all nationalism is ethno-nationalism, Connor focuses on the non-rational spheres of emotion and psychology in defining a nation as the largest group of people "who *believe* they are ancestrally related."²⁰ For the modernists, supra-national projects are either a historical aberration, i.e. the United States (a nation of immigrants), or likely to fail due to enduring ethno-national sentiments, i.e. the European Community.

This modernist body of literature, in examining the constructed and instrumentalist aspects of nationhood, developed in opposition to perennialist accounts, which view nations as continuations of ancient ethnic formations – a conviction that contributed to Europe's twentieth-century civil wars.²¹ A relatively small body of Western theory has continued to investigate the ancient roots of nations,²² but most perennialists in the post-World War II environment have tended to be practitioners, i.e. nationalist leaders such as Milošević. In spite of their wildly differing theoretical stances – modernists arguing constructivism, perennialists arguing primordialism – the two are united in their almost exclusive focus on ethnicity as the basis of nationhood. However, one strain of theory, the ethno-symbolist school led by Anthony Smith, argues that nations have assumed various forms, from ethnic to supra-ethnic, in different historical epochs. Smith more flexibly defines the nation as "a human population occupying an historic territory, sharing common myths and memories, a distinctive public culture, a common economy and common laws and customs."²³ With this definition, Smith, though averring that the origins of most nations indeed are ethnic, opens a theoretical space for the existence of supra-ethnic nations.²⁴ This space, however, was all but closed with the fall of

¹⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). See also Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁰ Walker Connor, *Ethno-Nationalism: The Quest for Understanding*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 212.

²¹ Anthony Smith, "The Poverty of Anti-Nationalist Modernism", *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2003, pp. 357-70.

²² See John Armstrong, *Nations Before Nationalism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

²³ Anthony Smith, 2003, p. 359. See also Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).

²⁴ As an example, Smith explains that ancient Greeks had a nationalist sense of "Greek" and "non-Greek," in spite of ethnic divisions such as Ionian, Dorian, Aeolian, etc. As a modern example, he offers multiethnic Eritrea: "[T]he sense of a distinctive Eritrean identity was formed not only by a measure of geographical separation, but also by its separate colonial (Italian and British)

the East European socialist regimes, unleashing ethnic-based warfare in Yugoslavia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, and elsewhere, which served to harden the conflict paradigm in Anglophone studies of post-Soviet Tatarstan.

Finally, a distinctive *praxis* contributed to the development of the conflict paradigm. Western scholars generally have examined the federal reforms carried out under Putin's watch from a Muscovite perspective, virtually ignoring important primary sources available in the regions that, if scrutinized, would paint a broader, clearer picture of center-region and interethnic relations in contemporary Russia.²⁵ This same approach in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulted in the fact that so few Western scholars saw the coming demise of the Soviet Union based on ethno-territorial conditions in the 14 non-Russian union republics. In the contemporary context, the failure to seriously consider regional perspectives has contributed to inaccurate statements such as those put forth by Shlapentokh, who, in an article titled "Tendencies in Putin's Russia," claims that Putin's first term was marked by the "inability to control the powerful governors of many Russian provinces," including Shaimiev in Tatarstan.²⁶ Insisting that "anti-center sentiments" are prevalent among common citizens in places such as Kazan and other provincial capitals, Shlapentokh goes on to forecast interethnic strife in Russia's regions. Such diagnoses and prognoses, as my research indicates, are largely unfounded²⁷ – arrived at by investigators who base their conclusions on research conducted in the federal capital or even from abroad. This habit, a potentially dangerous one, precludes a deep understanding of place that would contribute to more profound insight into today's Russia.

2. Contesting Tatarstan's Autonomy: A Regional Perspective

2.1. Via Presidential Decree: Dismantling Legal and Economic Autonomy

Moscow's contestation of Tatarstan's autonomy first targeted the legal sphere. Weeks after assuming his post as acting president, Putin announced that the

administration, and by prolonged warfare. So the sense of common nationhood has been nurtured by the myths, symbols, memories and public culture of colonialism and a common struggle, and by claims to an historic territory ..."; Anthony Smith, "Dating the Nation", In Daniele Conversi (ed.), *Ethnonationalism and the Contemporary World: Walker Connor and the Study of Nationalism*, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 67.

²⁵ For example, two separate articles by Nelson and Kuzes claim to analyze Putin's federal reforms from a regional perspective, including that of Tatarstan. However, these works appear to draw on only one article appearing in *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, one of Tatarstan's most widely read newspapers. Articles appearing in other Kazan-based print media are neglected. Instead, the authors rely mainly on Moscow-based sources, English-language sources available on the internet, and what appears to be a single interview with a top advisor to Shaimiev; Lynn Nelson and Irina Kuzes, "Regional Variations in the Implementation of Russia's Federal District Reform", *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2002, pp. 5-18; Lynn Nelson and Irina Kuzes, "Political and Economic Coordination in Russia's Federal District Reforms: A Study of Four Regions", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 4, 2003, pp. 507-20.

²⁶ Dmitry Shlapentokh, "Trends in Putin's Russia", *Society*, November/December 2003, p. 74.

²⁷ Chechnya and surrounding republics in the North Caucasus, of course, are the exceptions.

federal center would appoint constitutional judges serving in ethnic republics, a move intended to safeguard their independence from local governments. Additionally, he declared that intelligence agencies, tax police, and customs officials thenceforth would answer to the federal center, thereby usurping powers previously enjoyed by the republics. For Kazan, who insisted that Tatarstan as a state should retain these functions, this announcement signaled the first attack on its sovereignty. Fandas Safiullin, a deputy in Tatarstan's State Council, asked, "Do we have sovereignty? No! Our laws have no power. We are not protected from arbitrary rule."²⁸ At this point, the problematic nature of Tatarstan's sovereign status within the Russian Federation publicly was revealed: Ultimate authority over constitutional questions, policing, and border control could not be shared. What Safiullin identified as "arbitrary rule" in fact represented a confirmation of international norms.

With regional courts subordinate to the federal center, Putin oversaw further erosion of Tatarstan's juridical autonomy. First, in mid-April 2000, Russia's Constitutional Court, at the Kremlin's behest, pronounced that all regional legislation must be brought in line with the federal constitution. With hundreds of pieces laws contradicting federal norms, Tatarstan was identified as the "leader in legislative nonconformity."²⁹ Weeks later, the country's top court issued a second ruling that the republics' sovereignty declarations were incompatible with the sovereignty of the Russian Federation.

At this point, however, no mechanism was in place to carry out the center's orders to harmonize regional legislation with federal norms. This situation changed abruptly on May 13, 2000, when Putin, via a presidential decree, divided the country into seven federal districts (*federal'nye okruga*). Tatarstan's political elite understood that the creation of the federal districts was not merely a mechanism to harmonize federal and regional constitutions, but also a shift toward erasing the boundaries of ethnic republics. Thus, Putin's decree was interpreted as the first unambiguous sign that Moscow intended to revoke its autonomous statehood. Days after the creation of the "super-regions," *Respublika Tatarstan (The Republic of Tatarstan)*, the mouthpiece newspaper of the Kazan Kremlin, ran a lead article titled "Return as Much Sovereignty as You Can" in which the author insisted Putin had "reanimated Stalunist methods."³⁰ The author reviewed a 1921 decree that reduced the number of regions leftover from the Tsarist Empire in an effort to force through legal changes and thereby implement the Bolshevik vision of Russia, i.e. a hyper-centralized, totalitarian state. Finding parallels in Putin's creation of federal districts, the author posed the question, "What will Putin do after he restores manageability of the country?" His answer: arrests, repression, and even murder, just as it was under Stalin during the terror of the 1930s.

²⁸ Quoted in Yuliia Andreeva, "O Suverennykh Sud'iak Sovetuiut Zabyt'", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 26 January 2000, p. 1.

²⁹ Rustem Faliakhov, "Prokuror Dal Srok Sub'ektam", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 2 June 2000, p. 1.

³⁰ Evgenii Zhirnov, "Vernite Suvereniteta, Skol'ko Mozhet", *Respublika Tatarstan*, 23 May 2000, p. 1.

Shaimiev, on the other hand, retained his outward confidence that Tatarstan would remain autonomous. When asked if he feared a revision of the 1994 treaty, he responded, "No. The treaty cannot be unilaterally cancelled."³¹ But by the fall of 2000, dozens of changes had been made to the republic's constitution;³² and by April 2002, 128 corrections had been made.³³ Kazan, however, staunchly refused to carry out two other demands made by the country's highest court: to erase the word "sovereignty," which appeared in several places in Tatarstan's constitution, and abolish the requirement that the republic's president command both state languages, Russian and Tatar.³⁴ This is a stance the republic's leadership would maintain, even under the threat of arrest, throughout Putin's first term.³⁵

Tatarstan's constitution was not the only immediate victim of Putin's reconstruction of center-region relations; the republic's budget also suffered. According to the 1994 treaty between Moscow and Kazan, Tatarstan was granted exclusive control over its oil and gas, 100 percent of the taxes earned from vodka and other spirits, and 50 percent of sales and income taxes.³⁶ This arrangement permitted Tatarstan to retain approximately three-fourths of all its tax revenues, sending the remainder to the federal center. By the summer of 2000, however, Moscow pushed through a new tax code requiring all units of the federation – including Tatarstan – to send about 70 percent of its taxes to the center.³⁷ Furthermore, Moscow assumed partial control of Tatarstan's oil and gas and had revoked the republic's exclusive rights to license vodka and other spirits.³⁸

2.2. Explaining Putin's Initial Success

With the first year of Putin's rule drawing to a close, the center's primacy no longer was questioned. As a headline appearing in *Vremia i Den'gi* (*Time and Money*), an independent Kazan-based newspaper, concluded, "Sovereignty is Dead."³⁹ In spite of Shaimiev's warnings that attacks on the republic's

³¹ Quoted in Irek Murtazin, "Diktatura v Rossii Uzhe Iskliuchena", *Republika Tatarstan*, 28 July 2000, p. 2.

³² Rustam Vafin, "Privodit' Nel'zia Ostavit'", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 23 October 2000, p. 2.

³³ Respublika Tatarstan, "Konstitutsiia: Voprosy Poka Ostaiutsia", *Republika Tatarstan*, 18 April 2002, p. 4.

³⁴ Because so few Russians speak Tatar, this law effectively barred them from candidacy for the Tatarstani presidency.

³⁵ Months after Putin was re-elected in February 2004, Tatarstan complied with the courts demands and removed direct allusions to sovereignty from its constitution. The language issue became a moot point later that same year, when Putin decreed that regional leaders would be appointed by Moscow.

³⁶ A. Shishkin and M. Galiamov, "Ne Cheshite Tam, Gde ne Cheshetsia", *Republika Tatarstan*, 11 January 2000, p. 2.

³⁷ Svetlana Besschetnova and Rashid Galiamov, "Model' Tatarstana: Iskusstvo Vozmozhnogo i Nevozmozhnogo", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 29 August 2000, p. 2.

³⁸ Valentina Pakhomova, "Soverenniiia Vodka Stanet Rossiiskoi", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 24 March 2000, p. 2.

³⁹ A. Sharipov, "Suverenitet Umer! Da Zdravstvuet Suverenitet!", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 13 September 2000, p. 3.

sovereignty would "cause dissatisfaction among Tatarstan's population,"⁴⁰ Putin's top-down campaign to build a "unified legal space" received little criticism in Kazan's independent print media. On the contrary, his unilateral restructuring of center-region relations generally was lauded as a sign of decisiveness and discipline. For instance, days after Putin assumed the country's top post, *Vremia i Den'gi* observed, "Today one thing is clear – the people unambiguously have called out for order to be restored in the country, using the most decisive methods and in the nearest future."⁴¹ Indeed, a large majority of the opinions voiced in Kazan-based press indicated that the republic's citizenry above all desired order, and no small degree of the preceding decade's chaos was associated with sovereignty movements like that witnessed in Tatarstan. Having followed Yeltsin's command to "take as much sovereignty as you can swallow," the republic had become disorderly, drunk on its freedom; it was time to dry up, and Putin's image as a sober, strict leader provided the perfect foil for the ailing, inebriated Yeltsin.⁴²

Underpinning these sentiments was the fact that post-Soviet Tatarstan – contrary to Shaimiev's stated commitment to democratization – had evolved into a highly illiberal regime. As explained to me by journalist Lev Ovrutskii, the Kazan government had appointed the heads of all of the republic's districts and cities since the early 1990s. With no popular elections at any level, the defining trait of this nepotistic regime became its unquestioned loyalty to the Tatar president, a feature said to trickle down to the lowliest bureaucrat. The "Shaimiev clan," as it is frequently called, has three other notable features. First, it consists almost exclusively of ethnic Tatars drawn from rural areas.⁴³ Second, the bureaucracy is distinguished by its sheer size. With an apparatus consisting of more than 450,000 loyalists, Tatarstan is reported to occupy "first place in the civilized world, including Russia, in the number of bureaucrats."⁴⁴ And, third, the "Shaimiev clan" is said to control up to 70 percent of the republic's economy.⁴⁵

When considering the federation's systemic chaos and the local corruption that had flourished under Yeltsin's tenure, Putin's decision to carry out widespread legal reform appeared an objective necessity.⁴⁶ The campaign to

⁴⁰ Quoted in Murtazin, 2000, p. 2.

⁴¹ A. Bikmullin, "Konsolidatsiia vo Imia Budushego Strany", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 11 January 2000, p. 2.

⁴² See Elena Chernobrovkina (Ed.), *Demokraticheskaia Oppozitsiia Tatarstana: 10 Let Puti*, (Kazan: Remark, 2001), p. 79.

⁴³ The republic's president himself comes from a Tatar village. As Professor Vladimir Valeev told me, the "Shaimiev clan" alternately is called the "Tatar agrigarchy."

⁴⁴ Vera Postnova, "Na Ravnyk Razgovarivat' s Moskovskim Kremlem", *Nezavisimaiia Gazeta*, 29 July 2004, p. 1.

⁴⁵ This figure, though difficult to verify, was cited during three separate interviews. *Nezavisimaiia Gazeta* offers tacit support for such claims: "Business in the republic is by definition bureaucratic – especially big business, centered on oil, which is controlled by close relatives of high-ranking bureaucrats." Most notorious of these "close relatives" are Shaimiev's two sons, both of whom occupy top positions among Tatarstan's oil oligarchy; Postnova, 2004, p. 1.

⁴⁶ When Putin assumed the Russian presidency, the country's legal system was in a state of disarray. Constitutional acts contradicting federal law had been enacted in 19 of Russia's 21

harmonize federal and republic constitutions, at least during Putin's first year at Russia's helm, did not explicitly target the Tatars' cultural autonomy and therefore did not threaten their evolution as a non-Christian, non-Slavic people. However, having regained its primacy over ethnic republics, the federal center increasingly signaled that Russia's "unified legal space" also was to be defined as a unified cultural space, and this unified culture was to be defined as ethnic Russian. Emboldened by the restoration of its power, Moscow, as seen in following sections, initiated a series of acts that could only be interpreted as assaults against non-Russian culture in Tatarstan – a campaign to further diminish republic's autonomy.

2.3. The Latin Scandal

Having reestablished its constitutional predominance, Moscow turned its attention to matters of national culture. The center's first attack on Tatarstan's cultural autonomy targeted the Tatar language. According to legislation adopted in 1999, the republic, beginning on September 1, 2001, was to change the alphabet of the Tatar language from a Cyrillic script to a Latin-based one, popularly called *latinitsa*. However, during one of the federal Duma's first sessions of 2001, Vladimir Zhirinovskii accused Tatarstan of "linguistic separatism,"⁴⁷ which spurred the formation of an investigative committee. While visiting Kazan, according to reports, the Duma committee expressed its "complete conviction that the *latinitsa* posed no danger."⁴⁸ This assurance, however, was contradicted in a resulting report presented before the Duma. According to the document, "The Tatars' change from the Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet and Turkey's active participation in the preparation of cadres in madrasahs in several Russian cities represent a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation."⁴⁹ In addition to the fears of an expanding "Great Turan" spreading over the Caucasus, up the Volga, and ultimately causing the collapse of the Russian Federation, the letter identified two other reasons why the Tatars should be stopped from changing their alphabet. First, the Tatars previously used a Latin-based graphic for little more than a decade, but have used the Cyrillic for more than six decades.⁵⁰ Second, latinization of the Tatar tongue would lead to ethno-cultural separatism from other nationalities and even the Tatar diaspora within Russia.

ethnic republics – perhaps most egregiously in Tatarstan – four of the ten autonomous *okrugs*, and 29 of the 49 *oblasts*. Up to 30 percent of all laws adopted in Russia's ethnic republics contradicted norms established in the federal constitution. See Inform VES, "Regional'nyi Separatizm kak Ugroza Tselostnosti Rossii", *Ural'skii Informatsionnyi Tsentri*, 5-11 July 1999; Ross 2003.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Sofiia Saiganova, "Turki Roiut pod Rossiiu Cherez Tatarstan", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 8 February 2001, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Marina Yudkevich, "Mirnymi Stredstvami 'Yazykoviiu Problemu' Rezreshit' ne Udalos", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 16 February 2001, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Saiganova, 8 February 2001, p. 3.

⁵⁰ The Tatar language was printed in an Arabic script for nearly a millennium until Tatar intellectuals converted it to a Latin-based alphabet in 1927. Stalin forced upon the Tatar language a Cyrillic script in 1939.

In Kazan, politicians and press alike reacted with disbelief. Calling the allegations of a pan-Turkic plot to destroy Russia "simply silly," a representative from Tatarstan's Ministry of Education pointed out that 80 percent of Tatarstan's students study English: "But nobody says anything about Anglo-American expansion."⁵¹ *Vremia i Den'gi* compared the Duma report to "deportation documents of Stalinist times," adding, "Let's hope this is just the usual Duma foolishness and not a pretext for those who want to get rid of the national republics."⁵² The Kazan government offered measured tones, saying that as a "sovereign state" Tatarstan had the right to develop the Tatar language. It also was pointed out that the Russian constitution indicated that language questions are to be decided by the national groups themselves.⁵³

Nonetheless, Moscow commanded Tatarstan to stop the conversion of the alphabet, to which many in Kazan asked, "Is it not the internal business of the Tatars?" The nearly unanimous answer was summed up in an article printed in *Vremia i Den'gi*: "In the end, the exclusive right to decide the fate of the Tatar language belongs only to the Tatar people."⁵⁴ However, the stance of the Tatars themselves on this question was not unambiguous. In mid-September, a letter appearing in the pages of *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* (*Russian Gazette*), the official newspaper of the federal government, ignited a debate that touched on a tender spot for the Tatars – their diasporic condition within the Russian Federation.⁵⁵ Signed by 56 well-known Tatars, almost all dwelling in Moscow, the letter urged Shaimiev – "in the name of saving the nation" – to stop the conversion to the Tatar alphabet in order to avoid a national schism: "Living beyond the borders of Tatarstan, our families will become estranged from contemporary national culture, torn away from the lives of Tatars who live on the land of our ancestors."⁵⁶

With this letter, important members of the Tatar diaspora seemingly lent their support to the Duma members who initiated this campaign. But the letter immediately raised suspicion. First, if its authors were addressing Shaimiev, why did they post their letter in *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, the Moscow Kremlin's mouthpiece? Second, why had they not voiced their concerns earlier, before the conversion was underway? Puzzled by these questions, Kazan requested a copy of the original letter from *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* – a request the editors refused – and then began calling the letter's signatories. One by one, according to a

⁵¹ Quoted in Ol'ga Machneva, "Dazhe esli Mir Rukhnet, Tatarstan Pereidet na Latinitsu", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 9 February 2001, p. 1.

⁵² Quoted in Saiganova, 8 February 2001, p. 3.

⁵³ Il'shat Rakipov, "Bezopastnosti Rossii Latinitsa ne Ugrazhaet", *Republika Tatarstan*, 12 January 2001, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Sofia Saiganova, "'Latinitsa' – ne Prianik, no i ne 'Strashilka'", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 27 July 2001, p. 1. This position was supported by all of my interview subjects, Tatar and Russian alike, with the exception of Aleksandr Salii, a Communist deputy in Tatarstan's State Council.

⁵⁵ The Tatars, at about 5.5 million, are the second-largest ethnic group in Russia. Of that figure, only about one-third live in Tatarstan. Another third live in neighboring Bashkortostan, and the remaining third are dispersed throughout the Russian Federation, mainly living in large cities.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, "Nam, Tataram, ne Vse Ravno", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 15 September 2001, p. 2.

commission of deputies from Tatarstan's State Council, the "authors" denied ever seeing the letter.⁵⁷ As stated in *Vostochnyi Ekspres* (*Eastern Express*), an independent Tatarstani newspaper, the document was a "complete fake."⁵⁸ However, in employing a *divide et imperia* strategy, the center was successful in igniting a debate between Kazan and the Tatar diaspora over the fate of their language, a debate that has contributed to the Duma's success in prohibiting the *latinitsa*.

In November of 2002, the Duma passed a bill titled "On the languages of the peoples of the Russian Federation," which made Cyrillic the only official alphabet for all languages native to Russia. *Vostochnyi Ekspres* called the law "openly racist ... fascist."⁵⁹ Isolated voices in Moscow feared an "outburst of nationalism" resulting from this law, while Tatar politicians compared the project to Stalin's terror.⁶⁰ Since the law's introduction, however, no nationalistic outpouring has been witnessed in Tatarstan, although the Kazan Kremlin is still petitioning the legislation in Russia's highest court.

In spite of the initial public protest, this issue has not served as a rallying point in defense of Tatarstan's autonomy. In fact, as communicated to me by several interview subjects, it appears that the republic's Tatars have accepted Moscow's decision. An initial understanding of this mild response can be found in the disconnect between Tatar state and Tatar nation. Although it appears Moscow used the Tatar diaspora to inflame controversy, many Tatars living beyond the borders of Tatarstan indeed are anxious about being cut off from their contemporary national culture.⁶¹

2.4. The Headscarf Affair

As it became increasingly apparent that Moscow would stop Kazan from implementing its latinized alphabet, the federal center initiated a second campaign interpreted by many in Tatarstan as an attack on non-Russian culture. The so-called "headscarf affair"⁶² surfaced in July 2002, when Tatarstan's branch of the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MVD) told a group of 16 Muslim women that they could not submit passport photos in which they wore the *hijab*. Al'mira Adiatullina, director of the republic's Association of Muslim Women, explained that her faith does not permit Muslim women to bare their heads in public. In response, Aleksei Nikolaev, head of Kazan's branch of the MVD, cited "norms

⁵⁷ Sofiia Saiganova, "Vokrug Latinitsa – Intrigi i Strasti", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 18 October 2001, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Rinat Bilalov, "Latinitsa: Kto Rasstavit Tochki nad i?", *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 19-25 October 2001, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Rinat Bilalov and Rashid Galiamov, "Den' Natsional'nogo Unizheniia", *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 1-13 June 2002, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ *Vremia i Den'gi*, "Yazykovoii Separatizm Tatarstana – Eto Mif", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 19 November 2002, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ Rinat Bilalov, "U Rossii – Dve Nogi: Kievskaiia Rus' i Zolotaia Orda", *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 8-14 June 2001, p. 8.

⁶² Inna Serova, "Religiozni Aspekt v Ob'ektiv ne Rassmatrivaiut", *Vecherniiaia Kazan'*, 6 August 2002, p. 1.

worked out" in Moscow; these "norms," as was uncovered, were decided upon only months earlier, while the *latinita* scandal was at its peak.⁶³

The following month, Adiatullina and the other women took their complaint to a regional court in Kazan, which upheld the MVD's position. During the court hearing, as reported in *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, it was revealed that "in 'Russian' regions ... such as Ekaterinburg and Ul'ianovsk no obstacles are encountered by those wishing to be photographed in headscarves."⁶⁴ In a subsequent interview, Nikolaev said that he personally saw no reason to forbid Muslim faithful from submitting photographs in which they wore headscarves, as they had in preceding years. In his opinion, headscarves did not inhibit clear identification, as held by central MVD officers, but his orders from Moscow were to discontinue this tradition. Hence, it became evident that the center's "norms" were "worked out" *against* Tatarstan. After their initial defeat, the Muslim women addressed their complaints to Tatarstan's highest court and threatened to take their case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.⁶⁵ Amid a swell of media coverage, the earlier court decision eventually was reversed. Muslim women in Tatarstan again were permitted to submit passport photos in which they wore headscarves – but only after "proving" their faith with a letter from their imam.⁶⁶

Though many viewed this case as another move to entrench central primacy over the republic, the Kazan government refused to entangle itself in the "headscarf affair." In fact, this case failed to garner widespread sympathy in Tatarstan. Rafik Abrakhmanov, director of the Kazan Institute of Federalism, explained this reaction: "Tatar women never had a tradition of covering their heads." Abrakhmanov insisted that wearing the *hijab* was an alien practice to Tatars, who, he asserted, practice a liberal, Westernized version of Islam.⁶⁷ Tatar women who insist on covering their heads, he told me, were under the influence of a "conservative version of Islam coming from beyond Russia." Thus, Moscow's attempts to forbid *hijab* in passport photos were not necessarily viewed by the masses as a direct attack on Tatar national culture.

2.5. The 2002 Census: Divide and Rule Redux?

Another opportunity for Moscow to contest Tatarstan's autonomy was presented by post-Soviet Russia's first-ever countrywide census, scheduled to take place in October 2002. The most anticipated datum of the census was on

⁶³ Marina Talagaeva, "Platochki Veleno Sniat'", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 6 August 2002, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Azat Akhunov, "Ruki Proch' ot Platka!", *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 12-18 July 2002, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Serova, 2002, p. 1.

⁶⁶ Aisylu Kadyrova, "Delo of Platkakh: Razvitie Siuzheta", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 15 July 2003, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Articles appearing in *Respublika Tatarsan* regularly emphasize that Tatars practice *Jadidism* (from the Arabic word for "renewal") – or "Euro-Islam" – a modernizing form of the Muslim faith. Two years before the "headscarf affair," a top advisor to Shaimiev addressed the question of female apparel: "I don't like it when our girls dress like they do in Saudi Arabia ... Why must we reject our modern fashion and follow a backward Arabic style?"; quoted in *Respublika Tatarstan*, "Rafail' Khakimov: 'Tol'ko Uchityvaia Interesy Regionov, Rossiia Mozhet Sokhranit' Edinstvo'", *Respublika Tatarsan*, 18 May 2000, p. 5.

nationality. Evidence appeared in early 2002 that the census would be used as yet another divide-and-conquer tactic. In January of that year, an initiative had been undertaken in the Duma aiming to change the status of any ethnic republic in which titular populations did not exceed the 50-percent mark to that of a region.⁶⁸ Because Tatarstan sat on the threshold of that figure, the Kazan Kremlin interpreted the Duma project as the center's latest attempt to dismantle its autonomy and feared that the upcoming census would be used to pull off the coup.

When the central census committee announced its official list of nationalities, cultural groups such as Kriashens and Mishars, peoples considered by the Kazan Kremlin as sub-groups of the Tatar nation, were recognized as separate nationalities by the committee.⁶⁹ Furthermore, new national groups based on geography were listed, including Siberian Tatars, Astrakhan Tatars, and others. In all, Moscow assigned official nationality status to nine different ethnic groups in place of a single Tatar nation.⁷⁰

Accusing Moscow of trying to "dismember the Tatars" and thereby gain control of their historic homeland,⁷¹ the Kazan Kremlin responded by mobilizing its intellectual and political resources to spread the message "we are a unified nation."⁷² In *Tatarstan*, a journal backed by the Kazan Kremlin, Rashid Yagfarov wrote that the census was a "trap" that Moscow set for the Tatars:

"If the Tatar nation of 6-7 million is registered according to the "nationalities" that have been "defined" according geography, faith, and other criteria, then Tatars will collapse into nine nations and will constitute a minority in each region. This will give the center a basis no longer to consider our interests. A decreased population will mean that our people are on the edge of dying out, and that will become a signal for liquidating republics and creating [non-ethnic] provinces in their place ... Let's say that 52 percent of all people in Tatarstan are Tatars. If Tatar-Kriashens and Mishars are registered as separate nations, that figure will fall to 40-45 percent. Then Moscow bureaucrats will say, "You are less than 50 percent. You have no right to be a separate republic!"⁷³

Yagfarov touches on the complex connection between nation and state in the Russian context. The Tatars living in Siberia and Astrakhan share the same tongue, religion, and genetic makeup as the greater Tatar nation, but they are separated by territory; therefore, these groups are less important to Tatarstan, which is identified as their historic homeland. The Kriashens, on the other hand, are cleaved from the greater Tatar nation by a religion they share with ethnic

⁶⁸ Grigorenko, Galina, "Zakon o Tatarskom Narode kak Otrazhenie Zakona o Russkom Narode", *Vremia i Den'gi*, 18 January 2002, p. 1.

⁶⁹ Vostochnyi Ekspres, "Tatar Zapishem Tatarami", *Vostochnyi Ekspres*, 21-27 September 2002, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Yagfarov, Rashid, "'Lovushka' dlia Tatar", *Tatarstan*, January 2002, p. 18.

⁷¹ Dariia Ramazanova, "Gotovy li My k Ocherednomu Ispytaniiu?", *Tatarstan*, January 2002, pp. 16-17.

⁷² Tatar-Inform, "My – Edinaia Natsiia", *Respublika Tatarstan*, 13 April 2002, p. 1.

⁷³ Yagfarov, 2002, p. 18.

Russians, but united with the Tatars in a state-like structure. Thus, the “baptized” Tatars are more valuable to the Tatar state – only they can ensure that Tatarstan’s “titular” population exceeds the 50-percent mark.

In another article appearing in *Tatarstan*, dialectologist Dariia Ramazanova contended that Moscow’s list of nationalities, which included the Siberian and Astrakhan Tatars, was an attempt to destroy the Tatar nation on the “geographic principle.” She wrote,

geographic separation can in no way correspond to ethnic separation ... the drive to represent geographic groups of the Tatar nation as separate peoples is nothing other than a distortion of historic reality, an attempt to exterminate our people.⁷⁴

Though separated by territory, Ramazanova said, Russia’s various Tatar groups are unified by common tongue – language, she insisted, is the foundation of a nation. This formulation of nationhood appears to overcome the territorial principle. Nonetheless, it is highly problematic for those wishing to present the Tatars as a “unified nation,” as members of the diaspora in increasing numbers do not speak Tatar or are much more comfortable in Russian. According to Ramazanova’s definition of nationhood, Tatars in Moscow and other cities beyond Tatarstan’s borders who communicate solely in Russian indeed have become Russians.

If Ramazanova set out to disprove the “geographic principle” in defining nationhood, the territorial factor was exhibited in what amounted to a pre-census campaign to counteract what was seen as an assault on Tatarstan’s autonomy. The Kazan Kremlin’s message of ethnic solidarity particularly targeted Kriashens, who live compactly in villages throughout Tatarstan, reminding them that they speak the Tatar language and that they had been “forcefully converted” to Orthodoxy by tsarist missionaries.⁷⁵ This campaign proved effective. According to results from the 2002 census, the portion of Tatars *within* Tatarstan reached 53 percent, thereby exceeding Yagfarov’s estimate. But Kazan was unable to mobilize resources beyond the republic’s borders; potential Tatars in Moscow, Siberia, and other regions were beyond its reach. Countrywide the number of Tatars was registered at 5.5 million – 1.5 million fewer than Yagfarov’s hopeful estimate.⁷⁶

Both Kremlins were partially successful in their separate campaigns. Kazan could applaud itself for checking Moscow’s bid to “liquidate” Tatarstan’s republic status. Moscow, however, had managed to make Russia more “Russian.” But the center’s latest contestation of Tatarstan’s autonomy once again did not evoke popular protest. This response in part can be explained by the fact that, in spite of assertions that “we are one nation,” many who traditionally have been identified as a sub-group of the Tatar nation in fact view

⁷⁴ Ramazanova, 2002, p. 17.

⁷⁵ Mirgazizov, Rafael, “My Ostaemsia Tatarami, Poka Nam ne Zapreschaiut Krestit’sia i Govorit’ na Rodnom Yazike”, *Respublika Tatarstan*, 26 September 2002, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Goskomstat, “Vserossiiskaia Perepis’ Naseleniia 2002”, *Goskomstat* (www.perepis2002.ru).

themselves as separate nationalities. This self-identification is particularly strong among the Kriashens, a people who have long identified with Moscow along religious lines⁷⁷ Whereas Islam helped Tatars resist all-out russification, Orthodoxy has served to de-tatarize the Kriashens, who have practiced the Russian version of Christianity since the fifteenth century.

3. Understanding the Tatarstani Response

3.1. Economistic Explanations

Conversi writes that an "excess of over-zealous centralism" often engenders powerful nationalist movements among minority groups whose autonomy is encroached upon by a state's drive to vertically integrate its territory and citizens.⁷⁸ The case of Tatarstan under Putin, as I have documented in this article, clearly belies such expectations. Guided by Russia's second democratically elected president, the federal center has systematically dismantled Tatarstan's claim to sovereign statehood, first dismembering Tatarstan's legal and economic independence and then challenging its cultural autonomy. But the Tatars, in the face of this campaign, have not responded with the anticipated intensified demands for sovereignty. Shaimiev's warnings that the people of Tatarstan would react passionately to the loss of their autonomy have been proven empty – with the exception of isolated protests attended by only a handful of members of the Tatar Social Center (TOTs),⁷⁹ no displays of widespread public displeasure have been witnessed.

In discussing the mild response, Kazan-based observers commonly say that Tatarstanis had become disillusioned with the sovereignty script by the close of the 1990s. Their disappointment is explained almost exclusively in economic terms. Early promises that an independent, oil-rich Tatarstan would flourish economically for the benefit of all Tatarstanis never materialized; therefore, they sense that nothing has been lost with the revocation of the republic's sovereign status. As illustration, when it became obvious that a reinvigorated Moscow would restore its predominance over Tatarstan, *Vecherniaia Kazan'* invited its readers to answer two questions: "What did sovereignty give you?" and "What will you lose when our sovereignty is taken away?"⁸⁰ Of the more than 100 respondents, the overwhelming majority, Tatar and Russian alike, answered both questions with a single word: *nichego* ("nothing").

My interview subjects, with the exception of those associated with Shaimiev's party of power, responded similarly. When asked what Tatarstanis gained from sovereignty, Ovrutskii, the journalist, replied, "Nothing. Fifteen

⁷⁷ See Ronald Wixman, *The Peoples of the USSR: An Ethnographic Handbook*, (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1984).

⁷⁸ Conversi, 1997, p. 327.

⁷⁹ Supported financially by the Kazan Kremlin, TOTs is generally described as the republic's official nationalist group.

⁸⁰ Georgii Kuznetsov, "Chto Vy Teriaete Vmeste s Suverenitetom?", *Vecherniaia Kazan'*, 21 July 2000, pp. 1-2.

years have passed – nothing, or very little, has changed. People in the villages live exactly as they did in Soviet times.” Even Tatar national leaders joined the chorus. For example, Damir Kismetdinov, a specialist on interethnic relations for the Tatar Congress, said, “We were promised that oil would make us all wealthy. What happened? Nothing. For ordinary people, life today is harder than it was in the Soviet Union.”

Hard numbers indicate that such disappointment is not unfounded. As Aleksandr Shtanin, a liberal deputy in the republic’s State Council, explained, Tatarstan annually extracts some 29 million tons of oil; in a republic with 3.7 million inhabitants, that translates into nearly 8 million tons per person per annum. Russia-wide, 420 million tons of oil are extracted, which, for a country of 142 million, equals less than 3 million tons per capita each year. Therefore, he reasoned, “Tatarstan should be one of the richest republics. At the very least, we should have a standard of living noticeably higher than the average in Russia.” But as reported by *Nezavisimaia Gazeta (Independent Gazette)*, a popular Moscow-based newspaper, in 2004 the average monthly salary in Tatarstan was 1,000 rubles lower than the all-Russian figure of 8,655 rubles. Additionally, the average pension in Tatarstan was the lowest in the Volga federal region.⁸¹

In short, Tatarstan’s petro-dollars clearly were not used to build a Kuwait in the Eurasian heartland. Rather, it is widely understood that the republic’s oil profits poured into bank accounts of the “Shamiev clan.” Against this backdrop, the ethno-national discourse used to justify the Tatars’ sovereignty claim is remembered today as a cynical ploy, an instrument wielded by Tatarstan’s political elites for their own enrichment.⁸² Assumed to have provided the original stimulus for the republic’s sovereignty campaign, material considerations likewise are thought to determine the Tatars’ response to the recentralization that has proceeded under Putin. Connor, however, warns against “an unwarranted exaggeration of the influence of materialism upon human affairs.”⁸³ Rational choice, he maintains, often is a poor indicator of an ethnic group’s behavior. Several cases provide illustration. For instance, Slovaks divorced their more economically advanced Czech cousins, while poor Kosovars seek independence from a wealthier Serbia. If material considerations fail to explain these groups’ compulsion toward independence, is it possible that economic concerns do not provide the ultimate insight into Tatars’ response? Might the Tatars’ *absence* of passionate compulsion toward independence be better understood by exploring the irrational realms of emotion and psychology?

Non-Material Explanations: Toward a Multinational Russian People?

Caught up in the conflict paradigm, Anglophone analyses anticipating the “Chechen variant” in Tatarstan underappreciated the spatial-temporal context.

⁸¹ Postnova, 2004, p. 1.

⁸² See Nikolai Dogmatov, “Osobyi Status dlia Osobo Vazhnyk Person”, *Vecherniaia Kazan’*, 20 July 2001, 2.

⁸³ Connor, 1994, pp. 46-7.

Whereas Chechnya lies at the southern edge of the Russian expanse and didn't enter the tsarist polity until the nineteenth century, Tatarstan rests in the heart of the country and has been a constituent part of Russia since the mid-sixteenth century. This centuries-long experience has led to a situation where Tatars and Russians have not only competed for control of the Middle Volga Basin, but have also cooperated for their mutual benefit within and beyond the region.⁸⁴ As seen in the previous section of this article, this specific geo-history, one in which Tatars today are strewn throughout the Russian Federation, severely complicated Kazan's efforts to erect and maintain its claims to sovereign borders, both the physical borders of state and the invisible borders of culture. Tatar culture, including their language and religion, has developed within a greater all-Russian context.

Putin surely had these dynamics in mind when, following up on his victories in state-(re)building – a campaign dismantling Tatarstan's illusions of sovereignty – he initiated a project in nation-(re)building with the propagation in his public speeches of a "multinational Russian people" (*mnogonatsional'nyi rossiiskii narod*). To understand this rhetorical device, one must first recognize that the Russian language has two separate words for "Russian": *russkii* and *rossiiskii*. The former describes a language and a distinct ethnicity, i.e. the largest group of eastern Slavs, "the Russians," who account for approximately 80 percent of the country's citizens. The latter, evincing no ethnic associations, is a supranational qualifier that expresses territorial-state significance, i.e. "of Russia." In this manner, the "multinational Russian people" can also be interpreted as the "multinational people of the Russian state." The difference is clarified further when it is understood that in Russian the country itself is called *Rossiiia* – spelled with an "o" – not *Russiiia*.⁸⁵ Hence, the state is not semantically equated with the ethnic Russian nation. And the Russian word *narod*, like the German *Volk*, generally translates innocuously into English as "people" or "folk," but it also can carry with it stronger connotations of "nation."⁸⁶ Hence, when Putin addresses the *rossiiskii narod* or *rossiiane* – "Russians" – he invokes a territorial identity that transcends narrow ethnic conceptions of the nation-state.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ See Raphael Khakim, *Russia and Tatarstan at the Crossroads of History*, (Kazan: Academy of Sciences of Tatarstan, 2006).

⁸⁵ The latinized *Rossiiia*, introduced from Poland, appears to have displaced *Rus'* in the late sixteenth century, following Moscow's defeat of Kazan. It was at this point that the young Russian state began growing as a multinational empire. See M. Tikhmirov, "O Proiskhozhdenii Nazvaniia 'Rossiiia'", *Voprosy Istorii*, Vol. 11, 1953, pp. 93-6.

⁸⁶ See S. Ozhegov and N. Shvedova, *Tolkovyi slovar' Russkogo Yazyka*, (Moscow: Azbukovnik, 2001), p. 391.

⁸⁷ For a discussion on the various ethnographic terminology used by Russian scholars in the Soviet era, see Ronald Wixman, *Language Aspects of Ethnic Patterns and Processes in the North Caucasus*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 11-43.

This rhetorical device, first utilized by Putin in May 2003,⁸⁸ was surely aimed at Tatars and other non-*rossiiskii* citizens, who, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the concomitant disappearance of a supranational identity – the “Soviet people” (*sovetskii narod*) – were impelled to “define themselves anew in largely ethnic-national terms, because there was little else upon which to rebuild political identity.”⁸⁹ But does Putin’s multinational *rossiiskii* identity, building on Tatarstan’s specific spatial-temporal context, find resonance in Kazan? In the process of conducting fieldwork in Kazan in the spring of 2004, I presented this question to a variety of people, from Tatar nationalists to politicians to journalists. The following section provides an overview and analysis of their responses and further helps to elucidate Tatarstan’s mild reaction to the most recent recentralization of the Russian Federation.

3.2. Kazan Responds to Putin’s Rhetorical Device

The Tatar national leadership is generally divided into two camps: radicals and moderates. The radical nationalists I interviewed vociferously rejected the existence of a common supranational consciousness uniting all the various peoples of Russia. Rashit Yagfarov, director of the Tatar Public Center (TOTs), summarily dismissed the *rossiiskii narod* as “Russian imperialism,” while Fauziia Bairamova, leader of the separatist Ittufak (Freedom) party, insisting it is yet another expression of “great Russian chauvinism.” Both Yagfarov and Bairamova viewed *rossiiskost’* – a multinational *Rossian*-ness – as *russkost’* – ethnic Russian-ness – and unequivocally called Putin’s effort to propagate a common supranational identity an exercise in cultural assimilation. Chauvinism laced Yagfarov’s and Bairamova’s speech, and contempt for ethnic Russians was palpable. These and other radicals maintain the stance they held a decade ago: Tatarstan must be a sovereign republic organized on the ethno-national principle, serving first and foremost its Tatar population.

The radicalism of TOTs and Ittufak, though strong in the early 1990s, by all accounts had exhausted itself only a few years later and finds few adherents today. But moderate national leaders I interviewed, though in a milder form, echoed their rejection of a common *Rossiian* identity. Rimma Ratnikova is a deputy in the State Assembly. Although associated with the party of power, United Russia, which in no uncertain terms supports the Moscow Kremlin, she contended that Putin’s *rossiiskii narod* is propaganda. “It is not possible to create a multinational *Rossian* nation,” she stated. “We cannot all be the same. Russia’s richness is in its diversity.” Like Ratnikova, Damir Kismetdinov, who is part of

⁸⁸ This was during Putin’s address presidential address. See Vladimir Putin, “Poslanie Federal’nomu Sobraniuu Rossiiskoi Federatsii”, 16 May 2003. For evident of subsequent invocation of the *rossiiskii narod*, see Vladimir Putin, “Vystuplenie na Prazdnike, Posviaschenom Dniu Rossii”, 12 June 2003; Vladimir Putin, “Zakliuchitel’noe Slovo na Soveschaniu po Problemam Razvitiia Malyykh Gorodov Rossii”, 17 June 2003; Vladimir Putin, “Priamaia Liniia s Presidentom Rossii”, 18 December 2003; Vladimir Putin, “Vstupitel’noe Slovo na Rabochei Vstreche po Voprosam Mezhdunatsional’nykh i Mezkhkonnatsional’nykh Otnoshenii”, 5 February 2004; Vladimir Putin, “Obraschenie k Grazhdanam Strany pri Vstuplenii v Dolzhnost’ Prezidenta Rossii”, 7 May 2004.

⁸⁹ John Agnew, *Making Political Geography*, (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 93.

the Tatar Congress leadership, found a parallel between the *rossiiskii narod* and its Soviet-era equivalent: "The *rossiiskii narod* is an attempt to assimilate non-Russians – that is, *de facto* russification similar to the nationalities policy in the Soviet Union."

The surest sign of assimilatory intent, these moderates insisted, is the center's refusal to allow the Tatars to latinize their alphabet. Ratnikova called Moscow's campaign against the *latinitza* hypocrisy: "They say that Latin letters threaten the territorial integrity of Russia, but look at the Arbat in Moscow⁹⁰ – does that present any kind of threat? Of course not. And, likewise, any accusation of linguistic separatism in Tatarstan is nonsense. The latinization of the Tatar language does not threaten Russia." Worldwide experience supports Ratnikova's conviction. Several different scripts are employed in India, including separate alphabets for Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, and other languages. The Serbo-Croatian language in pre-war Yugoslavia was printed in both Cyrillic and Latin-based alphabets. And both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were home to several non-Cyrillic alphabets; as several of my interview subjects pointed out, nobody ever claimed that the Georgian script threatened the territorial integrity of either of those polities. Furthermore, as Kismetdinov said, the accusation that the independent development of the Tatar language will weaken the Russian language is similarly misguided:

Tatars all speak Russian, and many of us speak Russian better than we speak our native tongue. We live in Russia, and we understand that we must know the Russian language. Russian is the language of interethnic communication, the state language of multinational Russia. That is the reality, and a Tatar language written in Latin letters will in no way change that reality.

While anxious about an assimilatory nationalities policy emanating from Moscow, Ratnikova and Kismetdinov in no way expressed hostility toward ethnic Russians. They insisted on an inclusive model of statehood for Tatarstan, which they viewed as an inseparable part of the Russian Federation. Indeed, throughout the republic there is renewed recognition that Tatarstan cannot be extracted from Russia, and most feel that separatism of the republic would be fatal for both Tatarstan and Russia. The country's task, the moderates agreed, is not to impose an ideologically based supranational identity, but rather to find an optimal federative model that would permit minority ethnic groups such as the Tatars a meaningful degree of territorial autonomy to develop their distinctly non-Russian cultures within a greater *Rossian* state. They claimed that territorial autonomy in no way threatens the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, but actually strengthens the union: Only a people secure in the affirmation of its ethnic identity can be loyal to the federal center. Again, worldwide experience supports this conviction. Perhaps the most famous example is Switzerland, where the canton system has permitted the country's German-, French-, and Italian-speaking citizens to live peacefully since it was established in 1848. And though observers most often focus on the extremism of Basques and

⁹⁰ One of Moscow's most commercially developed streets, the Arbat, as Ratnikova implied, is filled with neon signs written in a Latin alphabet, mostly in the English language.

Catalonians in Spain, Madrid's official sanction of the Galician territorial autonomy has dispersed separatist sentiment in northwest Iberia. Several other cases, including Quebec in Canada and Friesland in the Netherlands, attest to the effectiveness of autonomous arrangements.

Not all moderate national leaders rejected the idea of a common supranational identity. For instance, Rafik Abdrakhmanov, director of the Kazan Institute of Federalism, welcomed the concept. When asked about the *rossiiskii narod*, he immediately answered, "I have a *rossiiskii* passport," a fact that fulfills the *de jure* aspect of nationhood. However, Abdrakhmanov admitted that a *rossiiskii* identity, although emergent, remains weak. "I consider it normal to try to develop such an idea," he said and perspicaciously noted that a couple years earlier Putin did not utter the word *rossiianin* in public speeches, preferring the non-emotive *grazhdanin Rossii* ("citizen of Russia"). He called this phenomenon "evolution" and contended that the *tatarskii* and *rossiiskii* identities do not contradict each other, but actually strengthen Russia. An obvious analog, as Abdrakhmanov pointed out, is the United States, where millions of citizens identify as bi-cultural.

If rejection of *rossiiskost'* was not universal among the moderate national leadership, skepticism of a supranational identity was not limited to Tatarstan's titular population. Yurii Alaev, an ethnic Russian who edits the influential newspaper *Vremia i Den'gi*, told me that although a *rossiiskii narod* exists on paper – that is, according to the constitution of the Russian Federation – it is not detectable as an authentic identity in today's Russia. He offered a straightforward explanation: A civic-based identity does not exist because civil society was non-existent in Imperial and Soviet Russia and remains very weak today. "After 100 years, maybe we'll be able to speak of a *rossiiskii narod* as a real entity – if we can establish a law-based society in Russia," he said. "But in today's circumstances, no, it doesn't exist." The absence of such an identity did not trouble Alaev. The hallmark of Tatarstan, he said, is tolerance. Having co-existed for nearly half a millennium, Tatars and Russians respect each other and live together peacefully in spite of Moscow's misguided nationalities policies. This interethnic respect, Alaev added, is bolstered by a relatively high rate of intermarriage.⁹¹ He therefore found no need to propagandize the *rossiiskii narod*.

Another non-Tatar observer, Lev Ovrutskii, a journalist who has analyzed issues of post-Soviet identity and politics in Tatarstan, also was skeptical about Putin's rhetorical device. When asked about the *rossiiskii narod*, he quickly answered with a single word: *fiksiia* ("fiction"). Ovrutskii conceded that perhaps such a national identity, based on common experience within the Russian Federation, is in the process of formation. But today, he said, it does not exist as a self-claimed identity:

We are still primarily Russians, Tatars, and Jews. Perhaps someday we will call ourselves "Rossians" like Americans of all ethnicities call themselves

⁹¹ About one-third of all marriages in Tatarstan cross ethnic lines.

"Americans," but such a consciousness must arise naturally, not out of ideology. The Soviet consciousness was based on ideology, not on reality.

However, Ovrutskii, when analyzing his own Jewish identity, was not averse to acknowledging that no small part of his mentality is distinctly Russian (*russkii*). "I think in Russian, read and write in Russian, and Russia is my homeland," he said. "But in Russia, I'm a Jew. Beyond her borders, though, I call myself Russian (*russkii*)"

Inferring from responses elicited in my interviews, Putin's *rossiiskii narod* has yet to take root as a self-proclaimed identity in Kazan. Tatar national leaders, radical and moderate alike, recall assimilatory policies of the Soviet state and consequently are wary of any top-down attempt to craft a common identity. However, it is important to note that, with the exception of the radical nationalists, none of my interview subjects expressed hostility toward ethnic Russians, most admitted that commonalities exist among Tatars and Russians, and most expressed loyalty to Russia itself. Confirming this final point, Abdrakhmanov said, "I have two motherlands – Tatarstan is my small motherland [*malaia rodina*] and Russia is my big motherland [*bol'shaia rodina*]." Thus, Abdrakhmanov and the other moderate Tatar national leaders seek recognition within a greater *Rossiian* polity.

Concluding Remarks

Sovereign borders are not only the physical lines that demarcate one discrete territory from another. There are also psychological and emotional lines that separate one people from another. The latter type of border, complex and unseen, perhaps is even more difficult to generate and maintain than the physical lines inscribed around a state. On this account, constructing borders between ethnic Tatars and the wider Russian citizenry proved untenable. Though the Tatars are cleaved from the ethnic Russian nation by a confession and a native tongue – generally acknowledged as two of the most important aspects of national identity – other psychological and emotional bonds tie these groups together. United within a Russian polity for nearly half a millennium, Tatars and Russians are more similar than the Tatar national leadership would like to admit. Though many Tatars speak their Turkic tongue as a first language, they also almost universally speak the Russian language; and no small portion of the Tatars, especially those living in cities beyond the Middle Volga region, communicate better in Russian than in their native language. But Tatars and Russians are united by more than a language. They have lived together in close proximity for hundreds of years, they have intermarried at high rates, and they have reared children of no distinct ethnicity; thus, these two peoples now share a common genetic stock. Tatars and Russians also share a greater supranational dialog. Together they have survived the travails that have threatened to dissolve the Russian polity, the *smuta* – "times of troubles" – in the early seventeenth century, in 1917, and again in the 1990s. Powerful bonds, these shared memories provide fodder for a mythology on which to cultivate a shared supranational identity.

The Tatars and Russians, as any outsider who has lived among them can attest, most definitely are connected by a certain *rossiiskost'* – a territorial identity based on a centuries-long common history within a shared state. Supranational territorial identities, such as the emerging *rossiiskii* identity, may indeed complement the narrower ethnic ones. African-Americans, Irish-Americans, and Chinese-Americans give testament to this complementariness. Similarly, perhaps Russia soon will be strengthened by a citizenry that identifies as Tatar-Rossians, Jewish-Rossians, and even Chechen-Rossians. But nations traditionally – at least in the European context – have been defined in ethnic terms, and consequently the development of a supra-ethnic nationality in the Eurasian heartland will prove a difficult task. Polls indicate that some 50 percent of Russia's population view ethnicity as more important than state citizenship.⁹² The age-old "glass as half-full or half-empty" equation applies in this situation. One could bemoan the fact that a large portion of the country's population seeks an exclusive model of nationality and wants to live in a "Russia for Russians" – or, as may be the case, a Tatarstan for Tatars. But many people in Russia acknowledge their *rossiiskii* identity as being more significant than their narrower ethnic nationality. This is a strong foundation on which to build a civic nation – a "Russia for Rossians." This can best be accomplished if *rossiiskii* does not become synonymous with *ruskii*.

But Tatars cannot be appreciated and recognized merely as *Rossians*. They must also be respected as Tatars – that is, a people with a distinct national culture, a people different from the Russian nation and a greater *Rossian* nation. The question here is what type of structure can contain and accommodate their uniqueness while maintaining the territorial integrity of Russia itself. It is unlikely that a unitary state, one with a single set of laws for an assumedly unified *Rossian* people, will accommodate the Tatars' aspirations – or those of other large non-Russian peoples. Some degree of territorial autonomy is necessary to reassure Tatars, Chechens, and other national groups in Russia that, while they all are valued *Rossians*, their unique ethnic identities are safeguarded. Cases throughout the world support the practice of territorial autonomy as a compromise to sub-state sovereignty claims. Galicians in Spain, Tadjiks in Uzbekistan, Alsatians in France, and other minority groups throughout the world enjoy a degree of territorial autonomy. The Tatars, unlike the Chechens, clearly were not intent on separation from Russia. They acknowledge Tatarstan as a vital part of that country, but they also demand room to develop their distinct culture. Moscow would be wise to recognize this and permit Tatarstan a continuing degree of independence.

Finding a workable balance in Russia's federative structure will be a long-term project beset by temporary setbacks, but also one hopefully marked in the end by greater stability and peace. Tatars and Russians fear a return to the chaos of Yeltsin era and, bolstered by commonalities, will cooperate in the process of building a democratic, more stable Russia. Scholars would be well

⁹² Geogrii Il'ichev, "53% Grazhdan Khoteli by Zhit' v Rossii dlia Russkikh", *Izvestia*, 19 January 2005 (www.izvestia.ru/community/article1031809).

served – and would serve well – if they focused not only on the shortcomings in this process, but also looked at the small successes. As my research indicates, the case of Chechnya is Russia's tragic exception, not the rule in the Eurasian heartland. Not only do Tatars and Russians live peacefully in Tatarstan, but Kalmyks and Russians live peacefully in Kalmykia, Buriats and Russians live peacefully in Buriatia, and dozens of ethnicities peacefully coexist in Moscow and St. Petersburg. By focusing on the most egregious case, Western media and scholars give the message that Russia is doomed to ethnic strife. Such a message is not only inaccurate; it also is potentially dangerous in that it reifies the conflict paradigm.

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