

PERSPECTIVES ON CHANGE
VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3
JUNE 5, 1992

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WHITHER TATARSTAN?

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Later this month, the Tatarstan Parliament will convene the World Congress of Tatars in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. This Congress will include not only members of the Tatar diaspora within the Commonwealth of Independent States, but also ethnic Tatars living abroad. It has been suggested that one of the goals of this Congress is to demonstrate the political strength of ethnic Tatars to the Russian government, just at the moment when the Russian and Tatar governments are working out a blueprint for future relations. This conference could serve as a kind of "insurance policy" against any Russian backpedalling on economic concessions offered to Tatarstan as part of the evolving Tatar-Russian relationship. In other recent moves to redefine Tatarstan's relations with Russia, the Tatarstan parliament decided to abrogate payments of Russian federal taxes, except for payments for functions delegated to the Russian government. By adopting tactics similar to those used by Russia against the USSR, this assertion by Tatar nationalists is likely to escalate the conflict between Moscow and Kazan. (Editor's note)

In a referendum held March 21, 1992, a majority of the voters of Tatarstan voted "Yes" to the following proposition: "Do you agree that the republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state, a subject of international law, building its relations with the Russian Federation and other states and republics on the basis of equitable agreements?"¹ In effect, the voters of Tatarstan reaffirmed the declaration made earlier on August 30, 1990, by the Supreme Soviet of the Tatar Republic that Tatarstan was the sixteenth union republic.² Even so, many now ask: why Tatarstan has chosen to hold this referendum; where will the policies of the current leadership lead this republic; and whether Tatarstan will seek to join the world community as an independent state. At the same time, this referendum serves to revive a series of larger questions that had been

¹ According to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service. Daily Report on Central Eurasia (hereafter FBIS-SOV), March 25, 1992, p. 54: 2,134,271 votes were cast out of 2,600,297 eligible to vote. Of those voting, 1,309,560 voted "Yes" (61.4% of the votes cast), as opposed to 794,444 voting "No" (37.2% of the votes cast). This meant that 1,309,560 actual voters of 2,600,297 possible eligible voters (or 50.3% of the total eligible electorate) voted in favor of the proposition. There were limited allegations of voter fraud reported in the Russian media (FBIS-SOV, March 26, 1992, p. 43), with none reported in the foreign press. The proposition posed in the referendum reads in Russian as follows: *Soglasny li vy, chto respublika Tatarstan - suverennoe gosudarstvo, sub'ekt mezhdunarodnogo prava, stroyashchiy svoi otnosheniya s Rossiyskoy federatsiey, drugimi gosudarstvami i respublikami na osnove ravnopravnykh dogovorov?* ("El' tsyn prizyvaet Tatarstan ne provodit' referendum o suverenitete", Novoe russkoe slovo, March 20, 1992, p. 4).

² Report on the USSR 2:36 (September 7, 1990), p. 31. The declaration was based on a vote of 240 for, none against, and one abstention.

forgotten in the wake of the failed putsch of August 1991 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. The most important of these is how the Russian Federation and the dominant Russian nationality will respond to the legitimate rights and aspirations of the non-Russian nationalities living within the Russian Federation. Just as the USSR's policy towards the non-Russian republics contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union, the current Russian government's policy towards its own non-Russian republics could now contribute to the possible future disintegration of the Russian Federation.

GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

It is important to distinguish two separate but nonetheless inevitably related concepts: one is the ethnically-mixed republic known as Tatarstan, the other is the supra-territorial Tatar nation. As is the case with the other republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the two do not coincide.

The Republic of Tatarstan has a population of 3.7 million. 48.5 percent are Tatars, 43.3 percent are Russians, and the remaining 8.2 percent are from other nationalities. As in most of the other republics in the CIS, the republic's president, Mintimer Shaymiyev, is a member of the former Communist establishment of the republic. Shaymiyev was elected president on June 13, 1991, when the Tatar republic voted for its own president instead of voting for the president of Russia.³

One of the key issues then, as now, relates to control over natural resources. Tatarstan produced 32 million tons of oil in 1991 and has been making arrangements to sell this oil abroad. According to media reports, Tatarstan's oil production is higher than that of OPEC member state Algeria.⁴ The oil production figures for these two republics is extremely significant considering the impending oil crisis for the Russian Federation.⁵ Tatarstan also possesses a highly-developed agricultural and industrial sector, including the well-known Kama automobile plant (KamAZ), the largest plant of its kind in the former Soviet Union.

³ Report on the USSR 3:25 (June 21, 1991), p. 34. Shaymiyev received 73% of votes cast. Sources report that 63% of eligible votes had cast ballots in the presidential election in Tatarstan, but that no more than 40% participated in the Russian presidential election. Voters in Tatarstan were not prevented from participating in the Russian presidential election.

⁴ Tatarstan's neighbor to the east, Bashqortostan, is also a major oil producer. Bashkirs claim, in fact, that Bashqortostan is a second Kuwait. (FBIS-SOV, September 26, 1991, p. 61; September 27, 1991, p. 28.)

⁵ Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press 44:7 (March 18, 1992), pp. 12-13.

The indigenous inhabitants of Tatarstan, the Kazan Tatars (also known in the West as the Volga Tatars), are a Muslim Turkic people.⁶ They speak a language that is closely related to the language of their neighbors to the east, the Bashkirs. Kazan Tatar is understood (with lesser or greater ease) by speakers of other Turkic languages such as Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Azeri, Crimean Tatar, Turkish, etc. All these groups share many aspects of their religion and culture, so much so that there was a movement for a broader shared identity beginning in the late 19th century.⁷ These ideas are resurfacing today, as exemplified by the simplified Turkish language now being used in television broadcasts to Central Asia.

The Kazan Tatars identify their own past with the state of Volga Bulgaria, which was located at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers within present-day Tatarstan. This territory converted to Islam in the early 10th century and was an integral part of the Golden Horde during the 13th-14th centuries. The Khanate of Kazan existed more or less in the same region from the 1430s until its conquest by Russia in 1552, which opened the door to Russian migration to the Middle Volga region and points further east as far as the Pacific. From this moment on, the Muslim Turkic population of this region lived under Russian rule, often subject to movements to convert or assimilate the population.⁸ Thus, since the 16th century, the republic known as Tatarstan has been home to an ethnically-mixed population of Muslim Turks known as Tatars, Russians, and other groups which have retained their separate identities.

The media have dwelled on the misleading fact that Tatars constitute less than half of the republic's population of 3.7 million people.⁹ I would argue that we must consider the larger picture, going beyond the boundaries of Tatarstan, for our understanding of the ethno-political situation in Tatarstan is incomplete if we do not consider that three-fourths of the Kazan Tatars live outside Tatarstan. In fact, if we exclude Ukrainians from consideration (since they have no official homeland within the Russian Federation), the Kazan Tatars are the largest nationality in the Russian

⁶ More recently the term "Volga-Ural Tatars" (*Idel-Ural Tatarları*) has also been used in the Tatar literary journal, *Kazan utları*, which may also be understood as a reference to the still-born Volga-Ural state of 1918, but also an indication that most Tatars live outside of the narrow borders of modern Tatarstan.

⁷ Certain other Turkic languages such as Chuvash, which is spoken in the neighboring Chuvash republic, and Siberian Turkic languages cannot be understood by speakers of Kazan Tatar. While the aforementioned closely-related Turkic peoples are Muslims, the Chuvash are Christians, and the Turkic peoples of Siberia are variously Christians, Buddhists, or animists.

⁸ Following a stillborn attempt to establish an independent Volga-Ural (*Idel-Ural*) state in 1918, a Tatar autonomous republic was established in 1920. I have oversimplified the many contradictions inherent in the identities constructed by the modern nations of the Volga region and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, but this brief outline is adequate for our purposes here.

⁹ Even so, it should be noted that they represent a higher portion of the population of their own republic than the Kazakhs.

Federation after the Russians.¹⁰ It is often forgotten that according to the 1979 census, the Tatars were the sixth largest nationality in the former Soviet Union.¹¹ According to more recent data from the 1989 census (which could once again recognize the Crimean Tatars and count them separately from the Kazan Tatars), the Kazan Tatars were the seventh largest nationality.¹² Even in 1989, there were more Kazan Tatars than Armenians, Estonians, Georgians, Kyrgyz, Latvians, Lithuanians, Moldavians, Tajiks, and Turkmen, all of whom had their own union republics under the former Soviet Union. However, the Kazan Tatars retained the status of an autonomous republic. Tatars feel that this second-class status was a result of discrimination in favor of Russia, though this view could not be expressed openly during most of the Soviet period.

GROWTH OF NATIONALISM

Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* made it possible for non-Russian nationalities to develop their own hitherto-repressed and underdeveloped national ideologies.¹³ In the case of the Tatars, the Tatar Public Center, an umbrella organization uniting many smaller groups established in early 1989, began to make two separate arguments, each of which was directly linked to the status of the republic.¹⁴ Tatar leaders began to argue that their republic, whose titular nationality's relative cultural and demographic position was even more favorable in the earlier periods of Soviet rule, had fulfilled the conditions for becoming a union republic from the very beginning of the Soviet period. This position links both the Tatar republic and the Tatar nation, and it reflects the most important reason that the sovereign status of the republic is championed by Tatar nationalists. This drive is out of national and not economic considerations.

¹⁰ FBIS-SOV, March 20, 1992, pp. 44-45, citing an article in Izvestiya.

¹¹ The largest nationality was the Russians, followed by the Ukrainians, Uzbeks (12,456,000), Byelorussians, Kazakhs (6,556,000), Tatars (6,317,000), and Azeris (5,477,000).

¹² The largest nationality was the Russians, followed by the Ukrainians, Uzbeks (16,697,815), Byelorussians, Kazakhs (8,135,818), Azeris (6,770,403), and Kazan Tatars (6,648,760). The Crimean Tatars numbered 271,715. Had the Kazan and Crimean Tatars been counted together as before (combined total 6,920,475), they would have retained their position as the sixth largest nationality.

¹³ This point is under-appreciated by analysts who advocate or follow exclusively the cause of the re-emerging Russian nation, as can be seen these days in Western commentaries on the struggle between Russia and Ukraine over the status of the Black Sea fleet and the Crimean peninsula. Of course, this debate ignores the role of the Crimean Tatars, who were expelled from their traditional homeland in 1944, but are now returning en masse.

¹⁴ I devoted an earlier article to the rise of the new Tatar national movement based on my own first-hand observations in "The Tatar Public Center and Current Tatar Concerns", Report on the USSR 1:51 (December 22, 1989), pp. 11-15. This article offers a detailed summary of numerous issues that are mentioned here only in passing.

The greatest consequence of a second-class political status for the Kazan Tatar nation (as distinct from the republic) was the cultural degradation which it suffered during the Soviet period. At the beginning of the Soviet period, the Kazan Tatars represented, together with the Crimean Tatars and the Azeris, the major cultural and intellectual elite among the Muslim Turkic groups of the former Russian Empire. By 1989, Kazan Tatar culture was on the path to extinction. Primary and secondary school education in the Kazan Tatar language was not available in the capital. For this reason, the language was dying out among the younger generations in the capital. This also reflected the reduced educational and cultural opportunities available to Tatars within their own republic, not to mention the absolute lack of educational and cultural support for the vast majority of Kazan Tatars living outside of the territory, who assigned "Tatar" as their official nationality. This should be contrasted with the much healthier linguistic and cultural situation in Azerbaijan, whose cultural development was comparable to Tatar culture at the beginning of the century, and in Uzbekistan (which had its own rich pre-modern tradition). However, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan did not have highly developed literary languages at the beginning of the century, but do today. It was to these problems that national-minded intellectuals responded. As we know from Central Europe, the Baltic states, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and other regions, nationalism is not a pocketbook issue. Rather, cultural interests instead of economic considerations, have fueled the intellectuals' drive for a declaration of political sovereignty on August 30, 1990; economic factors have been of secondary importance to the champions of a Kazan Tatar nation.

The economic reasons underlying the declaration of political sovereignty were in part intended to appeal to all the inhabitants of Tatarstan, especially the Russians, who had little to gain and possibly much to lose from a Tatar national movement. Tatarstan's rich natural resources, agricultural production, and industrial output were being extracted from the republic to subsidize other parts of the Soviet Union with only minimal return to the Tatar ASSR. Despite its potential "wealth," the Tatar ASSR was a relatively impoverished area in terms of the investment in health, education, culture, and other services. An improved standard of living was an attractive reason for every segment of society to support an independent status for the Tatar ASSR. The leadership of the Tatar Public Center made many concessions to the Russian population, including supporting equal rights and the inclusion of Russian as an official language of the republic, in order not to alienate the Russians, some of whose roots in the republic go back to the 16th century.

POST-COUP POLITICS

While the Soviet Union still existed, the republican leadership was very pro-center and at first resisted the Tatar Public Center. By the time of the declaration of sovereignty on August 30, 1990, the interests of the Tatar Public Center and the republican leadership appeared to coincide. While the national movement was primarily interested in the development of the Tatar nation, it is likely that the republican

leadership was more interested in the economic advantages to the leadership of the republic. After all, President Shaymiyev reportedly supported the organizers of the August 1991 putsch, which caused quite an uproar in the republic, including numerous demands for his resignation.¹⁵ It seems, however, that the formerly Communist leadership of Tatarstan is now successfully portraying itself in the same national garb as post-Communist leaders throughout the CIS and that the Tatar Public Center seems to have reached again some sort of accommodation with the president. This is evidenced by the fact that the referendum was held successfully. Nevertheless, the parliament continues to be divided into three major groups: 1) the supporters of the president; 2) the Tatar nationalists; and 3) the Russians.¹⁶

There are additional elements that should also be mentioned, including strongly nationalist groups which take positions different from or going far beyond those of the government or the Tatar Public Center. One example is the pro-Islamic Ittifak party led by Fauziya Bayramova, a charismatic personality fusing Tatar nationhood and a territorial brand of nationalism. She envisions extending the boundaries beyond those of the current republic, since so many Tatars live in neighboring Bashkortostan and along the Volga. This party is strongly involved in the national assembly (*milli majlis*) of the Tatars, selected by the self-proclaimed congress (*kurultay*). This body is an attempt to represent the Tatar diaspora. While political decisions taken by this national assembly are not recognized as legitimate either by the republican leadership or by the Tatar Public Center, nonetheless, the existence of the national assembly suggests that the strongest and most emotional concern of the various nationalist factions is the welfare of all the Tatars, whether they live within the boundaries of Tatarstan or not. The issue of the diaspora will continue to be the driving force behind politics in Tatarstan.

The religious orientation of the Ittifak party and other groups reflects the revival of one of the traditional elements in Tatar culture: Islam. Briefly, the role of Islam today is to be compared with the role of the Catholic church in the Polish movement for independence and the growing prominence of the Orthodox church in the culture of the re-emerging Russian nation, where it is seen as one of the legitimate components of a modern national secular culture. Unfortunately, there is a prevailing negative attitude among many Western analysts -- and a colonialist attitude among many Russian commentators -- whenever they describe politics in any of the former colonies of the Soviet Union. This seems to surface when it comes to describing nations for whom any religion other than Christianity is a component of the local national culture. Today, such

¹⁵ See for example Current Digest of the Soviet Press 43:33 (1991), pp. 21-22; FBIS-SOV, September 27, 1991, p. 46; October 3, 1991, pp. 57-59. (Ed. note: it has also been suggested that Shaymiyev supported the coup in hopes that he would secure Tatarstan's participation in the negotiations on the Union Treaty.)

¹⁶ There is a whole additional spectrum of political views including the supporters of the Republican leadership as well as the significant Russian population which are not addressed here.

an attitude must be seen as reflecting a profound misunderstanding of the role of religion in the rise of nationalism throughout the world, when it has as its origins a response to colonialism.

WHITHER TATARSTAN?

At this juncture it is too early to know how the Russian Federation will respond to the results of the referendum, although there are several observations that can be offered. One is that even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union there was talk of decentralizing the Russian Republic because it was too large and unwieldy to manage effectively. Another is that Boris Yeltsin himself supported the Tatar move for sovereignty while Gorbachev was still in power. Only as president of the post-putsch Russian Federation did Yeltsin suddenly oppose this move as he in effect assumed the centrist mantle of Gorbachev.¹⁷ The long-term future of governmental structures in Russia, including how long Yeltsin himself will be in power, is not yet clear. Today, news reports suggest that Moscow has little control over political and economic life in the provinces, so it is not clear how effectively Russia could move to suppress Tatarstan's sovereignty if it were to choose to do so. Nor is it clear whether Tatarstan's leadership will make a serious attempt at accommodation with Moscow. At present, President Shaymiyev indicates that there is no need for a separate currency, foreign representation, or defense structures. Such statements could be a smokescreen for a slow but steady move for greater independence. Though many groups within Tatarstan completely favor independence, the current leadership has proven its loyalty to the center in the past.

Much depends on the actions of Boris Yeltsin and the Russian Federation, including whether Russia's government will take a hostile posture or attempt a military solution. All of the major gas, oil, and chemical pipelines pass through Tatarstan and could easily be shut off. Such a move could bring Russia's economy to a halt in a short period of time. Also, it has been reported that most of the former Soviet Union's chemical weapons are stored in Tatarstan. Another important point is that many of the eighteen remaining former autonomous republics, other than Tatarstan and Chechen-Ingushetiya,¹⁸ could react very strongly against a crackdown on Tatarstan, which could only serve to hasten the collapse of the Russian Federation, the new treaty of federation notwithstanding. Perhaps a sign of things to come is the attempt by Tatar legislators to

¹⁷ See the following articles in The New York Times: "Yeltsin's Response to the Separatists: Feel Free" (September 3, 1990); "Tatars Seek Split with the Russians" (September 8, 1991); and "Tatar Area in Russia Votes on Sovereignty Today" (March 21, 1992).

¹⁸ In November, 1991, after Yeltsin declared presidential elections illegal in Chechen-Ingushetiya, he slapped a month-long state of emergency on the region. The Russian legislature vehemently opposed the measure and Yeltsin was almost immediately forced to retreat. This episode was regarded as Yeltsin's first ethnic test since his election in June, 1991. (Ed. note)

seek a federation with neighboring Bashkortostan, a historical rival over most of this century which nonetheless steadfastly supported Tatarstan's right to hold a referendum.

One lesson that can be drawn from the collapse of the Soviet Union is that Western governments insisted on ignoring the union republics, preferring to imagine instead that there was, or perhaps should be, a strong center with which Western governments could deal. Now these same governments are scrambling to establish ties with 14 additional newly-independent states in response to the overtures of neighboring governments in the region. If the Russian Federation were indeed to collapse, Western governments are not prepared to deal at present with up to one or two dozen new states. Will Western governments continue to put all their eggs in the Russian Federation's basket, despite the many indications that the Russian Federation's government is practically nonexistent outside the central regions and that the Russian Federation in all likelihood cannot survive as a stable entity? After all, it is only a matter of time before the local rulers representing the former Communist elites are ousted by more national-minded politicians. By then, Moscow may look fondly upon the days when only Tatarstan and Chechen-Ingushetiya considered themselves outside of the Russian Federation.

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