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INFORMAL GROUPS

The Tatar Public Center and Current Tatar Concerns

Uli Schamiloglu*

The Tatar Public Center (TOTs)¹ is the most important of the political and cultural groups formed recently in the Tatar ASSR. It enjoys official recognition,² the only group to have achieved this status at the time of my visit to the republic earlier this year, and its members are regularly invited to contribute to the press and to appear in round-table discussions on television. A TOTs delegation also met with the then first secretary of the Tatar Oblast Party Committee, G. I. Usmanov, shortly before he was transferred to the Secretariat of the CPSU Central Committee. TOTs appears to be the main forum for discussion of republican and national issues by the Tatar intelligentsia, and it is the only major voice with the will and credibility to speak on behalf of Tatars in the USSR.³

Another prominent group is the People's Front, while smaller groups include "Bolgar el-Jadid," "Marjani," "Tugan yak," and "Saf Islam." Of all these, only the People's Front of Kazan appears to have an "internationalist" character.⁴ Its newspaper, which is prominently

posted in strategic locations, does not appear to emphasize issues of unique concern to Tatars. A major concern of all the other groups, including TOTs, seems to be the preservation of Tatar and Islamic culture. "Bolgar el-Jadid," for example, advocates that Kazan Tatars change their name to "Bulgar" (in Kazan Tatar *Bolgar*) in recognition of their descent from the Volga Bulgars, a Turkic people that lived in the same territory and converted to Islam in the tenth century.⁵ In the account of the proceedings of its organizational meeting, TOTs claims that "Bolgar el-Jadid" (Bulgaria Nova), "Marjani" (named for the nineteenth-century Tatar scholar), and "Saf Islam" (Pure Islam) have joined TOTs. Although TOTs champions Tatar interests, it continues to advocate the equality of different ethnic and religious groups, including the many ethnic minorities residing in the Tatar ASSR. For example, a TOTs resolution of this summer called for the publication of Chuvash-language newspapers in the Tatar ASSR.⁶ (Russians and Jews have their own branches of TOTs.)

Goals

One date that has been given for the emergence of TOTs is June 27, 1988, the occasion of the first public gathering of people concerned about various problems, including

Kazan, January 10, 1989, p. 3; and A. Karapetyan's interview with Vasist Garipov, a representative of the Initiative Center of the People's Front of Kazan: "Narodnyi front: Rossiiskiy ili russkiy?" *Vechnyaya Kazan*, August 19, 1989, p. 2.

⁵ For examples of the earlier emotional debate on this question, see A. Khayrullin, "Kem vakalat birgan?" F. Garipov, "Bez—Kazannan, Ideldan," and A. Galiev, "Galim fikerlen yaklym," *Sotsialistik Tatarstan*, October 12, 1988, p. 3. See also "Further Debates in Tataria," *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle*, Vol. 8, No. 2, May, 1989, p. 9. It is reported that this position did not find much support among individuals attending an organizational meeting of TOTs on September 29, 1988 (see T. Bareev, "Trevogi naroda," *Vechnyaya Kazan*, October 10, 1988, p. 3).

⁶ See *Iman*, Nos. 2-3, 1989, p. 1. *Iman* (Faith) is published unofficially under the auspices of TOTs.

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¹ In Kazan Tatar this group is known as *Tatar ijtimagiy uzage*, although its Russian name, *Tatarskiy obshchestvennyy tsentr*, has given rise to the widely used acronym TOTs, which is used in the present article.

² The Tatar Council of Ministers is said to have approved the statute of TOTs on July 17, 1989. See T. Bareev, "Teper—v polnyi rost," *Vechnyaya Kazan*, July 27, 1989, p. 3.

³ It should be remembered that three-quarters of the Kazan Tatars live outside the Tatar ASSR.

⁴ For brief comments on relations between the People's Front and TOTs, see "TOTs—za primat ravenstva," *Vechnyaya*

those of the Tatar people.⁷ An organizational conference held on October 29, 1988, in Kazan drew nearly 1,000 people, including representatives from Moscow, Ul'yanovsk, Kuibyshev, Gor'ky, Saratov, Ufa, Perm', Sverdlovsk, Chelyabinsk, Orenburg, Kurgan, and Tyumen', as well as a delegation of Crimean Tatars from the Uzbek SSR. Seventy representatives were elected to organize the founding congress.⁸ Following the organizational conference, TOTs circulated preliminary "Theses for the Preparation of a Platform for the Tatar Public Center."⁹ The founding congress of TOTs was held on February 17-18, 1989, in Kazan, after which two documents were circulated: the platform and statute of the organization¹⁰ and the proceedings of the founding congress.¹¹

The main goals embodied in the final published version of the platform of TOTs can be summarized thus: gaining for the Tatar ASSR the status of a Union republic with all the rights of a sovereign government; making Kazan Tatar the official language of the republic; obtaining economic sovereignty for the republic; and promoting the cultural and spiritual consolidation of the Tatar nation scattered throughout the USSR.

TOTs seeks the complete elimination of all distinctions between Union and autonomous republics, and its published platform calls for equal representation in the USSR Congress of People's Deputies of all nationalities with state formations. In addition, it advocates the establishment of a Council of Nationalities of the RSFSR in which all nationalities living in autonomous oblasts or okrugs should have equal representation. At the same time, relations between the RSFSR and the Tatar republic should be brought up to the level of relations between two independent states, and the Tatar republic should have the right to enter into direct relations with foreign organizations.¹²

One obvious justification for this demand is the political underrepresentation of the Tatar people resulting from their autonomous republican status. The industrial output and exploitation of natural resources in the Tatar

ASSR is controlled centrally, but, as a "second-class" nation, the republic receives lower investment in education, culture, health care, and social needs. It also has less radio and television broadcasting; there are only limited means for publishing books, newspapers, and magazines; the republic has no film studio; and the Academy of Sciences is neglected.¹³ This situation does not correspond, in the view of TOTs, with the economic and spiritual resources of the republic. The head of TOTs, M. Mulyukov of Kazan University, points out that budgetary allotments for the socioeconomic needs of Estonia amount to 1,308 rubles per head of population, and for the RSFSR they are more than 800 rubles per head; yet the Tatar ASSR is allotted only 212 rubles per head, although the output of the Kama Automobile Works alone is as great as that of the entire Estonian economy.¹⁴ There seems to be a large degree of consensus in the republic on this issue, since both Tatars and non-Tatars can see the advantages of Union-republican status.¹⁵ According to one article, in little more than a year 67 percent of the population of the Tatar ASSR has come to accept the position of TOTs regarding the need to give the republic Union status. TOTs has already submitted two lists, each containing 100,000 signatures, to Moscow in support of this demand.¹⁶

A further important demand being made by TOTs is for the elevation of the Kazan Tatar language to the status of official language of the republic. Of course, the debate over this issue is no less emotional in the Tatar ASSR than in other parts of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ For Kazan Tatars,

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5. See also "TOTs—za primat ravenstva," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, January 10, 1989, p. 3; R. Khakimov, "Tatarii—status soyuznoi respubliki," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, February 2, 1989, p. 3; *idem*, "Federatsiyaneng nigeze," *Sotsialistik Tatarstan*, September 3, 1989, p. 3; "Uslyshat' golos avtonomii," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, September 12, 1989, p. 1; and K. Fasakhov, "Radikal' uzgareshlar kirak," *Sotsialistik Tatarstan*, September 20, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Politicheskoe obrazovanie*, No. 8, 1989, p. 99.

¹⁵ R. Khakimov, "Federatsiyaneng nigeze," *Sotsialistik Tatarstan*, September 3, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁶ See also "Uslyshat' golos avtonomii," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, September 12, 1989, p. 1.

¹⁷ See, for example, F. Bairamova, "I tot li narod svoikh prav ne dostoin?" *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, September 27, 1988, p. 3 (complaining that Tatars were able to publish more in their own language before the revolution than now); T. Bareev, "Trevogi naroda," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, October 10, 1988, p. 3; R. Khakimov, "Argumenty ne emotsii," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, August 2, 1989, p. 3; F. Khantemirova, "Rodnoi yazyk—yazyk materi," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, August 14, 1989, p. 3 (on the foundation of the Moscow Society of Tatar Culture and the "Tugan tel" (roughly, Mother Tongue) society; M. Nasybullin, "Khaterga sayakh," *Tatarstan yash'lare*, September 14, 1989, p. 3 (on Stalin's attack on Tatar culture, the declining use of Tatar in rural areas, and the republican leaders' insufficient knowledge of Tatar language and culture); A. Eniki, "Chego my ozhidali?" *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, September 16, 1989, p. 2 (on the decline

⁷ T. Bareev, "Trevogi naroda," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, October 10, 1988, p. 3.

⁸ See T. Bareev, "Zarozhdaetsya dvizhenie," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, November 7, 1988, p. 3.

⁹ For an English translation of this document, see *Central Asia and Caucasus Chronicle*, Vol. 8, No. 2, May, 1989, pp. 5-9. It should be borne in mind that many of the positions in this document differ significantly from the ones in the published version of the platform.

¹⁰ *Platforma. Ustav*, Kazan, 1989.

¹¹ *Oeshu s'ezdy magl'umailary: Notyklar, kararlar, morajagatlar/Materialy uchreditel'nogo s'ezda: Doklady, rezolyutsii, obrashcheniya*, Kazan, 1989. These pamphlets, which could not be published in the Tatar ASSR, include no additional publication data. According to F. Sultanov, one of the seven leading coordinators of TOTs, the organization turned to "Sajudis" in Lithuania for help in publishing these materials (T. Bareev, "Teper—v polnyi rost," *Vechnyaya Kazan'*, July 27, 1989, p. 3).

¹² *Platforma, Ustav*, p. 6.

the language issue is critical at this juncture because young people in the capital have to a great extent lost the ability to communicate in Kazan Tatar in the last generation. Members of TOTs trace the decline back to the closing of Tatar-language schools in Kazan in the 1960s. Now even young parents who do have a good command of their native language find that their children's knowledge of Tatar is submerged by Russian as soon as they enter kindergarten. There is a pervasive fear that the language may disappear in urban centers with the present generation.¹⁸ On September 1 of this year, the first few bilingual kindergartens finally reopened in Kazan. Inadequate as many people consider they are, it is something of an achievement, since initiatives of this kind have been quietly thwarted in the past.¹⁹

The tactical problem for members of TOTs is how to approach the question of raising Kazan Tatar to the status of official language of the republic. (A related issue is whether to switch from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Arabic or Latin alphabet.²⁰) To the members of TOTs it is clear that the Kazan Tatar language must be given official status in order to ensure its future, but this argument is not necessarily so self-evident to all Tatars, especially those living outside Kazan. The greatest difficulty has been the logistics of putting the argument to the general public, since the access of TOTs to the media is limited. Certain leading publications that contribute to this debate, such as the daily newspaper *Vechernyaya Kazan'*, do not even circulate outside the capital. (I found it difficult to purchase the various daily newspapers even in Kazan.) What is more, in the Tatar ASSR there is only limited time available on radio and television for programs that originate in the republic (with much of the local programming in Russian), and not all broadcasts reach all parts of the republic.²¹

Getting the message across to the population of the republic is important because conservative republican leaders have been suggesting that the language issue should be resolved by means of a referendum. Although, according to the preliminary results of the most recent census, Tatars now constitute 49 percent of the population of their republic, they are still in a minority. In the view of many members of TOTs, they stand to lose such a referendum, just as they failed to elect more Tatars (or

supporters of TOTs²²) to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies. To win, they need the full support of Tatars and a certain amount of support from non-Tatars, which simply may not be forthcoming on this divisive issue. Another possible solution of the language issue might be for the government of the Tatar ASSR simply to declare Kazan Tatar the official language of the republic. Members of TOTs believe that the government has the authority to take this step and are encouraging it to do so. The republican leaders have been reluctant so far to take the plunge, although, under the influence of TOTs, they may be beginning to move in that direction.

Weekly Meetings

The emotional level of these debates can best be gauged at the weekly meetings of TOTs in Kazan, which provide the main venue for the intelligentsia to gather, exchange views, and maintain links. They are held on Mondays at 5 P.M. in the auditorium of the Kazan branch of the Academy of Sciences and are open to the public, since TOTs does not have an official membership roll,²³ its only permanent members being the officers and committee members. Issues, proposals, and draft documents are discussed and voted upon by those present. During my stay in Kazan, thought was being given to holding meetings of the executive committee separately from the public meetings, which would then be conducted by the Kazan branch of TOTs.

Each meeting proved an unforgettable experience. The audiences usually consisted largely of scholars from the Institute of Language, Literature, and History, Kazan State University, and other higher educational institutions. Writers, journalists, and people from other walks of life also attended. Variety was added by representatives of Kazan Tatar and even Crimean Tatar communities in various regions of the USSR (the Bashkir ASSR, Siberia, the Middle and Lower Volga, Central Asia, Lithuania, Moscow, and Leningrad). Representatives of Crimean Tatar groups reported on their organizational activities and their efforts to restore a Crimean Tatar ASSR. A Kazan Tatar, apparently from Perm', pleaded for teachers who spoke Tatar, textbooks, and other teaching materials.²⁴ Representatives of private cooperatives came with information on Tatar language courses that were being established in Kazan for both Tatars and non-Tatars. There

of the Tatar language and the need to help Tatars living outside the Tatar ASSR); and K. Fasakhov, "Radikal' uzgareshlar kirak," *Sotsialistik Tatarstan*, September 20, 1989, p. 3.

¹⁸ Eniki, *op. cit.*, raises the same question regarding Tatars living outside the Tatar ASSR.

¹⁹ See T. Bareev, "Trevogi naroda," October 10, 1988, p. 3.

²⁰ This matter was also discussed at an organizational conference (see T. Bareev, "Zarozhdaetsya dvizhenie," *Vechernyaya Kazan'*, November 7, 1988, p. 3).

²¹ For Tatars living outside the Tatar ASSR there is a relay transmission of the Tatar-language broadcasts of Radio Kazan only for residents of Moscow.

²² See F. Bairamova's scathing criticism of the tactics of the local authorities in Mulyukov's unsuccessful electoral campaign (*Iman*, Nos. 2-3, 1989, pp. 11-13). Mulyukov was opposed by M. Shaimiev, then chairman of the Tatar Council of Ministers and now first secretary of the Tatar Oblast Party Committee.

²³ TOTs appears to rely on public contributions, and some articles carry requests for donations to Account No. 700629 at Zhilsotsbank in Kazan. They also give the address of TOTs as Ulitsa Karla Marksa 36, 420111 Kazan'; telephone 39 05 79.

²⁴ The failure of Kazan to help Tatars living in other areas is referred to in Eniki, *op. cit.*

were countless references to broadcasts by the Kazan Tatar Service of Radio Liberty, and a proposed flag for the Tatar ASSR was unfurled.²⁵

The discussion at one of the meetings centered on a complaint by a representative from the Bashkir ASSR about the pressure exerted on Tatars living there to declare themselves Bashkirs.²⁶ The Tatars living in the Bashkir ASSR had originally thought of asking for a separate ASSR (the platform of TOTs opposes this), but they have now decided to support the Bashkir call for Union-republican status, with the proviso that the Bashkir authorities agree to call it the Bashkir-Tatar SSR, with equal rights for Tatars. (This would be separate from the Union republic for which the Tatars of the Tatar ASSR are calling, and the proposal is also in line with the position of TOTs that the Tatars and Bashkirs are the two separate but equal indigenous nationalities of the Bashkir ASSR.) This representative also told those present that the Tatars living in Bashkiria looked to the central leadership of TOTs in Kazan for guidance but was not being offered enough of it. While the leadership in Kazan was still debating how to get its message across better to the people, members of TOTs in the Bashkir ASSR were already going from door to door in an effort to raise the consciousness of the local Tatar population. (I heard similar stories of branches of TOTs in smaller cities being far more active than the central group.)

I also heard public and private discussions of the problems facing Tatars living in Uzbekistan. Apparently, Kazan Tatars residing there are being warned to leave the Uzbek SSR or risk suffering the same fate as the Meskhetians. A representative of TOTs has acknowledged that many Tatars in Uzbekistan are writing letters asking to be allowed to return to the Tatar ASSR, and at its meetings TOTs has discussed how it might be possible to accommodate those Tatars who may wish to relocate to the Tatar ASSR.²⁷ There have even been calls from within the Tatar ASSR for Tatars to return to the republic. Because of the steady decline in the rural population, kolkhozes could absorb many of those who might wish to return. There has also been discussion about the large work force needed for the new industrial complex at Elabuga, and it has been suggested that priority should be given to employing Kazan Tatars who wish to move to the Tatar ASSR.²⁸ In the

past, the opening of new industrial complexes has led to an influx of non-Tatars. It is no secret that a single such complex could significantly alter the ethnic ratio of the population, and I even heard rumors of secret quotas to restrict the number of Tatars employed. In response, supporters of TOTs in one urban administration have tried to use bureaucratic measures to restrict the inflow of non-Tatars. (This is an example of the grass-roots activism of supporters of TOTs outside Kazan taking a much more radical stand than the central leadership.)

Influence of TOTs

The public stands taken by TOTs, especially on the status of the republic and, to a lesser extent, on the status of the Tatar language, seem to have had an impact on the positions of elected representatives and other organizations both inside and outside the Tatar ASSR. I was told, for example, that the People's Front was bringing its policies closer in line with those of TOTs. The activities of TOTs may also have served as a catalyst for the establishment of national movements among neighboring Turkic and Finno-Ugric nationalities of the Volga region (the Chuvash, among others). The influence that TOTs can exert on elected representatives was demonstrated at a public meeting, sponsored by TOTs, with members of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies representing the Tatar ASSR. As an autonomous republic, the Tatar ASSR is allocated eleven representatives in the USSR Congress of People's Deputies (compared with the thirty-two allocated to each Union republic). Since Tatars are a minority in their own republic, most of the people's deputies elected from the Tatar ASSR are ethnic Russians. (Needless to say, it has been impossible for Tatars living outside the republic to elect Tatar people's deputies.) Hence, Tatars look to the few Tatars in the Congress such as Tufan Mingullin (former head of the Writer's Union of the Tatar ASSR) to act as spokesmen for all Tatars in the USSR. Mingullin was present at the meeting and remained behind after the departure of the Russian deputies. The discussion switched to Kazan Tatar and became very loud and heated as the Tatar audience began to grill one of its own.

During the first session of the USSR Congress of People's Deputies, Mingullin had taken the same position as many of the leaders of the Tatar ASSR on the status of the republic: he refused to single out the Tatar ASSR for elevation to a Union republic unless that status was granted to other ASSRs. At the meeting, the audience pleaded with him to change his position and asked him to promise to raise the issue of the status of the republic at the next session of the Congress. The audience also reminded him that he was one of the few spokesmen for the Tatar people in the Congress. They further warned him that, if he was not

²⁵ This flag, resurrected from the pre-Soviet period, is divided diagonally into triangular fields of red (representing the Christian world) and green (representing the Muslim world), with a white crescent moon (representing the Tatar people) in the middle.

²⁶ Kazan Tatars and Bashkirs speak closely related Turkic languages. Kazan Tatars living in the Bashkir ASSR complain that they are considered by the authorities there to speak a Bashkir dialect.

²⁷ See T. Bareev, "Teper'—v polnyi rost," *Vechernyaya Kazan'*, July 27, 1989, p. 3.

²⁸ An open letter addressed to Chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov by residents of Neberezhnye Chelny has called for the voluntary resettlement in the

Tatar ASSR of the 1,500,000 Tatars living in Central Asia and Kazakhstan. There was also an appeal in the name of TOTs calling on Tatars living in Uzbekistan to return to their homeland to fill the 80,000-100,000 jobs to be had in Elabuga (*Iman*, Nos. 2-3, 1989, p. 6).

willing to accede to the will of the people, he should step down. (TOTs has already labeled the writer R. Mustafin, who is against making Kazan Tatar the official language of the republic, an "enemy of the Tatar people" and has asked him to refrain from claiming that he represents the Tatar people.) Shortly after the meeting, I saw Mingullin on a television call-in show, and it appeared that he had moved much closer to the position of TOTs.

It is also claimed that top leaders in the Tatar ASSR have now adopted many of the positions taken by TOTs after initially opposing them. They, together with their counterparts in the Bashkir ASSR, have finally promised to propose elevating their respective autonomous republics to Union-republican status. Again, shortly before my departure, an article appeared in the press by M. Zakiev, the director of the Institute of Language, Literature, and History who is also chairman of the Tatar Supreme Soviet. Zakiev, who is not regarded as a reformer (his position on the language question has been that it should be decided by referendum), acknowledges in his article that, under Stalin, autonomous republics were less than autonomous and that "internationalism" meant eliminating nationalities altogether. Because of the fewer resources available to autonomous republics, the Tatars in the ASSR have now fallen behind the cultural and material levels of the indigenous populations of the Turkic Union republics (despite the fact that Kazan Tatars originally served as teachers for Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Uzbeks, and Turkmen). Zakiev goes on to say that it is now accepted that "internationalism" must involve recognition of the rights of nationalities. He cites the criteria for according national groups autonomous status at the time of the formation of the USSR (degree of socioeconomic development; size of population; degree of consolidation; and past statehood), as mentioned in the recently adopted CPSU platform on the nationalities question, and points out, first, that the level of socioeconomic development of the Tatar ASSR is higher than in many Union republics; second, that the Tatar population of the Soviet Union at the time of the 1979 census was 6 million, with 1,500,000 of them living in the Tatar ASSR, that now 1,800,000 Tatars live in the Tatar ASSR, and that Tatars in the diaspora look upon the republic as their

homeland;²⁹ third, that Tatars achieved national consolidation in the nineteenth century before some of the peoples that have Union-republican status; and, fourth, that the Tatars have had their own state for over a thousand years, beginning with the Volga Bulgars.³⁰

Zakiev rejects the old Stalinist position that the Tatar and Bashkir ASSRs cannot be Union republics because they lack boundaries with a foreign country as "contrived," and he offers a list of Union republics that were originally created as subordinate units of the RSFSR. He even states that the Tatars already had the basis for forming a Union republic at the time of the formation of the USSR, but that the past history of the Golden Horde and the Khanate of Kazan must have been an obstacle to this. During the Soviet period, the further development of the Tatar people means that it now meets the criteria for a Union republic even more fully. Zakiev's position—and perhaps those of other leaders as well—now echoes in part that taken much earlier by representatives of TOTs.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is clear that the views of TOTs have had a significant impact on the intelligentsia, the rank-and-file population, and even the leadership of the Tatar ASSR. There is a new spirit in the republic: fresh emphasis has been placed on the study of the Turkic culture that Tatars share with Bashkirs, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Kirgiz, Azerbaijanis, and other peoples. Although it is impossible to predict events, the Tatars are cautiously optimistic that this is the first (and perhaps the last) opportunity to begin the reversal of historical trends that began with the capture of the Khanate of Kazan in 1552.

²⁹ Tatars are the fifth largest nationality in the USSR (after Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, and Belorussians) and the second largest Turkic or Muslim nationality (after Uzbeks).

³⁰ Shortly before my visit to Kazan, the city hosted an elaborate international celebration of the 1,100th Hijri anniversary of the conversion of the Volga Bulgars to Islam and the 200th anniversary of the creation of the Religious Board of Muslims of European Russia and Siberia.

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