

**A Tale of Tubeteikas:**  
Understanding the Effect of Ethnic Nationalism on  
the Relationship between Russia and Tatarstan

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Russian Politics 4218  
22 November 2013

In the heart of the Volga region of Russia lies Tatarstan, an oil-rich republic with a population of over three and a half million. The minarets of mosques and the onion domes of Orthodox churches dot much of the countryside as well as the capital, Kazan. The Tatar people make up about half of the current population, with Russians making up the other half. The Tatars are descendants of the Volga Bulgars who were absorbed into the Mongol Golden Horde in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Ivan the Terrible captured Kazan in 1552, killing many Tatars and destroying all the mosques. About two hundred years later, Catherine the Great allowed the reconstruction of mosques, and since then, Tatar Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians have lived a relatively peaceful coexistence. Throughout Soviet times, Tatars managed to maintain their cultural heritage and traditions. These cultural traditions eventually would reawaken Tatar national consciousness as the USSR neared its end.

During *glasnost* and *perestroika*, a surge of Tatar ethnic nationalism caused Tatarstan's government to challenge Russian federalism. The result was a referendum granting Tatarstan sovereignty. In order to satisfy both the Tatar nationalists and the Moscow politicians, the Tatar government has negotiated several treaties with the Russian federal government to maintain symbolic political rights within Tatarstan, while at the same time reducing its political and economic autonomy. These symbolic political rights thus mask the fact that Moscow still maintains significant control over Tatarstan.

To demonstrate this argument, first I will explain the definitions of nationalism, federalism, sovereignty, and regional sovereignty in the context of Russia and Tatarstan. Then I will examine how Tatar nationalism became the impetus for Tatarstan to challenge Russian federalism. Next, I will examine how bilateral treaties have maintained Tatar symbolic rights but have reduced Tatarstan's regional sovereignty. Finally, I will speculate on what Tatarstan and

Russia's relationship means for Russian federalism.

Clearly defining nationalism, federalism, sovereignty, and regional sovereignty is the first step to understanding Moscow and Kazan's relationship. Nationalism, according to *Encyclopedia Britannica* is an "ideology based on the premise that the individual's loyalty and devotion to the nation-state surpass other individual or group interests."<sup>1</sup> By Tatar ethnic nationalism, I mean an ideology where an individual's loyalty and devotion to Tatar culture, language, religion, and history surpass an individual's loyalty to Russian federal interests. Federalism, *Britannica* states, is a "mode of political organization that unites separate states or other polities within an overarching political system in such a way as to allow each to maintain its own fundamental political integrity."<sup>2</sup> Federalism is the distribution of power between the center and other political bodies. The center possesses power superseding that of the smaller political bodies, while the smaller bodies still maintain some autonomy. Finally, I refer to sovereignty as independence, while I use Bahry's definition of regional sovereignty as Tatarstan's "ability to forge and implement policy in key areas independently of the central government."<sup>3</sup> I make these distinctions in order to clarify between traditional definitions and how these definitions work within a Russian and Tatar context.

Tatar ethnic nationalism begin to grow significantly with the introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the late 1980s. The openness allowed the Tatar intelligentsia to form nationalist organizations, including extremist groups such as Ittifak and Azatlyk as well as the more moderate Tatar Public Center (TOT). Ittifak and Azatlyk advocated total and complete independence of Tatarstan in addition to the rebirth and revival of Tatar culture. In contrast,

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Nationalism"

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "Federalism"

<sup>3</sup> Bahry, Donna, "The New Federalism and the Paradoxes of Regional Sovereignty in Russia," *Comparative Politics* 37, no. 2 (2005): 128, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20072879>.

TOT, founded in 1988, promoted a more moderate agenda of language equality, Tatar consolidation, economic sovereignty, and national independence.<sup>4</sup> TOT wanted Tatar as the official language of government in order to counterbalance the domination of Russian. It also demanded obligatory bilingual education and access to higher education where Tatar would be the language of instruction. Additionally, TOT wished to bring the Tatar diaspora back to the Tatarstan. Overall, the agenda for economic sovereignty was simply Tatar economic interests would take precedence over federal interests, especially in the case of cultural and linguistic matters.<sup>5</sup> The cultural, historical, and linguistic communalities produced high interest in the nationalist movement, fueling the desire for Tatar statehood.<sup>6</sup>

Discussion for a declaration of sovereignty began spring 1990. The Tatar Public Center advocated changing the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR (TASSR), as Tatarstan was then known, to a union republic. As a union republic TASSAR would still be a part of the USSR, but not a part of the Russian Republic. The political establishment, including Mintimer Shaimiev, First Secretary of the Tatar Communist Party Committee, stressed the importance of maintaining TASSR's economic relationship with the Russian Republic.<sup>7</sup> In the end, the declaration did not mention which federation the republic would join, and specifically referred to the USSR, the Russian Republic, and other republics as separate entities. On August 30, 1990, the Supreme Council of TASSR accepted The Declaration of State Sovereignty, which transformed TASSR into the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic (TSSR) synonymous with Republic of Tatarstan (RT). The declaration stated that the TSSR Constitution was supreme, and natural

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<sup>4</sup> Giuliano, Elise, "Formation in Tatarstan's Nationalist Mobilization," *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 3 (2000): 305, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/422368>

<sup>5</sup> Kondrashov, Sergei, *Nationalism and the Drive for Sovereignty in Tatarstan, 1988-92* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 74.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

resources were property of the citizens of TSSR. It created equal rights for all ethnicities and established Tatar and Russian as equal languages.<sup>8</sup> Although the elevation of Tatar to an official language was an important decision, the declaration was essentially a way to stall a decision on Tatarstan's sovereignty until a more coherent agreement could be reached between the Tatar nationalist groups and the Tatar government.

With the threat of the Russian presidential election looming, TOT kept fighting for Tatarstan's sovereignty throughout 1991. The nationalists began organizing protests promoting Tatarstan's control over natural resources, establishment of a state bank, and right to regulate taxes.<sup>9</sup> This organizing, combined with interests of parliamentary authorities in maintaining power, pressured the TSSR Supreme Soviet to introduce a presidency of Tatarstan and declare that Tatarstan legislation overrides Russian legislation when in conflict.<sup>10</sup> Both Tatarstan's and Russia's elections took place on June 12, 1991. Unsurprisingly, 70% citizens voted for well-known Party Secretary Mintimer Shaimiev for president, including significant support from the TOT (despite some difficulties in their relationship throughout 1991).<sup>11</sup>

By 1992, a combination of the culminating power of the nationalists as well as Yeltsin's failed attempts to remove Shaimiev inspired the Tatar government to hold a referendum on the state sovereignty of Tatarstan. Ittifak and Azatlyk attempted to establish a new Tatar parliament (the Milli Mejlis), and "urged a 'yes' vote in the referendum in order to affirm Tatarstan's independence, which they claimed existed de facto."<sup>12</sup> The more moderate TOTs advocated a 'yes' vote as the means to create a multiethnic state in which Tatars would have greater rights."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>9</sup> Guiliano, "Formation," 309.

<sup>10</sup> Kondrashnov, *Nationalism*, 157.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>12</sup> Guiliano, "Formation," 310.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

On March 21, 1992, Tatarstan finally held a referendum. Both groups ended up voting yes because of the vague wording of the referendum:

Do you agree that the Republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state and a subject of international law building its relations with Russia and other republics and states on the basis of equal treaties?<sup>14</sup>

The citizens of Tatarstan approved the referendum with 61% affirmative vote (although it was defeated in Kazan and five other majority-Russian districts).<sup>15</sup> The Tatar government considered (and still considers) the referendum a ratification of Tatarstan's 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty. For Tatarstan, the referendum meant it would determine its relationship with Russia on a bilateral treaty basis instead of following top-down orders from the Russian president. In another jab at Moscow, on March 29 Tatarstan did not sign the Federation Treaty because it did not acknowledge its special status.

This surge of nationalism did not go unnoticed back in Moscow. Although Gorbachev initially wanted to raise the status of republics like TASSR, he found significant resistance within his government and abandoned such plans. Yeltsin, on the other hand, promoted the idea of regional sovereignty, offering to create bilateral treaties to change the relationship between the center and the republics.<sup>16</sup> Yeltsin even met with Shaimiev before the signing of the Declaration of State Sovereignty, stating that "if you want to govern completely on your own – just go ahead."<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, once the Soviet Union began disintegrating after the August 1991 coup, Yeltsin no longer had to compete against Gorbachev and dismissed the idea of a federal or bilateral treaty for the time being.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Report on the Tatarstan Referendum on Sovereignty* [sic], (Kazan and Pestretsy, 1992), 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Bahry, "New," 131.

<sup>17</sup> Kondrashnov, *Nationalism*, 142.

<sup>18</sup> Bahry, "New," 132.

In response, Tatarstan challenged Russian federalism again. The citizens did not ratify the December 1993 Russian Constitution.<sup>19</sup> As Yeltsin's ratings dropped, his concessions to Tatarstan increased in the hopes of increasing his popularity. In 1993, the Constitutional Commission introduced amendments into the Draft Constitution of Russia that allowed building relationship with Moscow through constitutions and bilateral treaties. Still, negotiations between Moscow and Kazan were difficult. Occasionally Tatarstan would even withhold tax revenues when negotiations broke down.<sup>20</sup> Finally, on February 15, 1994, Russia and Tatarstan agreed on a bilateral treaty, "On Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Mutual Delegation of Powers between the State Bodies of the Russian Federation and the State Bodies of the Republic of Tatarstan." The bilateral treaty gave Tatarstan special status and allowed the legalization of the Russian Constitution in Tatarstan. This treaty would later serve as an example for 42 other agreements with different regions in Russia (although 28 of these agreements have been revoked under Putin).<sup>21</sup>

After the struggle of nationalists to preserve Tatar culture and promote Tatarstan's regional sovereignty, how much regional sovereignty does Tatarstan actually enjoy today? Symbolically, a lot. Politically and economically, especially under Putin, not so much. Tatar and Russian continue to have equal legal status. All government documents, street signs, and even labels on food must be written in both Tatar and Russian. Additionally, the President of Tatarstan must speak both Tatar and Russian, which means he or she most likely always will be Tatar.<sup>22</sup> Citizens also receive a special kind of passport with additional pages in Tatar as well as a page bearing the Republic's seal. All these practices create a sense of distinct Tatar culture throughout

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>22</sup> Gorenburg, Dmitry, "Regional Separatism in Russia: Ethnic Mobilisation or Power Grab?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 2 (1999): 261, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/153611>.

the republic. Although Tatar symbolic sovereignty appears to remain strong, it does not replace Tatarstan's lack of political and economic regional sovereignty.

Tatarstan has acted occasionally as a sovereign state contrary to federal foreign policy in the past. Many of these actions tend to involve Tatarstan's ties to Turkic and Muslim countries. For example, Tatarstan signed an agreement on friendship and cooperation with Abkhazia, Georgia in August 1994.<sup>23</sup> Tatarstan has also developed special relationships with Turkey, UAE, Jordan, and has given humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Shaimiev even criticized Russia's decision to send peacekeeping troops to Kosovo, and the State Council of Tatarstan declared no Tatarstan military units would be permitted to fight in July of 1999.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Tatarstan has made contacts with the UN and EU and has opened foreign trade missions.<sup>26</sup> Moscow has since reigned in Tatarstan's paradiplomacy through revisions in the bilateral treaty. Currently, Tatarstan is permitted to pursue foreign policy only in coordination with the Russian federal government.<sup>27</sup>

Since the signing of the bilateral treaty and subsequent changes, Moscow has achieved more economic control over Tatarstan. Even in 1994, Bahry comments:

The key sources of revenue were defined in Moscow. Oil sales depended on each year's federal quota and on pipeline access. Federal authorities could withhold or cut both at will. Licenses to exploit local resources also depended on federal approval, as did licenses to sell the republic's military output abroad. Efforts to develop other external ties were hedged by federal regulation as well. [Tatarstan was] allowed...to pursue ties with foreign states, but only within the limits of federal law and federal policy.<sup>28</sup>

More recently, Tatarstan has pursued an economic policy linked with Russian federal economic

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<sup>23</sup> Sharafutdinova, Gulnaz, "Paradiplomacy in the Russian Regions: Tatarstan's Search for Statehood," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 4 (2003): 617, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594550>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 618, 625.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.

<sup>26</sup> Bahry, "New," 137.

<sup>27</sup> *Treaty on Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Powers between Bodies of Public Authority of the Russian Federation and Bodies of Public Authority of the Republic of Tatarstan*, (Moscow, 2007), Article 2.3

<sup>28</sup> Bahry, "New," 136.



interests. After another budget agreement, in January 2001, the share of tax revenues that Tatarstan received from Moscow decreased from reportedly 60% to between 40 and 45%.<sup>29</sup> In return, the federal government allocated funds for renovations in Kazan and other public projects. Furthermore, the 2002 revisions to the Tatarstan constitution reflected the 1994 treaty but reduced Tatarstan's power even further. After this revision, Tatarstan was considered a complete subject of the Russian Federation. In accordance with federal law, fines for civil infraction were lowered and distribution of social welfare benefits spread out in Tatarstan.<sup>30</sup> Most recently, a June 2007 successor to 1994 treaty maintained Tatarstan as a subject of Russian Federation. Moreover, Moscow and Kazan would now jointly govern the distribution of Tatarstan's natural resources. The actual distribution of these resources is a secret, according to *WikiLeaks*.<sup>31</sup> We can speculate that these numbers are kept secret because they would make many citizens of Tatarstan displeased. From the tax revenue percentages, we can guess that the federal government probably receives more money from Tatarstan than Tatarstan receives back from the federal government. Also, Moscow most likely uses Tatarstan as a donor state because of its strong economy compared to other republics and oblasts. Allowing Tatarstan to control its own economic resources, including its extensive oil reserves, would not benefit the federal government. Tatarstan has lost economic autonomy to the center.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tatarstan started to enjoy significant regional sovereignty. Under Putin, however, Tatarstan has lost some regional sovereignty. The regional sovereignty it does still possess is cultural rather than political. What does the example of Tatarstan demonstrate about Russian federalism? Under Yeltsin, we see power leave the center

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>31</sup> WikiLeaks, "Kazan Remains Tied to Moscow Despite Tatarstan's 'Model' Federalism," *American Embassy in Moscow*, March 12, 2008, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2008/03/08MOSCOW687.html>

and move towards smaller political bodies. Under Putin, we see the opposite: the center has taken powers away from smaller political bodies. The Russian government, though still a federal system, has leaned more unitary in the past several years. Will the government continue to lean more unitary? Much depends on the pressures the center could face from regional bodies.

What eventually could challenge Russian federalism is the emergence, not of Tatar nationalism, but Islamic nationalism among young people.<sup>32</sup> Islamic nationalism could challenge Moscow's policies towards regional sovereignty in much the same way ethnic nationalism did in the 1990s. For several years already, Tatarstan has worked to establish diplomatic and cultural relations with the Middle East and Turkey. These relations have allowed many young Tatars to seek education in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Additionally, more Islamic secondary schools and universities have been constructed due to these relationships, fueling an increase in recognition of Islamic identity and a nominal increase in the presence of extremist Islamic groups.<sup>33</sup> Although extremist groups are much weaker than in Tatarstan than in the North Caucasus, they could someday present a problem for both Kazan and Moscow. I agree with Hahn that the effects of Islamic nationalism largely depend on whether in the next couple of years "Tatar national identity emerges as largely secular, nationalist-Islamic and/or Islamist."<sup>34</sup> Depending on this outcome, Tatarstan might challenge Russian federalism on the basis of Islamic nationalism in the future. Moscow could react by increasing Tatarstan's sovereignty or reducing it. For now, Moscow and Kazan must stay attentive to the possible expansion of Islamic nationalism in Tatarstan.

As long as Putin remains in office, Moscow likely will continue to maintain a firm grip

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<sup>32</sup> Hahn, Gordon M. *Russia's Islamic Threat*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 204.

<sup>33</sup> Humphries, Harry L, "New Ethnic Identity: The Islamitization Process in the Russian Federation," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 31, no. 2 (2005): 212, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41421644>.

<sup>34</sup> Hahn, *Russia's*, 215.

on Tatarstan's regional sovereignty. The surge of Tatar ethnic nationalism that sparked Tatarstan's initial pursuit of sovereignty played an important part in the formation of Russian federalism. This federalism will grow and change, but the Moscow-Kazan relationship will continue to play a critical role in the development of Russian federalism.

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