

## **Tatar nation building since 1991: Ethnic mobilisation in historical perspective**

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This study analyses the process of ethnic mobilization in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras and assesses the way in which history, memory and the treatment of the Volga Tatars by the Soviet state, especially under Lenin and Stalin, affected their long term desire for greater independence from Moscow. The central argument of this study is that Volga Tatar's nation building was influenced by changes introduced under Gorbachev and by the weaknesses of the post-Soviet state particularly during the Yeltsin era of the 1990s. The article assesses the strategies the President of Tatarstan and his advisors utilized during this period, especially after 1985, to successfully negotiate a bilateral treaty with Moscow in February 1994 granting Tatarstan greater autonomy and independence. Within this framework, the article then provides a detailed analysis of the approach taken in Tatarstan to achieve this goal and to renew the treaty in October 2005, despite Putin's recentralization policies from 2000-2008.

**Keywords:** Russia, Tatarstan, federalism, sovereignty, separatism.

This article analyses the process of ethnic mobilization in one of the republics of the Russian Federation—Tatarstan. It is one of the four Turkish republics of Russia, the home of the Volga Tatars, and a well developed industrial part of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) with significant natural resources, especially oil. This republic has a population of around 4 million. By 2002, Tatars made up the majority with 52.9%, followed by Russians at 39.9%, Chuvash at 3.3% and other nationalities at 3.9% (Itogi, 2002; Natsional'nyi sostav, 2004: 156-157). Tatars are

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dispersed throughout the Russian Federation and this article only refers to Volga Tatars.

The following analysis takes a historical approach, and critically assesses the Volga Tatars' attempts at national revival in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. It draws upon Tatar, Russian and Western historiography and corresponding literature. The overall goal is to critically assess, first, the process of ethnic mobilization in Tatarstan over the last two decades in a broader long-term perspective; second, the changing strategy used by the Tatar leadership and elite to achieve greater 'sovereignty' from Moscow in the period from Mikhail Gorbachev to Vladimir Putin; third, the influence of various factors and strategies on the Tatar drive for autonomy; and fourth, the impact which all this has had on Tatar regional identity on the one hand, and centre-periphery relations on the other, since 1991.

The article uses some of the results of a project funded by the International Association formed by the European Union to promote East-West Scientific Cooperation (INTAS) on "Linguistic and Ethnic Revival in Russia: From Policy to Cultural Diversity", implemented between 2006 and 2008, to argue that there are a number of reasons for the relative success of the Volga Tatars with regard to ethnic mobilization and nation building in Tatarstan. The first of these was their ability to overcome the 'Soviet legacy'. The second was the key stabilizing factor of Mintimer Shaimiev, who offered the Tatars continuity and stability during a time of crisis (1991-1999) and also possessed other essential skills—notably the ability to balance different competing interests and to use the appropriate rhetoric and discourse for both his Tatar and Russian supporters and opponents. The third reason was identified as the shift in Russian presidential power from weakness (under Boris Yeltsin) to strength (under Putin), as well as the related issue of decentralization versus recentralization

during the same period (1991-2008) and its potential impact on ethnic mobilization and nation building, especially in relation to the 1994 peace-sharing treaty and its subsequent renewal in 2005. Fourth was the vital issue of gains and losses: what did the different sides get out of the process and who can be said to have won or lost—the Tatars or the Russians? Once we have explored all these issues we will address one final question: what lessons can other parts of the Russian Federation, who want to achieve similar goals, learn from Tatarstan? What can Tatarstan teach historians of the post-Soviet space about the process of ethnic mobilization, nation building and ethnic conflict over the last 20 years and, more importantly, about the issue of conflict resolution and different ways of handling regional separatism, sovereignty, independence and secession, and building community cohesion in contemporary Russia at a time of constant change and rising nationalism and terrorism? We will discuss all of these issues from a historical perspective, taking into account the ‘Soviet legacy’, notably under Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, and the difficulties encountered in the post-Soviet era.

### **The legacy of Soviet–Volga Tatar relations**

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed history of the Volga Tatars (see Rorlich, 1986) but a number of long-term factors have encouraged the drive for nationhood and the national revival among contemporary Volga Tatars. These include Tatars’ conversion to Islam, the destruction of the Kazan Khanate at the hands of Ivan the Terrible in 1552 and the forced Christianization that followed (Abdullin, 1976; Amirkhanov, 1998: 67-81; Diuduanbon *et al.*, 1997; Khudayakov, 1991; Iskhavov, 1999: 21-24; Musina 1998; Yemelianova 1999: 605-630).

Some attempt was made by Catherine the Great after 1773 to put an end to the rift between Russians and Tatars by ending religious persecution and giving Tatar nobles the same rights as their Russian counterparts<sup>1</sup> but despite these concessions Volga Tatars never regained their full independence. Soviet historiography interpreted the destruction of an independent Kazan Khanate as a positive feature which enabled, in Gimadi's opinion, "the Tatar people to enter into the composition of the Russian state and tie themselves directly to the Great Russian people" and thus choose the "correct historical path" (Gimadi, 1955: 5). This meant that Tatars were able to reap the benefits of Russia's socioeconomic, political, military and cultural development. Volga Tatars naturally saw Russia's actions as a form of conquest (Pelenski, 1974). Consequently, from the mid-sixteenth century to the present, the Volga Tatars have lived within the confines of the Russian state. Catherine's legacy and subsequent Tsarist policy meant, in Yemelianova's view, that "the bulk of the (Volga) Tatars did not perceive themselves outside Russia and saw their problems in all Russian democratic reform" (Yemelianova, 1999: 473). As a result, Tatar language, culture and elites still existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, by 1917 some Tatars wanted autonomy whereas the Bolsheviks had opted for a national territorial solution. This led to the pre-revolutionary (1917) Tatar leaders being replaced by a new radical leadership (including S. Galiev, A. Kamaletdinov, I. Kuleev and S. Akmadiev) who were now in a position to take full advantage of Lenin's policy of self-determination.

After the 1917 October Revolution, Lenin was in favour of the equality of all languages, as a means of undermining the class basis of nationalism, and he attempted to preserve and foster the culture of different nationalities via literacy campaigns, the promotion of traditional costumes and cultures, and the elevation of national elites

into the party, government, different sectors of the economy and the education system (Davletshin, 2005: section II). This move was made to legitimize Soviet power with the non-Russian peoples. Lenin preferred not to use Russian external pressure, which had led to the repression of ethnic minorities in the tsarist era (Martin, 2001), but to encourage the development of the Tatar language, culture and elites.

On 20 May 1920, the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was created and most Tatars were already literate at this point. After the civil war (1918-1920) and the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1921-1927), a policy which Terry Martin refers to as “affirmative action” was pursued by the Soviet government (Martin, 2001: 13). This ‘Tatarization’ strategy involved the Tatar language being given official status in 1921 and it also enhanced the position of Volga Tatars, via their promotion into leading positions in the Tatar ASSR party, state and government structures (*vydvizhenie*). This *korenizatsiia* (‘nativization’ or ‘indigenization’) policy led to the Tatar ASSR being governed in part by Tatar elites using their own national language. This affirmative action policy led to the rise of Tatar intellectual elites and Tatar language national schools under the jurisdiction of Narkompros.

As a result, according to Burbiel, by 1930 more than 96% of all Tatar children were educated in their own language (Burbiel, 1975: 406). It is important to remember that President Shaimiev’s parents had lived through this crucial period when the issue of non-Russian self-determination was actively pursued. Kreindler points out that this ‘affirmative action’ policy assumed it was the Russians who were supposed to be bilingual in a non-Russian (in this case Tatar) area (Kreindler, 1979: 7).

However, from the late 1920s onwards, after Lenin's death, the reverse happened as the process of 'Russification' began under Stalin. In 1927 the Arabic script long used for Tatar was replaced by a Latin-based alphabet, despite strong opposition. As the political situation and atmosphere changed from 1928 onwards, some Volga Tatars, such as Mirza Sultan-Galiev, were accused of "anti-Soviet activity". From 1921 to 1924 Sultan-Galiev had tried to develop Muslim national communism and was frequently arrested, the second time in 1929 (Benningsen-Broxup, 1990: 281; Davletshin, 2005: 235).

There was also a clampdown on key Tatar institutions, such as the Society for Tatar Studies and the Pedagogical Institute of Eastern and Tatar Schools, as these were viewed as centres of nationalism and part of the so-called 'Sultan-Galiev movement'. Many Volga Tatars were subsequently arrested; 2,056 Tatar ASSR party members in 1930 alone (Davletshin, 2005: 236). According to Benningsen-Broxup, after Lenin's death the Tatar ASSR Communist Party had effectively split into two factions: one wing was still very much in favour of Sultan-Galiev's approach while the other was more pro-Moscow. Attempts to reverse the domination of the latter between 1926 and 1928 failed, and Stalin launched the Great Terror on Sultan-Galiev's 'rightist' allies from the mid- to late 1930s (Benningsen-Broxup, 1990: 281-282). This heavy-handed policy hindered the development of the Tatar indigenous intelligentsia, Tatar language, literature, culture and society for the rest of the Stalin era. As Burbiel notes, "[i]n the process Tatars lost almost all political leaders and only a handful of writers survived the disaster" (Burbiel, 1975: 396).

This had consequences for Tatar identity and language. By 1932 native languages were taught from the first grade and a second language, usually Russian, from the third grade (Kreindler, 1979: 24). Throughout the 1930s the push for

Russification continued, mass radio was developed, and then finally in March 1938 a Soviet government decree made Russian compulsory in all schools of the USSR, including the Tatar ASSR. This change was made because of a widespread fear that the Russian language had been weakened and literacy levels were now allegedly below that of the tsarist era. However in reality there was still a Stalinist desire to clamp down on nationalists and alleged Sultan-Galievites in the Tatar ASSR (Grenoble, 2003: 195). This new law, which was implemented in September 1938, meant that by the end of the Stalin era “new generations of non-Russians became bilingual, mixing and matching their native and adopted Russian tongues at will, depending on the moment and desired meaning” (Smith, 1998: 166).

Following the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War, the Tatar ASSR, which was a major industrial centre, underwent further intensive industrialization, urbanization and heavy Russian immigration. Furthermore, Nikita Khrushchev’s 1958 Educational Reform completed the reversal of Leninist ‘affirmative action’ language and ethnic policies. Although each language was still theoretically equal, Khrushchev gave parents the choice on whether or not to send their children to Russian language schools (Blitstein, 2001: 254). This policy meant that Russian language was now the medium of instruction in many urban Volga Tatar schools (though Tatar remained strong in the countryside). From 1958 onwards, there was a decline in national languages and an expansion in Russian teaching in the cities. The number of hours devoted to Russian increased and it was introduced into the curriculum from the first grade; Russian was also taught in all pre-schools (Smith, 1998: 177). Tatar was now mainly offered in primary and secondary schools. As a consequence, by 1966 two thirds of Tatar children attended Russian schools in the Tatar ASSR. Although these Russian schools were supposed to provide two hours of Tatar language classes per

week from the second to the eighth grades, this policy was not always observed (Burbiel, 1975: 408-409). This policy meant less Tatar language availability and increasing bilingualism among non-Russians in the Tatar ASSR. Thus in the period 1970-1989 over two thirds of Tatars (70.8%) declared that they were able to speak Russian (Bennigsen-Broxup 1990: 368). Furthermore higher education instruction in the Tatar ASSR was also delivered in the Russian language.

However on the positive side, under Khrushchev's thaw, many Tatars were rehabilitated. In fact throughout the post-Soviet era, the Volga Tatar intelligentsia proved to be remarkably resilient and, drawing upon a rich cultural heritage, they gradually recovered from the adverse impact of the Stalinist period. Although Volga Tatars aspired to increase their status by moving from an autonomous republic to a union republic, and tried on several occasions to achieve this goal, Leonid Brezhnev's policies prevented Volga Tatars from achieving this aim. As a result this desire for autonomy never actually went away and from the late Gorbachev era onwards, a series of circumstances and factors put the issue back on the agenda.

Some scholars emphasize that there is a strong inter-relationship between ethnic revival and the push for sovereignty in the late or post-communist era. Roeder and Treisman, for instance, argue that the long-term goal is nation building but on this road to sovereignty, the short-term aim is the political survival of post-Soviet elites, financial autonomy or greater independence from the centre (Moscow), and a desire to gain greater economic and political control over their own republican affairs (see Roeder, 1991: 196-232; Roeder, 1994; Treisman, 1997: 212-249). During this period between 1990 and 1991 there were a "parade of sovereignties"<sup>2</sup> but we shall only evaluate how successful Tatarstan has been in pursuit of this goal.



### **Continuity and stability: the moderate Shaimiev factor<sup>3</sup>**

He (Shaimiev) combines in his disposition, resilience and firm straightforwardness, candour, dryness and emotionality, single heartiness and cunning even shrewdness, firmness of stance and softness in his attitude to people. As far as his character goes, *he is not a revolutionary, but rather a rational conservative* (Mustafin and Khasanov, 1995: 75, author's emphasis).

Even allowing for obvious bias, it is nevertheless commonly accepted that one of the most significant developments in Tatarstan's favour before and after 1991 was the leadership of Mintimer Shaimiev, who was a dominant force in the republic, particularly during the Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin eras. There is no denying that Shaimiev's calmness, caution, common sense, resolve and above all his moderate conservatism, were useful skills in managing the post-Soviet space and vital in negotiating the economic, political and social transition from 1991. He emphasized consent, stability and unity as key factors during Tatarstan's drive for self-rule. He was an experienced Soviet era politician who understood the nature of Soviet and post-Soviet politics. This was due to the fact that he had climbed up the Soviet political ladder during the Brezhnev era of stagnation to become a member of the Soviet *nomenklatura* in the Tatar ASSR. Shaimiev was fully aware of the different degrees of power held by Gorbachev, Yeltsin and Putin as well as the delicate balance of power between the centre and periphery, so he knew just how far to go and when. More importantly he was also well acquainted with Tatar history, language and culture, the demands of Volga Tatars and the concerns of Russians, both locally and in the federal centre, Moscow.

Shaimiev was born in the early Stalinist era (1937) and trained as a technocrat (he was awarded an engineering degree in 1959). Shaimiev became the Tatar ASSR's Minister of Water Management in 1969, and was then made Deputy Premier of the Tatar ASSR in 1983, and served as Premier from 1985 to 1989. Between 1989 and

1990, Shaimiev became the First Secretary of the Tatar ASSR Communist Party, then Chairman of the parliament of Tatarstan from 1990 to 1991, before finally reaching the highest post of all, that of President of Tatarstan, which he held between 1991 and March 2010 (Mustafin and Khasanov, 1995: 12, 22). He was well aware of the importance of Tatar language, which he learnt at home and in school, and of the history of Tatar nation building.<sup>4</sup> Thus Shaimiev declared at the First World Congress of Tatars in 1992:

The history of the Tatars nation is very difficult and tragic. The Tatars lost their Bulgar state, but found a respectable place for themselves within the Golden Horde. After its collapse they created the khanates of Kazan [...] the restoration of statehood was an idea ever present in Tatar history (cited in Mustafin and Khasanov, 1995: 113).

But Shaimiev also realized that he needed Russian to survive so he became a bilingual speaker. He was thus able to serve the Soviet system from the Brezhnev to Gorbachev eras and was also aware of the flaws in the Soviet system.

During the Gorbachev period (1985-1991), there was renewed ethnic agitation, as the USSR was facing economic crisis, nationalism and growing separatism.<sup>5</sup> During this period there was a push to increase the Tatar ASSR's status to that of a Union Republic, a goal Volga Tatars had wanted since 1920.

As some scholars have pointed out the Tatar public centre (*Tatarskii obshchestvennyi Tsentr* or 'ToTs'), created in June 1988, was at the forefront of this ethnic mobilization.<sup>6</sup> The ToTs included famous Tatar writers, academics, clergy and other key members of Tatar cultural societies and clubs. These figures and groups had high expectations after over 60 years of waiting for Tatar nationhood and independence. Although relations were initially harmonious between the ToTs and the republican authorities, things started to deteriorate in January 1989, as the ToTs had tried too hard to build links beyond the Tatar ASSR, and demanded union republic

status and economic sovereignty, all of which caused tension with Moscow and the Tatar branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) (Kondrashov, 2000: 119). According to Kondrashov:

The [Tatar ASSR] authorities stood for tackling problems in agreement and consultation with all parties involved, in order not to upset order and stability, not to damage relations with neighbours and with Moscow (Kondrashov, 2000: 119).

In relation to the above quote, the key phrases are “in agreement”, “consultation”, and “all parties”, local and federal, and this emphasis and strategy distinguished the republican authorities from the more extreme nationalists in the ToTs. In Moscow’s view, some figures within the ToTs favoured Tatars over others, particularly Russians, whilst ToTs leaders accused the republican authorities, including Shaimiev, of “cowardice and passivity” and bowing to pressure from Moscow (Kondrashov, 2000: 119).

While in the late 1980s, this looked like a serious miscalculation on the part of the then Tatar authorities and Shaimiev himself, in the long run it proved to be a turning point. This more gradualist approach allowed Shaimiev and his allies to gain some control over the ethnic mobilization agenda, to reduce the hold the extreme nationalists seemed to have over the process and, above all, it eased Moscow’s anxieties. This proved that Tatarstan’s drive for independence would probably not generate ethnic conflict. In my opinion, President Shaimiev’s experience of the political game and his well-honed negotiating skills proved decisive in avoiding such a situation.

This was, of course, not the end of the matter. The Tatar ASSR authorities did not just placate Moscow, they eventually mended fences with the ToTs. In January 1989, a ToTs congress draft pushed for complete economic sovereignty, and for Tatar as the only official language of the republic. However the Tatar authorities refused to

bend to this pressure, and meanwhile started to negotiate with Moscow over the issue of “broad autonomy on economic matters” and “real bilingualism” before allowing the ToTs to officially register as a public organization on 17 July 1989 (Kondrashov, 2000: 119). According to Bennigsen-Broxup, ToTs radicals wanted an upgrade from AR to UR; sovereignty; increased Tatar representation in state organs; consultation on future developments, such as further industrialization; stronger links between the Tatar ASSR and the Tatar diaspora within the USSR; the reinstatement of Tatar as a state language; and a shift from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet for Tatar (Bennigsen-Broxup, 1990: 283-286). While these demands are understandable given the past treatment of the Volga Tatars during the tsarist period, under Stalin and in the post-Stalin era until Gorbachev’s rise to power, fulfilling such demands would have probably engendered a negative, possibly military, reaction from Moscow; as a result the Tatar authorities championed some of these ToTs ideas, but in “a more moderate form” (Kondrashov, 2000: 122-127). Thus after the August 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty, Tatarstan declared both Russian and Tatar to be official languages of the republic and this became a key aspect of the 1992 Constitution and the 1992 Decree on Languages of the Peoples of the Tatar Republic (Garipov and Faller, 2003: 170-171). Although in the early 1990s there was a lot of concern about this move in the Russian media and academic community, it was far short of the extensive demands and changes advocated by some members of the ToTs.

### **Sovereignty: what’s in a name?**

In relation to the main topic of this article—namely, the discourse, historiography and political debate on ethnic mobilization in Tatarstan and Tatar nation building—a number of concepts are crucial, including ‘nation’, ‘citizenship’ ‘ethnicity’, ‘ethnic

revival', 'independence', 'sovereignty', 'secession', etc. Shaimiev himself used numerous terms between 1989 and 1994. Gorenburg points out that between 1989 and 1991, Shaimiev talked about "independence" (*samostryatel'nost'*), then from 1991 to 1993 of "economic sovereignty" and of a "Tatarstan nation" (Gorenburg, 1999: 250). These shifting concepts do not demonstrate inconsistency or indecisiveness, but a desire to move the agenda forward without generating a local or federal Russian backlash. The context is also crucial: the December 1993 Constitution had been drawn up and approved, and Tatar bilateral treaty negotiations with Russia had begun, becoming a reality in February 1994.

Shaimiev's tendency to play down "sovereignty" and "secession" in favour of "autonomy" (albeit dressed up in the cloak of independence and sovereignty for his local audience), has meant that he has gradually been able to neutralize the radicals, ensure that Russians living in Tatarstan are not discriminated against; and so in due course, he secured a high percentage of Russian supporters for Tatar autonomy.

Hence Gorenburg writes:

This [strategy] allowed them [Shaimiev and his government] to maintain their support among non-titular ethnic groups, preserve peace in the republic [of Tatarstan and Russia] and avoid excessively alienating the central government (Gorenburg, 1999:251-252).

Crucial to this cross ethnic support throughout Tatarstan was Shaimiev and his advisors promotion of "inclusion" rather than "exclusion" in various key documents.

The following extracts from the 1990 Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Republic of Tatarstan will serve to illustrate the point:

realizing the historical responsibility for the fortunes of *multinational peoples*; expressing *respect for the sovereign rights of all peoples*, inhabiting the Russian Federation and the USSR [...], ensuring the *inherent rights of Tatars, of the whole population of the Republic to self-determination* [...]. Irrespective of nationality, social origin, belief, political convictions and other differences, the Tatar SSR *shall guarantee all citizens of the Republic equal rights and freedoms. Russian and Tatar shall be state languages and shall be equal in Tatar SSR* and the maintenance and development of languages of other

nationalities shall be ensured” (M. Shaimiev, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tatar Soviet Social Republic Kazan, 30 August 1990, emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

It is clear from the above that the 1990 sovereignty document, while promoting Tatars and trying to improve their status through language vitalization rather than ethnic revival *per se*, Shaimiev still promoted equality for all ethnic groups in the Tatar ASSR, treating Tatars and Russians as “equal”. However from a Moscow and Russian-speaking perspective, the increased importance attached to Tatar and the use of the terms ‘sovereignty’ and ‘equal rights’ might have been seen as undermining Russian/Soviet hegemony, Soviet federalism and the dominance of the Russian language. For this reason, at this early stage in Tatar nation building, the main goal of ethnic mobilization in Tatarstan was language promotion rather than broader systemic change. However, Shaimiev was quick to point out in an August 1991 newspaper interview that “our position remains the same: the sovereignty of the Republic of Tatarstan *will not have a national colouring*”.<sup>8</sup>

While Shimaev’s greatest critics—the ardent Tatar nationalists within the ToTs—may have felt that he had sold the Volga Tatars out, Shaimiev was fully aware of how delicate the situation in Russia was by late 1991. It had lost the 14 former union republics and a large proportion of its Soviet empire, so he limited his demands to the promotion of Tatar language and culture.

By 6 November 1992, when the Constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan had been drawn up, although Article 1 stated that the “Republic of Tatarstan” was a “sovereign democratic state”, the emphasis was now on economic aspects of sovereignty. As Article 9 points out:

The earth, mineral wealth, water, forest and other natural resources, the animal and vegetable kingdom, means of state budget, assets of national banks, cultural and historical values of the peoples of Tatarstan and other estate ensuring the economic independence of the republic, the preservation of material and spiritual culture, shall be the property of the whole people.<sup>9</sup>

Here it is evident that the 1992 Tatarstan Constitution was emphasizing the need to defend its economic resources and industries so that the economic benefits of sovereignty would be available to all citizens of Tatarstan.

### **Coping with Russian presidential power shifts**

A significant factor in the post-Soviet era as Tatarstan was debating the key issue of the benefits of Federalism and decentralism in Russia was the difficulties facing Russia after the collapse of the USSR. Thus Lilia Shevtsova concludes:

Post-communist Russia is a country of paradoxes. On the one hand, it is a model of endless movement. On the other, there is evidence all around of inertia and continuity [...] there are areas of dynamism and success, areas of crisis and collapse, and increasingly areas of stagnation” (Shevtsova, 1999: 1).

Since 1991 Russia has gone through a major economic, political and social transformation: Economically Russia has dismantled its central planned economy and gradually introduced a market economy; politically Russia has moved from a one party to a multi-party system and also introduced a strong Presidency and socially Russia has moved from the old system of solidarity which guaranteed basic socio-economic and labour rights to a radical overhaul of its system of social assistance. This has meant that the old welfare system has gradually been dismantled and a new system of social provision introduced. In this context, George W. Breslauer makes the following comparison of Soviet leaders’ aims:

Khrushchev tried to *reform* the system; Brezhnev tried to *consolidate and adapt it*; Gorbachev attempted to *transform* it into a socialist democracy; and Yeltsin sought ultimately to *destroy and replace it* (Breslauer 2001: 45, author’s emphasis).

The problem was that Yeltsin may have destroyed the communist system but he struggled to replace it with something stable, strong and durable throughout the

1990s, so there were constant conflicts: between the executive and parliament, between the centre and the regions, among the ‘oligarchs’ or financial clans; within the presidential entourage and between the main political parties—Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) through to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF)—many of which opposed his rule. The problems Yeltsin inherited from the Soviet system were big enough for any new post-Soviet leader to tackle, but the situation was compounded by Yeltsin’s style of leadership which was erratic, unpredictable and impulsive. Yeltsin had a clear lack of ideology, apart from being broadly anti-communist and as a result, his philosophy was rather eclectic. As

Shevtsova notes:

Yeltsin could move in various directions and combine various ideologies—Westernisation, liberal democracy, open authoritarianism, statism and elements of nationalism” (Shevtsova, 2001: 83).

The consequence from 1991 to 1999 was political and economic instability because of Yeltsin’s failure to take control and be decisive (so Russia was often rudderless). There were constant shake-ups (e.g. several prime ministers in the 1990s), and everyone failed to rally around “a single system of values”. There was fierce opposition by KPRF and LDPR to Yeltsin’s policies (notably on the economy and Chechnya). Moreover Yeltsin was in bad health, frequently ill and prone to drinking. The 1990s saw the rise of paternalism and favouritism under Yeltsin, as he often failed to weigh up the consequences of his decisions, which led to the need for constant adjustment and compromise; so he was in favour of “sharing responsibility without sharing power” (Williams, 1996: 9-36; Williams, 2000: 248-266).

From Shaimiev and Tatarstan’s perspective, the aforementioned weaknesses and problems were clearly to their advantage. Thus Shaimiev proceeded to pursue his sovereignty project in a more sustained way. However, far from undermining the



notion of post-Soviet federalism, Tatarstan sought to create the symbolic and institutional trappings of sovereignty, which retained the integrity of the Russian state but gave Tatarstan greater autonomy within that post-Soviet space, so both sides gained. This Volga Tatar concept of sovereignty was perhaps most clearly outlined during the March 1992 referendum in Tatarstan which stated that:

The goal of the referendum is to determine if the change of Tatarstan from an autonomous republic to a sovereign state which remains united with the Russian Federation in a common economic and geopolitical space, but, which based on commonly accepted principles of equality and self determination of peoples, seeks to build relations with Russia and other states in a new way, on the basis of bilateral agreements and the delegation of some authorities to the Russian Federation on this basis, answers to the will of the peoples of Tatarstan.<sup>10</sup>

Once more a number of key themes are evident—unity, commonality with Russia, equality, self-determination. What Shaimiev desired from Moscow was respect and fair and equal treatment, and in return the President of Tatarstan was effectively promising that they would share the same post-Soviet space and that Tatarstan would not break away from the Russian Federation.

With regard to the referendum of 22 March 1992, it is important to point out that 61.4% of the population supported sovereignty, and 43% of Russians and 48% of Tatars living in Tatarstan were totally in favour of independence (Gorenburg, 2003: 135-136). The Tatarstan authorities emphasized greater autonomy from Moscow but not secession as the moderate Shaimiev wanted to maintain interethnic peace and economic stability for all those living in the republic.

The March 1992 federal treaty granted special status to republics and recognized their sovereignty and rights to local property and resources. This was followed in 1994 by other concessions in the form of power-sharing treaties. Tatarstan was one of the beneficiaries. Shaimiev's moderate approach, which successfully marginalized Russian centrists and Tatar nationalists alike, eventually led to the

signing of the “Treaty on the delineation of judicial subjects and mutual delegation of authorities between the state bodies of power of the Russian Federation and the state bodies of power of the Republic of Tatarstan” in February 1994. The aim of this treaty was to decide who had power over which issues. Russia and Tatarstan had joint responsibility for the preservation of territorial integrity, common economic interests, cultures and languages, security and basic human rights on both sides, but Tatarstan was able to set its own budget, define and impose the republic taxes, manage its own economic affairs and engage in international relations with the outside world.<sup>11</sup> These limited indicators of ‘sovereignty’ were granted, Bahry argues, providing Tatarstan stayed within the bounds of Russian Federal law and policy (Bahry, 2005: 136).

While this looked like a major loss of central authority, this was far from being the case. Although Tatarstan negotiators used the term *gosudarstvennost* (‘stateness’) to refer to the outcome and gave the impression the republic had been granted economic sovereignty, in reality Moscow still had control over foreign trade, foreign capital and tax raising issues, so 85% of the taxes were determined by Moscow and only 15% by Tatarstan. On the upside though Tatarstan could now utilize its overseas oil revenues for the benefit of the leadership (so they could retain power), and for all citizens of Tatarstan so that everyone could see how the new so-called ‘sovereignty’ worked (Bahry, 2005: 134-135).

Shaimiev, as an ex-Soviet government minister, was well acquainted with his republic and wherever possible, according to his supporters, he resisted Moscow’s pressures to introduce price liberalization, privatization, etc. and was strongly opposed to the adverse affects of Yeltsin’s ‘shock therapy’ policy (Williams 1996: 9-36). Shaimiev used local taxes to maintain support for state industry in Tatarstan and

subsidized food and utility prices. As a consequence Shaimiev managed, unlike his federal counterpart, to preserve social cohesion and the worst excesses of Russia's economic problems (Bukharev, 1999: 31-35). Bukharaev concludes that Tatarstan's economic model under Shaimiev "was essentially characterised by its soft entry into the market and gradual privatization with simultaneous provision of the social safety net" (Bukharaev, 1999: 37).

Through this strategy Shaimiev was seeking to achieve greater economic autonomy, to reduce Moscow's interference in its economic affairs, and to protect Tatarstan against the adverse effect of the ups and (mostly) downs of Yeltsin's economic policy.

In terms of Yeltsin's policies, his reforms led to inflation, budget deficits, major wage arrears, privatization, poor tax collection, the need for loans from the International Monetary Fund, a heavy reliance on imports, and the need to sell Russian and Tatar oil and gas to stay afloat. He did not use tried and tested policies, and had no solutions for the mounting problems. Instead he ruled Russia by 'veto' and 'instinct', and his policies were largely ad hoc, reactive, aimed at preserving his personal rule.

With regards to centre-periphery relations Yeltsin was seen as weak and indecisive, as giving away too much power to the likes of Tatarstan. Following the economic collapse of 1998, Yeltsin's authoritarian tendencies, his major failures and his tendency to retreat, coupled with Russia's instability, all prompted his resignation in December 1999. He nominated Vladimir Putin as his successor, but the Yeltsin legacy was not a good one and he left Putin with a great many issues to resolve (see Williams, 1996: 9-36; Williams, 2000: 248-266).

## **Putin and Tatarstan**

Putin's rise took place in the context of increasing feelings of insecurity, fear and personal danger as a result of the legacy of an unsuccessful war in Chechnya, a Chechen attack on Dagestan and the Moscow apartment, and the Volgodonsk and Buinaksk explosions of September 1999. Putin successfully used Chechen threats to unite Russian society and consolidate his regime in the run-up to the March 2000 presidential elections. Over the next eight years, and during two terms in office, he proved himself to be more dynamic, reliable and decisive than Yeltsin. Where Gorbachev destroyed the USSR and Yeltsin failed to serve and protect Russia's national interests, Putin stressed both the pros and cons of the Soviet era and emphasized the need to put Russia first, to restore its national pride, and to protect Russia's national interests. This eventually led to a more authoritarian type of rule—an anti-oligarch campaign, limitations on political pluralism and freedom of the press, a hardline stance on Chechnya, standing up to the West, managing the economy more effectively and adopting a nationalistic and 'great power' rhetoric to neutralize political opponents (LDPR, KPRF). Finally, Putin used the majority of the Unity or United Russia Party in the Dumas of 1999, 2004, 2007 to push through reforms which granted greater power to the Russian president and the security structures, prosecutors, and other allies.

Returning to the main theme of this article, Putin has sought to refocus power to the centre, reducing that of regional and other elites. He has portrayed himself as "President of all Russians" and ran on a ticket that promoted stability and renewal.

Thus Shevtsova concludes:

The center [Kremlin] has managed to liquidate the independence of regional elites, to depoliticize big business, to drive the opposition out of legal politics,

and finally to rally around itself servile social groups that were willing to support every initiative the Kremlin took (Shevtsova, 2007: 47).

Putin's Russia from 2000-2008 was characterized by growing centralization and a changing regional policy. Orrtung maintains that:

Over the course of his first term (2000-4), Putin transformed center-regional relations and restricted the regions' political power. The changes [...] greatly strengthened the central executive's oversight and control of the regional administrations and limited the governors' capacity to make policy without the Kremlin's consent (Orrtung, 2008: 3).

Putin did this through a variety of means: firstly, he created *polpredy* ('super governors') to oversee regional governors; secondly, governors and regional legislative chairman were stripped of the right to sit on the Federation Council; third, he abolished the election of governors and presidents of national republics; fourth, he divided Russia into seven districts (the same as military districts) run by his own appointees; and finally, he increased the economic control of the Russian Treasury over governors.<sup>12</sup> The current presidential representative in the Volga federal district is Grigory Rapota.<sup>13</sup>

What did all this mean for the February 1994 bilateral power-sharing treaty between Russia and Tatarstan when it came up for its ten-year renewal on 29 October 2005? According to Graney, after September 2004, Tatarstan:

[...] pursued the same strategy that had brought them such success in the past – keeping the sovereignty project as robust as possible while accommodating it to new political and economic realities in Russia (Graney, 2009: 139).

Throughout 2004 and 2005, the Tatarstan authorities used their parliament, members of the Federation Council and United Russia Party structures to try and limit the impact of Putin's regional reforms:

[U]ltimately some elements of Tatarstan's proposed amendments were accepted by Putin—the center agreed that regional parliaments and elites should be 'consulted' in the period proceeding nominations of candidates for regional executive, and a month long 'conciliation' period was introduced before the dissolution of any regional parliament in the event of 2 consecutive

candidate rejections (*Rossisskaya Gazeta*, 15 December 2004, cited in Graney, 2009: 137-138).

The negotiations around the renewal of the 1994 bilateral treaty began in October 2004 and were almost completed by 10 March 2005. According to Graney, Shaimiev supported Putin during the Beslan crisis and in the process secured Putin's support for re-nomination as President of Tatarstan on 11 March 2005 (Graney, 2009: 138). Subsequently Putin participated in the 1,000th anniversary of Kazan celebrations in late August 2005. This is interpreted by Graney as a sign of a less hardline and more conciliatory approach to certain regions, providing they made concessions to Moscow (Graney, 2009: 140-145). All this paid off when in October 2005, the new revised bilateral treaty between Moscow and Tatarstan was approved and subsequently ratified by the Russian Duma and Federal Council on 4 and 6 July 2007 respectively (Graney, 2009: 147). This less aggressive and less separatist approach led to Shamiaev being re-elected four times (1996, 1999, 2001, 2005) and to his becoming an ally of Putin and a senior figure in United Russia.

The successful renewal of the bilateral treaty also confirmed Tatarstan's distinctiveness and ensured that it retained some economic and cultural autonomy in the early twenty-first century. Bahry rightly concludes that "the retraction of regional privileges was slower and more difficult in Tatarstan [...] than in many other regions [of Russia]" (Bahry, 2005: 141). However, she also adds that "sovereignty proved to be more *internal than external*" (Bahry, 2005: 141, author's emphasis).

### **Future prospects**

Shaimiev was the top politician in Tatarstan for over 20 years and was not replaced until March 2010, when Rustam Minnikhanov took over the post. While Shaimiev made a concession to the current Russian President Medvedev, albeit unwillingly, to

step down as head of the republic, he has managed to stay in power; he subsequently became a United Russia candidate and then ‘State Advisor’ with wide-ranging powers such as initiating bills, and making recommendations to the second President of Tatarstan. It is possible that he is the power behind the throne, as the new President Minnikhanov formed a government based on the ex-president’s recommendations, and only presented them to the new prime minister afterwards. Furthermore, Ivanov suggests that around 50% of ministerial chairs have been retained by Shaimiev’s people; the other half by Minnikhanov’s supporters (Pavlov, 2010). Shaimiev’s new position gives him quasi-presidential powers. Although neither Medvedev nor Putin came to Rustam Minnikhanov’s inauguration, suggesting that something was amiss, at the time of writing the federal authorities had not interfered in Tatarstan’s affairs.

This brings us to the final key issue: can Tatarstan’s sovereignty and long-term nation building project survive under the new President Minnikhanov? The answer depends on a number of factors, not least whether Medvedev will continue with Putin’s onslaught on Russia’s regions, the strength of Minnikhanov’s power base, his negotiating skills, and the degree of support that Volga Tatars and Russians have for Tatarstan autonomy in 2011 and beyond. Recent research by Hagendoorn *et al.* suggests that support for what they term “regional separatism” depends on age, gender, level of education, group relationships, ethnic migration, religion and so forth (Hagendoorn *et al.*, 2008: 357). Hagendoorn and his colleagues conclude that the factors indicating support for “regional separatism” include increasing wealth, maintenance of the republic, and the fact that people have become acquainted with greater autonomy. But all this must be balanced against countermeasures from the federal government (e.g. economic sanctions, military intervention, and so forth) (Hagendoorn *et al.*, 2008: 359-360). Apart from the use of the term “regional

separatism”, which does not seem to fit the Tatarstan model of sovereignty, it is clear that Russian and Volga Tatar support for these goals are high and that intergroup relations are generally good, with all enjoying the possibility of becoming prosperous. So in these terms the outlook seems positive.

Giuliano’s research highlights another trend in Tatarstan’s favour, namely the fact that since the 1960s Tatarstan has undergone a process of *zemlyachestvo* (that is the creation of an ‘in-group’) and this network and patronage system was continued under Shaimiev. Its goal was to protect member’s positions and preserve the *zemlyachestvo* network (Giuliano, 2000: 307-308). If at least 50% of Minnikhanov’s government come from this system, and if he continues to support the network and patronage system, then it is probable that the Tatarstan sovereignty project will be maintained and expanded, whenever possible, for many years to come.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that Volga Tatar elites have sought to gain political power and economic wealth without provoking a backlash from Moscow or the local multiethnic population. This was achieved through a totally different integrationist strategy to that pursued in other parts of Russia, for example in Chechnya. Both republics implemented different sovereignty projects, levels of nationalism and varying degrees of accommodation within Russian federalism. However the impact has been positive for Volga Tatar regional identity and negative, thus far, for Chechens, resulting in the labelling of the latter as ‘terrorists’ in the post-Soviet, post-9/11 world.

These different outcomes are partly the result on the one hand of the key role played by Volga Tatar elites in promoting Tatar language revitalization and economic



autonomy, and on the other hand of the more extremist measures and demands for sovereignty and secession by various Chechen and North Caucasus groups. This has led to the pursuit of ethnic nationalism in Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus, while the two presidents of Tatarstan have largely emphasized a more civic form of nationalism which involves promoting nationhood with citizenship and inclusive political participation. Both of these reform strategies have been pursued in line with their own respective post-Soviet interests. This had some positive effects in Tatarstan, namely reduced interethnic conflict, greater social cohesion, and increased political and economic equality, while such trends remain elusive in Chechnya and the Caucasus. Tatarstan elites have sought to maximize autonomy and Chechens to gain sovereignty. Both groups tried to keep the nation building and ethnic mobilization process agenda under their firm control and for their respective benefits. However, while for Tatarstan this has amounted to greater autonomy, in the form of power-sharing, in Chechnya it has led to continued threats to its sovereignty by Russia and to Russian federalism by Chechens. Despite Putin's rhetoric during his time as president, high levels of Chechen nationalism remain and concessions were not sufficient to prevent ethnic clashes, as is sadly illustrated by the January 2011 bombings in Domodedovo airport in Moscow. However, to date, the Tatarstan leadership has by and large achieved its goal, gaining significant privileges from Moscow; Moscow in turn has been able to accommodate Volga Tatar nationalism and avoid secession from the Russian Federation.

### *Notes*

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- 1 On Catherine the Great's reforms see Abdullin (1976). For a useful overview of Russian-Tatar relations after that period, see Yemelianova (1999).
- 2 This is analysed in Bowring (2010).
- 3 In placing an emphasis on Shaimiev, it is of course not the author's intention to downplay the importance of other key participants in this process, such as Valentin V. Mikhailov, who was a member of Tatarstan's State Council from 1990 and a member of the Federal Assembly from 1994 to 1995. The aim is rather to shift the focus onto Shaimiev's skills in putting these sovereignty goals into practice. For more information on Mikhailov's interpretation of these events see Mikhailov (2004a; 2004b; 2010).
- 4 For a more detailed discussion of the origins of the Volga Tatars see Rorlich (1986: Part One).
- 5 On these trends, see Williams (1999).
- 6 On ToTs, see Kondrashov (2000: Chapter 6).
- 7 1990 Declaration of state sovereignty. Available at [http://www.kcn.ru/tat\\_en/politics/dfa/sover/decl1.htm](http://www.kcn.ru/tat_en/politics/dfa/sover/decl1.htm).
- 8 M. Shaimiev, *Rossisskaya gazeta*, 17 August 1991, author's emphasis. Shaimiev's advisor Rafael Khakimov was instrumental here and ensured that when bilingualism was promoted it did not displace Russian (Khakimov, 1993). On the language aspect of nation building and ethnic mobilization see Suleymanova (2010). Language is of course a political issue, and there has been a constant struggle between the Tatarstan and Moscow authorities over the desire to use Latin scripts and to keep Cyrillic mandatory, respectively. In 2004 the Russian Federation Constitutional Court objected to language reforms in Tatarstan on the grounds that it limited citizens' native language use and choice regarding the language of communication (see comment on Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation of 16 November 2004 No 16-P 'On the Case on the Examination of the Constitutionality of the Provisions in Article 10(2) of the Law of the Republic of Tatarstan 'On Languages of the Peoples of the Republic of Tatarstan' in *Rossisskaya gazeta* 23 November 2004). For more on this see Suleymanova (2010).
- 9 Constitution of Tatarstan 1992. Available at [http://www.kcn.ru/tat\\_en/politics/dfa/sover/cons8.htm](http://www.kcn.ru/tat_en/politics/dfa/sover/cons8.htm).
- 10 'Zayavlenie Presidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta Respublika Tatarstan' ('Statement of Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Tatarstan'), *Prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta Respubliki Tatarstan* (Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Tatarstan), 1992 (Graney, 2009: 34).
- 11 Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tatarstan 'On Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and Mutual Delegation of Authority between the State Bodies of the Russian Federation and the State Bodies of the Republic of Tatarstan'. Available at [http://www.kcn.ru/tat\\_en/politics/dfa/inform/treaty.htm](http://www.kcn.ru/tat_en/politics/dfa/inform/treaty.htm).
- 12 On these developments see Petrov and Slider (2003), Matsuzato (2004), Bahry (2005), Orttung (2008), and Slider (2008). For a detailed analysis of the challenges facing regional government see Ross and Campbell (2009) and Ross (2009). On Tatarstan in particular see Mukhariamov and Mukhariamova (2004); Sharafutdinova and Magomedov (2004).
- 13 Like Putin, Grigory Rapota is a KGB/FSB career officer. He worked for the KGB at the First Chief Directorate and in the USA (1971-1975), Sweden (1979-1983, although he was expelled from Sweden on December 20, the Cheka Day), and Finland (1987-1990). In 1992, Rapota was made head of the Third Geographical Department, and

between 1993 and 1998, he was head of the First Chief Directorate. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.

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