

Analysis

More than a Cog in the Kremlin's Machine: A Political Portrait of Tatarstan¹

By Danielle N. Lussier, Berkeley

Abstract

Tatarstan negotiated one of the highest levels of autonomy for any region within the Russian Federation during the Yeltsin era. Putin's efforts to centralize power curtailed many of the advantages the republic had originally won. Ironically, the strengthening of central institutions actually forced greater democracy in the region. However, as the key patron in a clientelistic system, Tatarstan President Mintimer Shaimiev remains extremely powerful and the Kremlin has little choice but to take his preferences into account if it wants to maintain the support of Tatarstan's population. Shaimiev has effectively co-opted the Kremlin political machine for his own purposes

Tatarstan's Evolving Relationship with Moscow

During the early years of post-Soviet Russian federalism, the Republic of Tatarstan showed other regions how to play tough with the Kremlin – and win. In stark contrast to Chechnya, where separatist claims led to armed conflict and large-scale regional destruction, Tatarstan leveraged nationalist sentiment to garner more autonomy than any other region in the Russian Federation. Heeding former Russian President Boris Yeltsin's 1990 invitation to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow,” Tatarstan negotiated the first (and most advantageous) bilateral power-sharing treaty between the central government and a Russian region. Throughout the 1990s Tatarstan's President Mintimer Shaimiev successfully wielded the region's troublemaking potential to shield Tatarstan from the Kremlin's reach. The result was a region that operated according to its own rules – until former Russian President Vladimir Putin came to power.

As Putin shortened the leashes of unwieldy regional executives by recentralizing the state apparatus, many of the advantages Tatarstan gained through its 1994 power-sharing treaty were slowly chipped away. As Russia enters the Medvedev era, where does Tatarstan stand in Russia's centralized federation? Has this fiercely independent region been compelled to forfeit autonomy or can it still stand up to the Kremlin?

Chicago of the Lower Volga

Tatarstan is located in the Volga Federal District, and its 3.8 million residents represent nearly one hundred different nationalities, although the most prominent are the Tatars (52.9 percent) and Russians (39.5 percent). The Russian population is more urbanized, resulting in relatively equal Tatar and Russian populations in the two largest cities – the capital Kazan and Naberezhnye Chelny. Tatarstan is one of Russia's most economically developed regions with strong oil, petrochemical, and automotive and aviation manufacturing industries. It comes in seventh among Russia's regions for its share of total Russian GDP (2.8%).

The 1994 power-sharing agreement brokered between Moscow and Kazan gave Tatarstan almost total control over the region's economic resources and revenue. The region maintained power over much of the taxable income generated in Tatarstan, and also held control over the privatization of assets located on the republic's territory. At the turn of the century, approximately 65 percent of the region's wealth was under the control of the republican political elite.

Mintimer Shaimiev, now 71, has controlled regional politics since 1989, when he became the first secretary of the Tatar Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Shaimiev adapted the method of single-party political rule to the post-Soviet context, running unopposed as the republican president in 1991 and 1996 before changing the republican constitution to run for a third term in 2001. Shaimiev's mandate was extended yet again in 2005 when Putin appointed him to a fourth five-year term.

Even though discussions about Shaimiev's ultimate retirement have been underway for almost a decade, it is clear that his departure from the political scene will happen on his own terms. While Tatarstan's reputation

¹ The following analysis was largely informed by twenty-four interviews with representatives of political parties, civil society organizations, scholars, analysts, and present and former legislators in Tatarstan, and twenty-five anonymous semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of the population of Kazan. All interviews were conducted in February–April 2008.

as one of the most authoritarian regions in an increasingly authoritarian Russia may lend itself to comparison with the personalistic dictatorships that characterize Central Asia, a more accurate analogy for Shaimiev is that of a party boss for a well-oiled political machine, like the 1970s Cook County Democratic Organization that previously dominated Chicago politics. In spite of a severe reduction in Tatarstan's autonomy over legislation and taxation, Shaimiev's longstanding role as patron for Tatarstan's political and economic spoils provides him with an asset the Kremlin covets: sway over republican public opinion and vote choice to ensure that the federal center cannot bypass him if it wants to maintain a loyal Tatarstani public. Given Tatarstan's economic significance to Russia as a whole, an agreeable population in the region serves the Kremlin's interests.

Indispensable Power Broker

Shaimiev first made a name for himself as an essential player in Tatarstan's struggle for power with Moscow when Tatar nationalism was mobilized into a 1990 regional declaration of sovereignty and a 1992 referendum in favor of independent statehood. Shaimiev, who preached moderation and commanded the respect of multiple sides, arose to broker a palatable solution. For the Kremlin, maintaining Russia's territorial integrity was of far greater importance than democratizing political institutions. The Kremlin priorities led to the beginning of an implicit trade-off: Tatarstan's democracy in return for its subordination.

Having averted a potential civil war, Shaimiev turned his attention toward strengthening his hold on the region's economic and political power. Tatarstan's experience with fair and free elections was short-lived. By the March 1995 elections for the republican legislature, the State Council, Shaimiev had successfully reconsolidated power in central republican institutions, which henceforth managed elections from the top. The engineering of elections became more egregious during the 1996 Russian presidential voting. In the first round alone, vote tabulation protocols from Kazan were revised to add over 47,000 votes to Boris Yeltsin's tally and deduct almost 14,000 from second-place finisher Gennady Zyuganov, according to an analysis by Yelena Chernobrovkina. If this was not evidence enough to suspect foul play in the published results claiming that both Yeltsin and Zyuganov took about 38 percent of the vote, then the radical increase in support for Yeltsin to 61 percent in the second round should certainly have raised questions.

Those questions, however, were of little interest to the Kremlin, which benefited from Shaimiev's ability to support the status quo in Moscow. Shaimiev's

team continued to deliver the desired results, posting votes for Putin of 68.8 percent and 82.6 percent in 2000 and 2004, respectively, and showing 79 percent for Medvedev in 2008. These outcomes are not all due to falsification. Other techniques, such as media control and voter mobilization, help keep the numbers high, particularly in rural areas. Most of the voters in the region – who had been socialized to believe that voting was not about selecting representatives, but about demonstrating loyalty to the regime – could be easily swayed to participate. Moreover, they shared the belief that Shaimiev's shrewd political leadership had prevented ethnic violence. They also believe that life in Tatarstan is better than in other regions, a debatable myth that Shaimiev's regime has successfully propagandized.

According to Ivan Grachev, one of the founders of the democratic movement in Tatarstan and a current Russian State Duma deputy elected from Irkutsk, regions like Tatarstan and Bashkortostan destroyed nascent democratic institutions in order to strengthen a clientelistic relationship with the Russian center: the regions turn out the pro-Kremlin vote and in turn receive various privileges. Grachev suggests that other regions have learned from Tatarstan's example.

Co-opting the Pro-Kremlin Machine

Turning out the vote for Moscow became an even more important task for Shaimiev following Putin's 2004 decision to cancel direct elections for regional executives. By then, however, Shaimiev was already turning the regional branch of the pro-Kremlin United Russia party into the republican ruling machine. While the parallels between the former CPSU and United Russia are frequently noted, nowhere are the similarities more striking than in Tatarstan.

The Tatarstan regional branch of United Russia was created from above by elite agreement, co-chaired by Shaimiev and chairman of the State Council Farid Mukhametshin. Eighty-three of the 93 State Council deputies are members of the party. All republican ministers but two are in the United Russia party leadership. According to a United Russia party insider, the party cannot be viewed as an independent organization. Rather, it is intertwined with the republican executive and legislative branches and with central political organs.

The perception of the party as an extension of the state apparatus is further reinforced by the regional branch's charitable foundation, which has financed popular initiatives like the Naberezhnye Chelny City Center for Children's Creative Works – a twenty-first century version of the Pioneer Palace. Such displays of patronage reinforce the image of United Russia as the modern-day ruling party for the rank-and-file as well.

The spread of membership over the past several years closely parallels CPSU recruitment – enterprise directors joined and then strongly encouraged their subordinates to join as well. These employees see job security as somewhat contingent on party membership. A United Russia party insider noted that this is a view shared by young people as well, who see party membership as a way to move up the career ladder.

The public and elite perceptions of United Russia as a regional patron, however, are not based on sympathies with the party, but are closely linked to the popularity of Shaimiev and Mukhametshin as individuals. To generate support for United Russia, Shaimiev agreed to be on the party's candidate list for both the 2003 and 2007 State Duma elections. Shaimiev's popularity in the region is genuine. Tatars and Russians alike look on him favorably, even while they criticize the regional and local legislatures for being corrupt and clan-centric. This degree of public support makes crossing Shaimiev a dangerous move for the Kremlin. Meanwhile, by taking control over the development of United Russia in the region, Shaimiev has succeeded in linking his regionally-based system of patronage into the Kremlin's primary institutional support structure.

The result is a subtle form of leverage for lobbying regional interests against a powerful center. Though organized from the top-down, United Russia has acquired a mass following in Tatarstan, boasting 45 local branches with 132,000 members, making this division the largest United Russia branch of all regions, including Moscow, according to an interview with a Tatarstan-based United Russia employee. United Russia dominated the 2007 State Duma elections in Tatarstan. It was the only party to cross the 7 percent barrier, and the high showing resulted in the election of fourteen United Russia deputies from Tatarstan, which constitutes the largest regional group in the Duma.

Bleak Prospects for Opposition

The nearly twenty-year reign of one man's political machine in Tatarstan has not been unanimously supported. Opposition to Shaimiev, however, continues to encounter sustained and meaningful barriers. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Just Russia, the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, Yabloko, and the Union of Right Forces are all active in the region. Just Russia, in particular, inherited the vocal opposition following that the Russian Party of Life had cultivated in Tatarstan. Unfortunately, disagreements among the regional members of the parties that united to form Just Russia have caused the party to lose a sizeable bloc of its previously active cadre. All of these parties share an interest in reducing vote falsification, and Yabloko, Union of Right Forces, and Just Russia have worked together to mon-

itor elections and vote counting. They all are confident that officially published vote results belie true levels of support.

Ironically, it was Putin's success at strengthening the center that brought modest democratic gains to the region. Tatarstan ultimately made over 350 amendments to the republican constitution to bring it into alignment with federal legislation. Changes included the elimination of single-candidate elections for executive positions, the revision of an election procedure that led to the overrepresentation of complicit rural regions in the State Council, and the introduction of elections for local government. These revisions improved the legal basis for competitive elections. According to one local political observer, the March 2004 elections to the State Council marked the first time since 1995 when a few opposition candidates made it into the legislature. In October 2005 the first-ever elections were held for city and town governments. Yet, in most instances, the status quo was preserved. Over 80 percent of candidates ran unopposed and all but one *raion* head was reelected (*Russian Regional Report*, Vol. 10, no. 18, 3 November 2005). While these changes may mark small progress in terms of reducing *de jure* authoritarian procedures, they have done little to actually change the face of Tatarstan's politics.

Mass movements have long been absent from Tatarstan. According to an estimate made by one local scholar, the All-Tatar Public Center (VTOTs) claims to have 3,000 registered members, but only 200 to 300 are active. Aside from VTOTs, there is no civil society organization in the region with more than 100 active members. The pro-democracy movement Accord had 500 active members during its peak in 1990–1991, but now it has only about 70 regular participants. Similarly, the once vibrant Equal Rights and Lawfulness movement has been diluted into a discussion group aimed at assisting the State Council's sole democratically-inclined member, Aleksander Shtanin. Nevertheless, small pockets of protest occasionally emerge regarding local issues, such as conditions relating to small business and the rising costs of utilities. Opposition potential exists, but most residents see elections as a useless mechanism for resolving their problems. They find issuing formal complaint letters and filing the occasional court case to be more effective.

Whether this situation will change once Shaimiev leaves office is an open question. Local analysts are not optimistic: the Kremlin knows better than to put anyone in charge of Tatarstan who does not have Shaimiev's backing. The most likely compromise candidate is Farid Mukhametshin, although Shaimiev has also praised Kazan mayor Ilсур Metshin. Regardless of who the successor is, he is unlikely to tinker with the smooth-run-

ning machine. For any real change to come at this point, the Russian federal government would have to make democratization in Tatarstan a priority. But since the

current system serves Moscow's interests well, there is little chance that it will make many changes.

About the author

Danielle Lussier is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the University of California, Berkeley Political Science Department.

Recommended Reading

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Analysis

The Oil Factor and War of Clans in Chechnya

By Nathalie Ouvaroff, Moscow

Abstract

Oil has long been an object of conflict in Chechnya, with both Moscow and the leaders of the republic trying to gain control of the profits from its sale. Over time various warlords and members of the Russian special services have sold the oil on the black market for personal profit. Under Ramzan Kadyrov, the Chechens argue that the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft is taking too much of the republic's oil for its own purposes, leaving too little money in the region. Kadyrov has apparently scored some victories over Rosneft recently, but these may be short-lived. Ultimately, the Putin-Medvedev tandem and the people around them must decide whether the Russian government will continue to support Kadyrov or try to replace him with an alternative figure who would better serve Russian interests.

Time of Uncertainty

Russia is entering a zone of uncertainty, fraught with danger. Elites view the Putin-Medvedev tandem as a false diarchy, in which Putin remains the leading figure. According to jokes currently circulating in Moscow, "The tsar is still there, he has just appointed an assistant" or "Our Vladimir is canny, he has chosen the only way to preserve his throne without alienating Western public opinion and oligarchs eager to launder money in the West." Even though the Russian constitution places power in the hands of the president, the presence of two people at the top will allow a number of maneuvers between the two centers of power, particularly since the new head of state does not seem to be a clone of his predecessor.

Even before the new president was sworn in, subtle games began to appear in the fringes of the empire: The Chechen Republic, which since the arrival of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov in 2006 has experienced a period of calm and prosperity that even Kadyrov's opponents must concede, is again facing tension for two reasons:

- Rosneft's decision to build a second refinery in the neighboring republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, rather than in Chechnya, and
- The resumption of clan warfare among the various Chechen factions, marked in particular by the dispute between Kadyrov and the Yamadaev Brothers and the surprising statement of the separatist refugee Ahmed Zakaev in London highlighting the