

Main Article

Moscow and Kazan are at Loggerheads as Tatarstan's Nominal Sovereignty remains in Limbo

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Abstract *The Tatarstan-Russia relationship has long been seen as a struggling, but still eloquent enough symbol of Russia's federalist polity. Following the expiry of the Russia-Tatarstan Treaty, which used to grant Kazan some elements of sovereignty, analysts from different political quarters in Russia wonder whether the move will have positive or damaging effects on the long term.*

Introduction

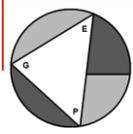
Moscow is currently locked in a delicate legalistic quandary with Kazan, the capital of the autonomous region of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation, over the extension of a ten-year-long Federal Treaty with predominantly Sunni Turkic Tatarstan. The shares of Russians and Tatars in the total population of the republic of Tatarstan are 39.7% and 53.2%, respectively, according to the 2010 census.

The matter has not received the coverage it deserves, having been buried under the avalanche of the most pressing news smothering Russia in new American sanctions. The bilateral document of the said Federal Treaty, which expired on 24 July 2017, stood out amongst all other similar treaties because of its salient feature: it endowed Tatarstan with increased sovereignty.

Things are likely to change, however. The Kremlin is allegedly claiming that the extension is currently inexpedient; it certainly seems keen to place Tatarstan on the same footing as the rest of Russia's federal subjects. Try as Tatarstan would to renegotiate, the distinctly privileged relationship's revival seems difficult already. Both Moscow's and Kazan's Kremains are reticent about their intended steps while the issue's possible implications are tacitly seething in Tatarstan.

In political commentators' views, the reasons behind the Kremlin's position are as pragmatic as they are politically motivated. Those come down to Russia's increasing domestic trend for further "verticalization, consolidation and russification" of the country. There are unconfirmed rumours afloat that the Turkic republic may be renamed into Tatarstan *Gubernia* (governorate) ¹, which presages an overly gloomy picture of Moscow-Kazan future ties. But unsubstantiated forecasts apart, Russia's President Vladimir Putin recently did question the necessity for ethnic Russians to learn local languages of the federal republics they live in.

Russian society is thus split in two camps, those supporting the President's stance that is implicitly aimed at further russification and others, opposing it and viewing Putin's comment as a prescient sign that may undermine the multiethnic and federalist foundations of Russia. Some Tatar analysts consider the president's comments to have been intended exclusively for Tatarstan, where compulsory learning of the Tatar language in schools is construed as "a key element in the ideological make-up of the republic." ²



History of Russo-Tatar Relations

The pinnacle of historical ties between Russians and Tatars—the titular Slavic nation and the largest ethnic minority³ of Turkic origin respectively—goes back to the 13th century AD. The relationship was not devoid of direct European influence.

Prominent Russian historians maintain that throughout its late medieval history, Russia faced intense attempts from Rome to be coerced to the bosom of the Catholic Church. However, most Slavic rulers vehemently rejected the Pope-Caesarian model under which a pontific granted license to a monarch, thus restricting the royal power. They preferred the Byzantine or Caesarian-Pope principle, enabling monarchs, on the basis of “God-given right”, to appoint the Head of Church accountable to the ruler. This latter peculiarity explains the origin of the Russian Orthodox Church’s most articulate premise of God-bestowed power on the monarch. “All power emanates from God,” declares the Orthodox mantra, purporting total self-subjugation to a sacral monarch.⁴ The contemporary “Power Vertical” phenomenon, inherent in Russia, to a certain extent reflects this centuries-long dogma.

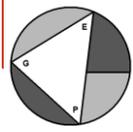
Rome’s attempts at bringing Russian rulers to the “true faith” continued incessantly, increasing in intensity amid the looming Tatar invasion in the early 13th century AD. Torn between Rome’s promises of protection on the one hand and Mongol-Tatar descendants of Chengis Khan’s imminent military conquest on the other, the Prince of Novgorod Alexander Nevsky (subsequently elevated to sainthood) preferred a tributary alliance with the Tatars instead of renouncing the Orthodox Church in favour of Catholicism.

Prince Nevsky swore allegiance to the Golden Horde’s Khan, committing himself to all customary requirements flowing thereof, such as payment of regular tribute, allocation of military force and even participation in the liege’s military campaigns of which he partook more than once. He returned from his last trip to the Golden Horde in 1263 AD in very poor health and died a few months later after taking the vows.

A leading Russian medieval history Professor Alexander Ujankov believes that this self-sacrificial political maneuver gave Nevsky’s subjects a thirty-years-long respite from wars allowing him to build the country.⁵ Most importantly, the Slavic Prince managed to save a whole generation of Russians, whose lives would have been lost in case of an open warfare against the then invincible Mongol-Tatars.⁶

The Mongol-Tatar rule over Russia lasted from 1237 to 1480 AD and in length of time, the two peoples grew so ethnically mixed with one another that it gave birth to a Russian proverbial saying, “scrape a Russian, and you’ll find a Tartar”. The Russians and the Tatars established close social and commercial links to such an extent that they even came to share many traditions. The Tatar cuisine, traditional dress, ways of government and most attributes of statehood gradually made their way into the Russia’s Slavic population’s life.⁷

Even after the Golden Horde was defeated, the Tatars remained in close contact with the Slavic population, retaining small khanates that posed no risk to Russia’s security. Following the conquest of the Kazan Khanate by Ivan the Terrible in 1552 AD, the Tatars fell under a stronger Russian influence.



Path to Tatarstan's Sovereignty

Following the USSR's demise in 1991, Russia itself stood at the brink of disintegration. As a matter of fact, President Boris Yeltsin's proverbial announcement "take as much sovereignty as you can carry" only exacerbated the secessionist aspirations. Over a dozen of Russia's mostly ethno-religious autonomies proclaimed independence. In response, Moscow was quick to either persuade or pressure them all, except Chechnya, into recognizing Russia's sovereignty.

Kazan, for its part, thanks to its peaceful and noiseless assertiveness, proved more tenacious and continued to stubbornly insist on full sovereignty. The local elite went out of their way to preserve their control primarily based on its developed economy and sizeable hydrocarbon resources. Strong ethno-religious aspirations and pro-independence movements active in Tatarstan served as too loud a warning not to be heard in Moscow.

Kazan thus engaged in difficult and little promising discussions with Moscow. In the teeth of every difficulty and following protracted negotiations, political wrangling, a local referendum for independence and temporary disruptions with the Federal Centre in the early 1990s, the region's leader Mr Mintimer Shaymiyev at length succeeded.

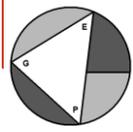
In February 1994 the Treaty was signed. The Turkic republic of Tatarstan gained an unprecedented right to conduct its own foreign policy and trade. Crucially, the region's land and mineral resources were legally recognized as the republic's property. In return, such attributes of sovereignty as law enforcement, courts, Public Prosecutor's Office and other agencies and functionaries reverted back to Russia's jurisdiction.

President Putin's focus on his "Power Vertical" resulted in strict centralization of the state. This led to a gradual but noticeable enfeeblement of regional authorities, both financial and administrative.

By 2007 all preferential bilateral treaties between the Federal Centre and its administrative subjects, irrespective of their ethno-religious fabric, were scrapped except for the one with Tatarstan. The renewed arrangement was extended for another ten years till July 2017.⁸ Additionally, unlike all other similar subjects of the Federation, whose leaders were self-downgraded to the status of *glava respubliki* (head of republic) under the presidential term of Dmitry Medvedev, only Tatarstan's leader preserved a largely symbolic official title of 'president'.

In fact, Tatarstan allegedly simply decided not to participate in that political campaign launched voluntarily by the Caucasus republics' presidents that momentarily spread all over Russia.

Today, Tatarstan is one of the most economically prosperous republics, boasting a wide range of well-functioning industries such as petro-chemistry, shipbuilding, airplanes and helicopters plants, trucks construction and other enterprises. It is currently estimated that investments in Tatarstan attain \$2m per day.⁹



Change of the *status quo*

Commenting on the current stand-off, *Kommersant's* sources¹⁰ identify Mr Sergey Kiriyyenko, Deputy Head of President Putin's Administration, as the principal opponent to the largest ethnic minority's preferential status.

Reportedly, in the early 2000s, Mr Kiriyyenko, in his capacity as the President's Representative Plenipotentiary in the Volga region, unsuccessfully endeavoured to incorporate the republic into the 'Power Vertical'; his attempts were shattered by local leadership's intransigence, greatly buttressed by an existing treaty.

Allegedly, Mr Kiriyyenko nevertheless decided to have the mission accomplished once the situation permitted, *Kommersant* reports. In the meanwhile, much to Putin's credit, he has a long record of promoting ethnic Tatars to the highest positions of power. Some of them are still part of the country's top decision-making bodies. His early years in power clearly indicated his appreciation of the importance of the Tatar factor in Russia's domestic politics.

By and large the Tatar republic's relations with the Kremlin were unclouded, except for the fact that Tatarstan remained loyal to its Turkic kin, distancing itself from the anti-Turkish campaign that barged into the Russian internal agenda on the heels of the incident involving the shooting of the Russian jet by Turkey over Syria in November 2015.¹¹

"Almost sovereign but loyal to Russia, Tatarstan was exceptionally important for the Kremlin twenty years ago as a stark alternative for the unbending ethnic separatism reigning in the then Chechnya", writes Oleg Kashin in *Respublika.ru*.¹² "Moreover, by now Tatarstan has evolved into a full-fledged state within a state and however strong the Kremlin's "Power Vertical" may be, Moscow does not have that much resources to restrict Kazan's ambitions."¹³

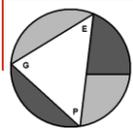
However, to see the wood for the trees, one should treat Mr Kashin's latter assertion with utmost caution. Some analysts maintain that once the sovereign status had been achieved the then Tatarstan's leader Mr Shaymiyev did not particularly encourage nationalist movements' activities. Those were vociferous in support of the republic's full independence, thus becoming a hurdle for the local ruling elites.

Therefore, Tatarstan's authorities allegedly saw no need in their further activities, since the nationalists had fully played their role by then. According to some experts, today the field ostentatiously seems to be clear of any pro-independence activists of consequence.

On the other hand, some other commentators believe that the main nationalist groups are still actively organized and remain under the Shaymiyev clan's control. A superficial examination shows that the protest electorate is a mix of nationalist and religious activists.

There are two main opposition nationalist centres of influence, one in Kazan and another in Naberejniye Chelny.¹⁴ The two groups mark their active presence on the ground annually, when they hold a rally across Kazan in commemoration of Ivan the Terrible's conquest of Kazan, crowning the event by prayers in local mosques.

Besides, there were a few cases of ethnic Russians' expressing dissatisfaction over excessive time devoted to the Tatar language in local schools. On one occasion ethnic Russians took to



the streets in a peaceful protest, demanding the content of the Russian language in Tatarstan's syllabus to be equal and in line with that of other Russian regions. This open polemic resulted in a Tatar journalist's calling the Russians "occupants" in the early 2010s.¹⁵

Kazan's recent claims are forthwith rejected

The World Tatar Congress was held in Tatarstan and gathered over one thousand participants from 41 countries from 2 to 6 August 2017. Typically, congresses like this are usually full of lukewarm discussions on immaterial matters and are never very entertaining in terms of ardent polemics and heated discussions. But contrary to all expectations regardless, from the first day of the gathering the former Tatarstan's leader Shaymiyev, who currently holds a prestigious position as a State Councilor, brought up the painful question. He spoke of the necessity to discuss with the Federal Centre those "things that have relevance to our rights and are reflected in our constitution".

It is noteworthy that the (post-Soviet) Tatar Constitution was adopted a year earlier than the Russian one. Mr Shaymiyev likened the first Russia-Tatarstan treaty to a "bridge over hell".

Thus, the Tatarstan authorities effectively declared their intention not to yield to the Kremlin's pressure. It seems that the Tatars are adamant to retain some economic benefits arising from the Treaty, sweetening the pill with an apparent readiness for compromises and concessions regarding some other, less important items from the previous arrangement.

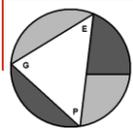
In the meanwhile, Moscow did not tarry to react to Tatarstan's representation by saying that "the Kremlin's position vis-à-vis the treaty has not changed, since a state must not be built upon the principle of an arrangement".¹⁶ This appears to put an end to discussions before they even opened, but in reality the process is just entering its first phase.

Although the issue will hardly have repercussions on Russia's territorial integrity in the short term, stripping officially granted traits of sovereignty from assertive Tatarstan will decidedly affect both Moscow and Kazan and have its consequences elsewhere.

Moscow's stance towards Tatarstan met with noticeable concerns from the predominantly Sunni Turkic population, primarily due to economic considerations. For instance, the recent near-demise of the republic's main financial institution Tatfondbank has already had a negative impact on Tatarstan's economy. And the subsequent fate of Tatneft Oil is equally unpredictable. It may follow the example of Bashneft (Bashkortostan's oil company), which was taken over by the Sistema Holding and soon afterwards by Rosneft. This, naturally, came as a hard blow to Bashkortostan's economy.

Conclusion

The outcome of the tacit legalistic confrontation between Moscow and Kazan may engender far-reaching ethnic consequences inside Russia. It is also bound to have an impact on other federal subjects, most of which have their own idiosyncrasies in terms of ethnic and religious profiles. On the other hand, extension of the Treaty in its latest form could raise discontent i.e.



jealousy in other republics of Russia with considerable ethnic and religious minorities. Also it will pose a potential problem for Moscow if other subjects of the federation would line up to be granted a similar status as Tatarstan used to enjoy.

Ethnically still mixed, but predominantly Turkic, Russia's Ural and Volga regions are currently seen as the areas of discontent. The expiry of the Russia-Tatarstan Treaty comes at a time of acute disagreements between the republic and Moscow over Tatarstan's contributions to the Federal Budget and annual allocations it receives from it. Thus, this donor republic began to display a quiet dissatisfaction over the 'distribution of taxes' imposed by Moscow.

Notably, months before the Treaty's expiry the Kremlin retorted with a succession of regional governors' replacements, which could not but cause concerns amongst the Tatar population. Consequently a Russian analyst, Mr Ruslan Aysin, defined the Volga-Ural region and the Caucasus as zones of instability fraught with surprises before the 2018 presidential elections in Russia.¹⁷

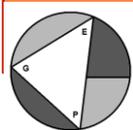
It is difficult to predict what would be the outcome of Tatarstan's conundrum, should the Kremlin stick to its decision to cancel its partial sovereignty. It should, however, be born in mind that the current *status quo* between Kazan and Moscow has been in a mutually advantageous existence for over twenty years. This could not but firmly establish a certain pattern of a *modus vivendi* in this prosperous republic that has always taken pride in religious, cultural and ethnic harmony. Nor is it easy to foresee the reaction at the grassroots level, particularly when the future of an ethnically and religiously different region is in stake.

It could, however, be said with absolute certainty that the Russia-Tatarstan Treaty has been exceptionally useful from the point of view of preventing this economically strong and ethnically sensitive region from any separatist aspiration—and violent secessionism to boot. Should economic realities of this relatively prosperous republic remain unchanged, the lost sovereignty may sooner or later fade and lose its momentum, whereas any deterioration of erstwhile economic stability and welfare may unleash nefarious dynamics that will be difficult to harness.

Rafael Ibrahimov, former Azerbaijani Ambassador to the United Kingdom, has served as the Azerbaijani Head of Mission in London (2001-2007) and Stockholm (2007-2013). Before joining the Foreign Ministry in Azerbaijan in 1993 he served in Yemen (1985-1986) and Algeria (1987-1990) as military interpreter of Arabic, French and Russian. His later ambassadorial postings included Dublin, Oslo and Helsinki. He is a frequent political commentator on the Middle East and the former Soviet Union for BBC World Service, Channel Four, Al-Jazeera, and Channel 5 (UK), and has held a number speaking engagements in leading UK and Scandinavian educational establishments and think-tanks. rtibrahim@gmail.com

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6. Interestingly enough, another Russian contemporary royalty, Prince Daniel of Galicia, opted to swear allegiance to Rome, thus becoming the first and last Slavic royalty to be crowned as the King of Russ by a papal archbishop in 1253 AD, thus bringing Catholicism to some parts of modern Ukraine. Александр Ужанков. "Два выбора - две истории. Даниил Галицкий и Александр Невский".
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