

**REPORT ON  
THE TATARSTAN REFERENDUM ON SOVERIGNTY**

**March 21, 1992**

**Kazan and Pestretsy**

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of the  
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## SUMMARY

- Tatarstan's voters went to the polls on March 21, 1992, in a referendum asking whether Tatarstan is a "sovereign state" and "a subject of international law." They voted Yes by a margin of 61 percent to 37 percent.
- The referendum's passage was a victory for a Tatarstan government determined to redefine its relationship with the Russian Federation on a bilateral treaty basis, rather than within the proposed federation arrangements put forward by the Yeltsin administration.
- Tatarstan's government insisted that the referendum was not about "leaving or not leaving" the Russian Federation, but rather on ratifying Tatarstan's August 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty. Nevertheless, the phrasing of the question allowed room for various interpretations and claims.
- The referendum was strongly promoted by Tatarstan's President Shaymiyev, his administration, and the parliamentary faction *Tatarstan*. The opposition in parliament coalesced around the mostly Russian faction *Narodovlastie* (People's Power).
- While the "ethnicity" of the vote could not be determined in a secret ballot, the Tatar population clearly voted Yes and the Russian population was less enthusiastic. The referendum passed by large margins in ethnic Tatar areas, but passed by a much smaller margin in the cities, where most Russians live. In the five districts where Russians form the majority, and in the capital, Kazan, the referendum went down to defeat.
- Election day went smoothly in areas monitored by Helsinki Commission staff, although some practices common during the Soviet period but impermissible by international standards were still observed. Spokesmen for the Russian Democratic Party, which strongly opposed the referendum, claimed that irregularities took place where observers were not present.
- The Russian Federation Commission on Constitutionality declared the referendum unconstitutional on March 13, and the referendum was accompanied by charges and counter-charges in the Moscow and Kazan mass media. Moscow's television coverage frequently featured editorial comment against the referendum. On the eve of the referendum, President Shamiyev made a personal television appeal for passage, while President Yeltsin, leaving for the CIS meeting in Kiev, pledged that he [would] "not allow Tatarstan to leave the Russian Federation."

- Passage of Tatarstan's referendum represents another step in the ongoing rearrangement of political and economic structures in the former USSR and Russia. On March 29, 1992, 18 of Russia's 20 major autonomous regions signed the Federation Treaty, many with certain reservations and amendments. Tatarstan's refusal to sign and its insistence on negotiating directly with Russia may well influence other autonomous republics, even those that signed the treaty, to renegotiate their terms or, at least, to continue striving for more autonomy.
- Helsinki Commission observers had been invited by Tatarstan's government. Such invitations conform with the provision of paragraph 8, section 1 of the *Copenhagen Document* of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, to which the Russian Federation has acceded as successor to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, one Commission observer was told by a representative of the Democratic Party of Russia that his presence in Tatarstan to observe the referendum was "to put it mildly, incorrect."

## BACKGROUND

Tatarstan, the former Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR, with an area of 26,000 square miles, is located approximately 500 miles east of Moscow at the confluence of the Volga and Kama Rivers. The Turkic-speaking Muslim Tatars are a remnant of the "Golden Horde" left in the wake of the Mongol occupation of Russia (1240-1480). Kazan, the capital of today's Tatarstan, was captured in 1552 by Ivan the Terrible, as Muscovy began its drive to the Pacific coast and beyond. The area is a significant source of oil for Russia, and is a major producer of trucks, tires, and other rubber products. In addition, Tatarstan lies across major energy pipelines between Moscow and Western Siberia, and includes a large defense industry.

The current population of Tatarstan is approximately 49 percent Tatar and 43 percent Russian. Finno-Ugric peoples and Bashkirs, whose titular autonomous regions border Tatarstan, make up the remainder. There is a high degree of intermingling among the population: about one-third of the marriages are mixed.

With the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Tatarstan, together with Bashkiria and part of present-day Orenburg oblast of the Russian Federation, comprised a short-lived "Idel-Ural" state stretching to the Caspian Sea that was declared in February 1918 by the Tatar National Assembly (*Medzhlis*). Soon thereafter, the Bolsheviks dissolved this state and arrested its leaders. The Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was formally created in May 1920.

Like other non-Russian peoples, Tatars experienced an upsurge of national feeling and political organization under Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Tatarstan's parliament unanimously declared the sovereignty of Tatarstan on August 30, 1990. Unlike similar declarations of sovereignty by other autonomous regions, the declaration omitted any reference to Tatarstan's existence *within* the Russian Republic. Tatarstan got a great boost in its striving for autonomy in September 1990, when Boris Yeltsin, competing with President Gorbachev for power, told the Tatars in Kazan that they could have "all the independence they could handle." Today, Russian officials tend to grimace when reminded of Yeltsin's remark.

The Tatars took it seriously, however. In April 1991, the parliament followed up the sovereignty declaration by asserting the supremacy of Tatar legislation over Russian legislation where the two were in conflict. During the deliberations on Gorbachev's Union Treaty, Tatarstan President Shaymiyev voiced his intention to sign the Treaty as an independent entity rather than as part of the Russian Republic.

The inherent conflict between Moscow and the leaders of autonomous republics came increasingly to the fore in 1991, and relations between Tatarstan's leaders and Yeltsin cooled. Exacerbating tensions between them was lack of support for Yeltsin's

presidential ambitions by Tatarstan's Communist Party leadership, which refused to participate in the June 1991 presidential election. The republic's President Mintimer Shaymiyev basically backed the coup plotters in August 1991 and Moscow's negative attitude towards Tatarstan's March 1992 referendum was based partially on opposition to what Russian officials call a hardline apparatchik government exploiting nationalist slogans to retain power.

Meanwhile, some Tatar national movements were becoming increasingly radical. In mid-October 1991, Tatar nationalists staged a demonstration on Freedom Square in front of parliament demanding that parliament declare independence and break relations with Russia. At one point, they attempted to storm the parliament building, and several policemen and demonstrators were injured.

In early February 1992, at the initiative of the *Ittifak* Tatar Independence Party, a Congress (*kurultay*) of Tatar peoples from throughout the former USSR met in Kazan to elect a 75-member ruling body, the *Milli Medzhlis*. The Congress passed a law decreeing Tatarstan an "independent country" and called for recognition of Tatarstan by the United Nations. President Shamiyev criticized the apparent pretensions of the Congress to operate as a legislative body, and the Congress chairman, Talgat Abdullin, later told the *Interfax* news agency that "the [*medzhlis*] lays no claim to power in Tatarstan."

On February 21, Tatarstan announced that a referendum would be held one month later. The Russian Federation parliament issued an appeal "to the parliament, people, and government of Tatarstan" warning that such a referendum could lead to inter-ethnic strife. On March 13, Russia's Constitutional Court declared the referendum question as framed unconstitutional, as well as sections of the Declaration of Sovereignty that limit application of Russian law on the territory of Tatarstan.

## THE REFERENDUM QUESTION

Lengthy debates in Tatarstan's Supreme Soviet surrounded the formulation of the referendum question [see below]. Ultimately, the deputies agreed on the following compromise:

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

Particular debate focused on the phrase "subject of international law," which opponents of the referendum interpreted to mean full independence and secession from Russia.

Tatarstan came under strong pressure from Moscow to change the wording; up until a few days before the voting, it seemed the deputies might be swayed but the republic's government and Supreme Soviet resisted all warnings and blandishments and remained committed to the wording of the question as originally formulated.

## THE PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS

Of the "pro-sovereignty," anti-Moscow forces, the Tatarstan Public Center is probably the most important of the political and cultural groups in Tatarstan. Headed by Kazan University Professor and parliamentary deputy Marat Mulyukov, the Public Center's stated goals are to make Tatar the official language of the republic, obtain "economic sovereignty" for Tatarstan, and promote the cultural and spiritual consolidation of Tatars throughout the [former] USSR. A more radical Tatar nationalist group is the *Ittafak* party; its leader Fauzia Bairamova told *U.S. New and World Report* (February 24, 1992) that "A real Tatar . . . will not besmirch the honor of the descendants of the warriors of Genghis Khan." Most people interviewed in Kazan claim this party's influence and popularity are limited. Other groups associated with the radical nationalist wing are the *Marjani Society* (after an 18th century Tatar theologian and educator) and the *Azatyk* (Freedom) youth movement.

The most prominent public organization opposing passage of the referendum was the Democratic Party of Russia (DPR), whose spokespersons in Tatarstan and Moscow have been especially critical of President Yeltsin's unwillingness to take stronger measures against the Tatarstan government and the referendum. A mostly Russian but multi-ethnic group known as *Soglasie* [Agreement] opposes secession and urged a "No" vote in the referendum, but is not as closely identified with Moscow as the DPR.

In the middle, but clearly supported by the majority of nationalists, are President Shamiyev and his administration. A former Republic Communist Party chairman who jailed six anti-coup demonstrators in August 1991, Shamiyev walks a moderate-nationalist line, expressing his dispute with Moscow not in ethnic, but in economic terms. At least as of March 1992, he had managed to effect a relatively "soft transition" to a market economy, an opinion frequently voiced with appreciation by the average citizen. Except for the Freedom Square incident of October 1991, ethnic confrontation in Tatarstan has been kept to a minimum.

These divisions are, broadly speaking, reflected in Tatarstan's parliament. The nationalists -- particularly from the Public Center -- are represented by the *Tatarstan* faction, while the "democrats"/*Soglasie* movement draws adherents from the deputies of the *Narodovlastie* (People's Power) caucus.

Members of the *Tatarstan* faction saw passage of the referendum as a necessary confirmation of the parliament's sovereignty declaration, although in conversation with Commission staff, they contended that they had not sought the referendum. Rather, they said they were responding to "negative propaganda" from the "neo-Bolsheviks" in the Russian government. The Russians, claimed the *Tatarstan* deputies, had not dealt in good faith with Tatarstan's government when the latter sought to correct past economic inequities and environmental deprivations. They emphasized their desire for a "single channel" budget system for Tatarstan, i.e., raising taxes in the republic, and contributing funds to the Russian Federation budget for specific functions delegated by Tatarstan to Russia, such as defense and foreign policy. The deputies voiced suspicion that Russia had already initiated a currency blockade, limiting the supply of rubles to Tatarstan banks. Those urging a Yes vote stressed the economic benefits Tatarstan would receive if Moscow's domination were lifted, arguing that the republic has great economic potential, especially given its oil reserves.

The *Tatarstan* deputies complained of "information terror" emanating from Moscow. They stressed that all claims of anti-Russian discrimination were nonsense, and pointed to the high proportion of mixed Tatar-Russian marriages: "How can I discriminate against my niece?" They have no intention of closing Russian schools or museums, they said -- they merely want to be treated equally, after centuries of Russian repression of Tatar culture.

In an interview, Farid Mukhametshin, Chairman of the parliament, made similar points. "We are not trying to break up Russia," he said, "but the Russians appear unwilling to negotiate seriously. Instead, we get criticism and charges of separatism." Tatar officials detailed their unhappiness about various aspects of the Federation Treaty proposed by Boris Yeltsin, *inter alia*: it had provisions on entering the Federation but not leaving; it gave budgetary priority to Russia, which also usurped control over the natural resources of autonomous republics; it subordinated law enforcement organs to Moscow, not Kazan. Still, Mukhametshin said if the referendum failed, Tatarstan would sign the Federation Treaty. If it passed, Tatarstan would press for a bi-lateral treaty, as stipulated in the referendum wording.

*Narodovlastie* legislators, in opposing passage, did not oppose the concept of greater sovereignty for Tatarstan -- everyone, they said, wants a "better deal" -- but they claimed that Tatarstan's visions of future wealth were illusory and argued that the republic receives more from Russia than it gives. More important, they asserted that the wording of the referendum could be used to legitimize secession. They said they supported holding a referendum, but had sought an "open, honest question" on the issue of remaining or leaving Tatarstan. *Narodovlastie* representatives who took part in the conference committee drafting the referendum question stated that they had reluctantly agreed to the wording of the referendum as a compromise to prevent a vote on what they claimed was a seriously flawed draft Tatarstan Constitution. The draft, they said, was written for a state *already* independent, contained no clear assurances of two state languages (Tatar and

Russian) or of dual citizenship, and only vaguely delineated functions between Moscow and Kazan. The deputies had also tried to insert the wording "within the composition (*sostav*) of Russia" but this had been rejected.

*Narodovlastie* deputies charged that the local media were entirely controlled by Shaymiyev's administration and naturally urged a Yes vote. They also felt that the increased national fervor accompanying the referendum was creating a schism between ethnic Russians and Tatars, and accused Shaymiyev of appointing far more Tatars than Russians to local administrative posts. One deputy noted the results of a public opinion survey indicating that support for Tatarstan's sovereignty had increased among Tatars over the previous year, while support among Russians had decreased significantly. Another deputy pointed to a statement attributed to President Shamiyev to the effect that if the referendum did not pass, ethnic violence might take place; he saw this a threat to non-Tatar voters.

Among those opposing passage of the referendum, a curious *de facto* coalition developed between anti-communist dissidents who view Shaymiyev as an old-line Communist Party apparatchik staking out his fiefdom in the post-Communist era, and the ubiquitous contingent of conservative Russophone residents opposing any changes in the status quo. The former group in this coalition tended to be younger.

## THE REFERENDUM LAW

The law on the referendum permitted voting by any citizen 18 years of age and older, excluding non-resident students and military personnel, the mentally incapacitated, and persons serving labor camp or prison sentences. As has been the practice throughout the former Soviet Union, election procedures, assignment of election districts, placement of polling stations and selection of election commission personnel generally adhered to previous practice under the *ancien regime*. The law also provided for government funding to organizations advocating both passage of the referendum and its defeat.

According to election officials in one of the Kazan city precincts, for the first time in the republic's history, persons held in investigative custody -- but not yet tried -- could vote, using the "mobile ballot box" traditionally used for elderly and infirm unable to visit the polling place in person.

## THE CAMPAIGN

The Tatarstan government headed by President Shaymiyev campaigned actively and effectively for passage, avoiding any appearance of inter-ethnic contention, and emphasizing the economic benefits of sovereignty. Shaymiyev was vigorously seconded by the parliamentary faction *Tatarstan*, whose members presented Commission staffers with crude, handpainted anti-passage leaflets that they claimed had been produced outside



Tatarstan in such cities as Moscow and Krasnodar. These posters depicted Russia exploding in the center (i.e., Tatarstan), or caricatures of prominent Tatar nationalists, like Bairamova, trying to cut the Tatarstan branch off the Russian tree.

Lively charges and counter-charges in the Moscow and Kazan mass media accompanied the campaign. Television coverage from Moscow frequently included editorial comment against the referendum. On the eve of the referendum, President Shaymiyev made a personal appeal on television for passage, while the *Narodovlastie* group announced that President Yeltsin would disclose what steps he would take to enforce the ruling of the Russian Constitutional Committee that the referendum was unconstitutional. But Yeltsin, en route to the CIS meeting in Kiev, merely pledged on Russian television that he [would] "not allow Tatarstan to leave the Russian Federation." It was reported that republic television did not broadcast Yeltsin's statement, but instead substituted his September 1990 call for Tatars to take as much independence as they wished.

There was no organized attempt to boycott the referendum. Local anarchists reportedly urged voters not to vote, but to bring their unmarked ballots to the statue of Mulla-Nur Vakhitov in the center of town to participate in a lottery for literature. As far as could be determined, no one did so.

A few days before the referendum, reports reached the West that CIS troops were being moved into the Mari Republic, north of Tatarstan, as a show of force to intimidate the Tatarstan government. A government official who contacted the local military command told Commission staff that he was satisfied with the explanation he was given: the troops were from Ukraine and had refused to take the oath of loyalty to Ukraine so they were being re-deployed in Mari.

## **THE "EXPLANATION"**

In response to charges by opponents that the referendum was a secession proposal in disguise, the Tatarstan parliament on March 16 issued a decree intended to explain the meaning of the wording. Posted in several of the polling places visited by Commission observers, the decree assured voters that: the referendum's goal was to confirm the August 1990 sovereignty decree, and the state separatism of Tatarstan or the alteration of Russia's borders was not at issue; Tatarstan guarantees all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion, equal rights, as well as dual citizenship; Tatar and Russian would have equal status as state languages, and the languages of all nationalities in Tatarstan would be preserved.

Opponents claimed, not unreasonably, that the posting by an interested party of this explanatory notice clearly designed to improve chances of passage was "indirectly electioneering" and a violation of the election law against campaigning at polling places. On the other hand, the document explicitly demonstrated government awareness of the

ambiguity of the referendum question and the perplexity and concern it had evoked among voters.

### **ELECTION DAY OBSERVATIONS**

Commission observers, together with Illinois State Senator John Nimrod (also invited by the Tatarstan government), observed a total of 10 polling places, seven in Kazan, two in the city of Pestretsy, about 30 miles east of Kazan, and one at a fur-producing kolkhoz on the road between the two cities.

Voting procedures were as follows: voters came to polling stations, presented their passports, received a ballot (they were available in Tatar and Russian), signed for the ballot, went into a curtained booth, made their choice -- which involved crossing out Yes or No, with the choice left unmarked expressing the voter's preference -- and deposited the marked ballot into a box. In some polling stations, election commission members guarded the box; in others, observers from political parties or groups did so, while in others, the ballot box was unguarded.

While there were no clear violations of Tatarstan's election law, staff observed a few irregularities vis-a-vis accepted international standards. As generally has been the case in voting in former Soviet republics, several family members, or entire families, could be seen in voting booths. At one polling place, two young men conferred on their ballots before entering the voting booth. At another, a woman took her ballot and stepped into an adjacent corridor for a long discussion with an acquaintance before casting her ballot. At the kolkhoz between Kazan and Pestretsy, election officials checked the identification only of those voters they did not know by sight; according to Article 30 of the Tatarstan election law, they are supposed to check each voter's passport. In general, however, these irregularities did not appear to be deliberate attempts to commit or tolerate fraud.

In most polling stations Commission staff visited, there were observers from various political groups and organizations, some local, others from Moscow. The observers included representatives of the Social-Democratic Party, the Tatar Public Center, Crimean Tatars, the Democratic Party of Russia, Yakutia, and "representatives of veterans and labor organizations." A DPR spokesman subsequently claimed that its observers had been harassed, detained and prevented from monitoring in some rural areas by police allegedly searching for drugs. The same group also expressed suspicion at the fact that in some regions, rural tallies were reported to electoral commissions before urban results. On the other hand, some observers, especially from non-Russian republics, such as representatives of *Rukh* in Ukraine, asserted that the voting had gone well and that they had seen no irregularities. (Some also subsequently spoke out in support of the referendum and Tatar aspirations generally.)

## THE RESULTS

According to the official tabulation, 81.7 percent of the eligible voters took part in the referendum. Of these, 1,309,560 or 61.4 percent voted in favor, with 794,444 or 37.2 percent against. According to the *Interfax* news agency, the proposal was voted down, 51.2 percent to 46.8 percent in Kazan. In several other cities where ethnic Russians dominate or form a significant minority, the proposal either lost or barely passed. All in all, urban regions passed the measure by 58.7 percent to 43, rural regions by 75.3 percent to 23.8. In the five districts of 43 where Russians form the majority, and in the capital, Kazan, the referendum went down to defeat.

## POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Support for a Yes vote apparently flowed from several considerations, namely:

- Shaymiyev's authority. Charges that "he backed the coup" -- which have had a relatively short half-life in any event -- appeared not to sway the public in Tatarstan, where, as mentioned, the citizens have up until now not suffered economically as much as in other regions.
- Opposition to Moscow's economic exploitation. All the local players, including Russians, believe that Tatarstan has been exploited by Moscow, and some voters clearly felt that sovereignty, however defined, will bring a "better deal" for Tatarstan.
- National sympathies. The overwhelming pluralities in rural, Tatar-ethnic regions reflect years of pent up resentment against Russia's -- Tsarist and Communist -- "colonialist" policies and the current upsurge of Tatar national feeling.
- The government's "explanation" that the referendum was not about secession from Russia may have reassured voters. A poll published by *Vechernaya Kazan'* a few days before the referendum indicated that the referendum as framed would win by a 16 point margin, with 22 percent of voters undecided. A straight up-and-down vote on independence would lose, however, by a wide margin. Some Russian voters told Commission staff they believed the government's assurances that Tatarstan would not leave Russia.
- Threat of ethnic violence. Non-Tatar voters may have decided to trust the Shamiyev administration's ability to keep the lid on ethnic unrest rather than risk a possible violent reaction by Tatar nationalists had the referendum lost.

