

# **The Potential of Radical Islam in Tatarstan**

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper evaluates the prospects for the spread of radical Islam in the Volga-Ural region of the Russian Federation. Although my focus is on the Republic of Tatarstan, the case of the neighboring Republic of Bashkortostan is used as an auxiliary contrast case and the conclusions of the paper can be generalized to both republics.

By radical Islam I refer to what is commonly known as «wahhabism» in Russia and «salafite jihadist movement» in the West. According to Marietta Stepaniants, a prominent Russian scholar of Islam, the distinguishing features of «wahhabism» are «aggressive interference into the realm of politics, strong objection to the separation of the state from religion, idealization of Islam of the time of its original emergence, intolerance to any dissidence, ... hostility to non-Muslims, and determination to use violent, even armed, means for their ends».<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to such places as Dagestan, Chechnya, or Ingushetia, the current situation in the Volga-Ural region is far more stable to such extent that wide-spread proliferation of radical Islam there may seem unlikely. A part of this difference may be explained by the respective levels of modernization of the two regions. My comparison of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, however, reveals that there are also other drivers of «wahhabism» that may contribute to the rise of radical Islam even in that relatively secularized region. Among them are inequalities resulting from the painful social transformation of the past twenty years, diffusion of radical ideas from the Middle East, competition between various Muslim clerics for power and money, and the policies of the republics' government. In most of these aspects, the two republics are very similar. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Stepaniants. *Religiia i identichnost' v Rossii*, Moscow, 2003. p. 11.

policies of the two republics' governments with respect to the Muslim organizations have diverged in the period between 1992 and 1998; whereas only one organization recognized and backed by the government has survived in Tatarstan, two rival organizations are continuing in Bashkortostan. Although the religious schism in that republic runs mostly along ethnic boundaries (between Tatars and Bashkorts), it does allow those clerics who feel alienated in one organization to switch to an alternative organization. Another result of the comparison is that the combination of the ethnic divide with the organizational divide in Bashkortostan in effect complicates an alliance of religion and nationalism (Islam being claimed as a resource by two competing ethnic groups), whereas the exclusivity of religious organization in Tatarstan is matched by close correspondence between nationhood and religion there. This facilitates an alliance of non-coopted nationalists with alienated Muslim clerics in Tatarstan where political Islam has a potential to emerge as a powerful force and maybe eventually even to supercede secular nationalism.

My periodization of the Islamic renaissance in Tatarstan is predicated on the combination of external actors who controlled the Islamic organizations in each particular period. Before c. 1989 the freedom of religious organization was severely restricted by the Council on Religious Affairs, a Soviet government agency. In 1989-1994 the vacuum of authority and the collapse of the Soviet state led to an ideological crisis, which prompted a search for alternative ideologies and, in particular, a surge in religious attendance. Two most important actors in that period were the nationalist Tatar and Bashkort organizations, and, since about 1992, foreign Muslim charities. The combined effort of the nationalist organizations and of the charities precipitated a split within the Muslim authorities in both republics; republic-level Muslim authorities backed by the nationalist movements emerged as an alternative to the old Muslim Spiritual Board of European Russia and Siberia (DUMES). At about the same time, various business groups emerge as an alternative sponsor of some Muslim parishes. In 1994, the Tatarstani leadership, having concluded a power-sharing treaty with Moscow, cracked down on the independent organizations and individuals that

were instrumental in autonomization of Tatarstan, including both nationalists and Muslims. By 1998, the republic's leadership has ensured that only one religious organization (the new one) remained in Tatarstan and that its leader is their man through and through. Meanwhile, two Muslim organizations continue to exist in Bashkortostan; the old one represents the interests of the Tatar «minority» (who are actually more numerous than the Bashkorts) and the new one of the Bashkort nationalists. Finally, since about 2000, a new old actor has re-emerged on the stage: the Russian state. Thus, at this moment, the most relevant actors are the republic-level government and the federal government. In addition, nationalist, foreign and and local business sponsors remain on the margins.

My studies show that the organizations backed by nationalists are more likely to contribute to the emergence of radical Islam in the region. They also show that, for a variety of factors, proliferation of radical Islam is somewhat more likely in Tatarstan than in Bashkortostan. It seems that at least some nationalists in Tatarstan recognize this danger and criticize the Muslim authorities of their republic. At the same time, they do not link this danger with the policy of religious monopoly pursued by the republic's leadership.

Revitalization of Islam in Tatarstan dates back to the perestroika of the late 1980s. It was a part of a more general process of searching for new ideological alternatives that involved all peoples of the USSR. Islam was an important tool of the Tatar national movement that served to reinforce a distinct Tatar identity and demands for greater autonomy or independence. The most common approach at that time was to restore Islam as a conservative national tradition, a set of certain popular rites. Islam then was not yet an independent political force. The national movement used Muslim symbols, such as green flags and traditional hats, instrumentally, to back up their political demands with claims of national authenticity.

Some scholars draw direct parallels between the leaders of the national movement in the late 1980s and the so called “national communists” of the 1920s who strategically used Communist rhetoric to legitimate their demands of greater autonomy for their peoples.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the Islamic renaissance of the late 1980s was an important asset in the struggle to promote autonomy of the Muslim republics of the Russian Federation. The instrumentalist role of Islam is exemplified by numerous instances of its noncanonical usage, such as reciting prayers in theaters and staging theatrical shows devoted to the feast of Ramadan and the feast of Sacrifice and played on stadiums or in the streets near national monuments. For instance, the first public celebration of the feast of Ramadan in the city of Kazan on April 16, 1991 culminated in a procession of thousands of people to the Freedom Square chanting slogans of the national movement.<sup>3</sup> Since mid-1990s such public celebrations of religious holidays have become rare. Rather, celebrations have become private and local. The only public component left is formal greetings published in the press on the occasion of a religious holiday. The Russian language newspapers of Tatarstan sometimes totally ignore them. At the same time there has emerged a strand of Islam that is self-sufficient, independent of either the

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2 Мухаметшин Р. Ислам в общественной и политической жизни татар и Татарстана в XX веке. – Казань: Татар. кн. изд-во, 2005. – С. 122.

3 Суверенный Татарстан. – М., 1998. – Т.1 Суверенизация и движение к национально-культурной автономии. – С. 238.

remnants of the nationalist movement or the local government. Moreover, this strand of Islam has recently exhibited some political ambitions.

During Gorbachev's era of perestroika and glasnost, the renaissance of Islam in the Volga-Ural region proceeded under the leadership of Talgat Tajutdin, an outstanding and controversial Islamic leader of Russia who at the time was the head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of European Russia and Siberia (DUMES)<sup>4</sup>. The ideological crisis of Communism precipitated a surge of interest towards religion in general and Islam in particular. On the wave of this interest, Mr. Tajutdin quickly turned from a relatively obscure figure into an enormously popular leader. His charismatic power was based in part on his skill as a public speaker. Equally eloquent in both Tatar and Russian, he is able to command attention and emotion of huge crowds of people. He is also one of the few Muslim leaders in Russia who has completed a full course of theological studies at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Egypt.

Mr. Tajutdin's position of spiritual leadership was complemented by substantial financial resources coming from a surge of sales of religious literature some of which was freely donated by foreign charities that emerged on the scene just before the Soviet collapse of 1991. These proceeds were de facto at his personal disposal as he was the main Muslim in charge. Furthermore, as he re-established the medrese in Ufa, the city of his residence, in 1988, he had educated about eighty Russian Muslim scholars by 1992<sup>5</sup>. That was ostensibly bound to further increase Mr. Tajutdin's position of supremacy as the principal Muslim leader in Russia.

Ironically, it was his own disciples who staged a rebellion that put an end to Mr. Tajutdin's monopoly on Islam in his own diocese. Among them were Nurmammed Nigmatullin and Ayup Bibarsov (now head and deputy head of the Bashkortostan DUM, respectively), Gusman Iskhakov (now the head of the Tatarstan DUM), and Nafigulla Ashirov (now the head of the Siberian DUM

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4 The authority of that body did not extend to the area of the Caucasus.

5 Галлямов, Рушан (2007). Исламское возрождение в Волгоуральском макрорегионе: Сравнительный анализ моделей Башкортостана и Татарстана.// Ислам от Каспия до Урала: макрорегиональный подход. Саппоро (Япония): Центр славянских исследований Университета Хоккайдо.

and formerly Talgat Tajutdin's deputy). Typically, experts find the reasons for the rebellion in Mr. Tajutdin's bad temper and authoritarian style. However, I cannot help but notice that a whole new constellation of various interests and actors at that time was bound to challenge the Soviet-era centralized Muslim authority.

On the one hand, Mr. Tajutdin's relationship with foreign Muslim charities was indeed strained by his absolutely clear intention to keep things under his own control and, in particular, not to allow propagation of ideas that he found incongruent with the local religious tradition. On the other hand, the nationalist movements in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan appreciated the symbolic power of religion and wished to establish independent Muslim structures in their republics to match their increased degree of autonomy from the federal center. Furthermore, the erstwhile disciples and then subordinates of Mr. Tajutdin strived to tap into the financial flows that he continued to tightly control even after the abolition of the Soviet-era Council on Religious Affairs in Moscow.

On the 2nd International Islamic Forum “The Islamic Education in East Europe and Muslim States” held in Moscow on September 28 – October 1, 1992, the leaders of international Muslim organizations concluded agreements with the would-be leaders of new Russian Muslim organizations on financing them, sending them teachers, and receiving their students at the Islamic universities abroad. On the same forum, the Saudi representatives gave away fifteen libraries of (mostly) Salafite literature. According to Valliulla Yakupov, the Saudi delegations hinted at generous assistance should an organization alternative to the Ufa Muslim headquarters emerge<sup>6</sup>. Disagreement among the Tatar and Bashkort clerics as to how the spoils should be divided greatly contributed to the heat surrounding the ensuing schism later that year. The schism did not involve much of a theological debate; the rebellious imams could not find a better reason to anathemize Mr. Tajutdin than a mosque built in Tatarstan and decorated with Christian and Judaic symbols.

Thus in 1992 there emerge independent Spiritual Boards of Muslims of Tatarstan and of

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6 V. Ya. Yakupov. *Islamskii komponent gosudarstvenno-konfessional'nykh otnoshenii v Tatarstane v 90-e gody XX veka (istoriko-politicheskii analiz)*. Cand. Sc. dissertation defended at the Sh. Mardjani Institute of History, Tatarstan Academy of Sciences. Kazan, 2004, p. 34.

Bashkortostan. Apparently, the Tatar and Bashkort nationalists played a substantial role in the process. Tatar nationalists, in particular, called on Mr. Tajutdin to relocate his headquarters from Ufa in Bashkortostan to Kazan, the capital city of Tatarstan, because, according to them, the coming secession of Tatarstan from Russia would require independent religious structures. Mr. Tajutdin declined those calls and instead established an office of his representative in Kazan, which reinforced the nationalists' motivation to establish an independent religious authority. In Bashkortostan, ironically, the Bashkort nationalists perceived Mr. Tajutdin as a Tatar leader intent to preserve the dominance of Tatars in Islam. But that the split in both republics occurred only after the above mentioned conference suggests that the energy of the nationalist movements alone would probably be insufficient without financial backing from abroad.

BY THE TIME OF THE SCHISM, creation of new Muslim parishes and construction of mosques had been extensively proceeding in both republics. The number of Muslim parishes in Tatarstan had increased from 18 in 1988 to more than 700 in 1992 and by far outpaced the growth of Orthodox Christian parishes in the republic (which had also spectacularly grown by the factor of 17 in the same period). Since mid-nineties more than half of the population have been declaring themselves believers, with Tatars, again, yielding somewhat higher percentage than Russians<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, the number of Muslim parishes in Bashkortostan has increased from about two dozen in 1988 to almost 800 in 2004, the most rapid proliferation occurred in the early nineties<sup>8</sup>. This extensive growth took place in spite of drastic shortage of properly educated imams who could fill the new vacancies. For instance, in Tatarstan, as of 1990, of the 55 total imams 41 were older than 60 years of age, only one had university-level theological education and only eight had secondary (high-school level) Muslim education. That reflected the Soviet-era policies when religious

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7 R. Musina. Etnokonfessional'nye osobennosti i faktory formirovaniia grazhdanskoi identichnosti. In *Federalizm v Rossii*. Kazan, 2001. P. 208.

8 Competition between two rival Muslim organizations in Bashkortostan probably contributed to a somewhat larger number of parishes compared to Tatarstan. As many as 62% parishes in Tajutdin's jurisdiction are not registered by the government, whereas 75% of parishes in the rival organization are.

education was rather difficult to obtain and religion itself barely survived. Throughout most of the Soviet period the Tatar and Bashkort religious leaders got their education in Uzbekistan, which had become an independent state in 1991. To repair the situation, high-school level medrese had been re-established in Bashkortostan in 1988 for the first time since the early 20th century. In 1990, two Muslim secondary schools had also emerged in Tatarstan. Such was the legacy left by Mr. Tajutdin by 1992.

OPPORTUNITIES CREATED BY YOUNG RUSSIAN CAPITALISM typically absorb most talented young people into secular career paths. From my interviews with young imams and shakirds (Islamic students) I gather that their intellectual level, with few exceptions, is not very high. Many of them got their education in vocation schools and some have not even completed secondary education. This includes some of those who later studied in foreign Islamic institutions. No wonder that one young imam interviewed in a small town in Tatarstan asserts that women should cover their hair, arms, legs, and belly because otherwise they will get harmed by some cosmic rays.

General level of interest towards religion is restricted mostly to some symbolic and cultural issues. Whereas the Muslims of the North Caucasus, especially in its eastern part, according to some studies have almost fully restituted the number of mosques and Islamic schools to the pre-1917 level<sup>9</sup>, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, in spite of an extensive growth of religious awareness in the nineties, are still far behind. For instance, in Dagestan alone with 1.5 million «titular» Muslims there are 1,569 Muslim parishes and 149 secondary and university-level Islamic schools; that is more than in combined Tatarstan and Bashkortostan with about 4 million «titular» Muslims. Before 1917, Bashkortostan alone had 2,500 mosques<sup>10</sup> whereas the current number of parishes is less

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9 См.: Макаров Д. Радикальный ислаимзм в российских регионах: общее и особенное (на примере Дагестана, Кабардино-Балкарии, Карачаево-Черкесии и Татарстана) // Ислам в советском и постсоветском пространстве. - Казань.2001, С.49-51.

10 Юлдашбаев Б.Х. Башкиры и Башкортостан. XX век: этностатистика. Уфа, 1996. – С.53.



than 800. It seems that a career of a Muslim scholar is far more attractive in such places as Dagestan than in the Volga-Ural region.

Nevertheless, religion in the Volga-Urals region does have some symbolic importance and therefore a career of a Muslim cleric might seem attractive to some ambitious young people, especially in the context of the turbulent early nineties when religion and politics often intersected. On the wave of religious renaissance, a young man considering this kind of career might forecast not too difficult a job, a reasonable degree of wealth, public respect, and security. The reality by 1992, however, had proved to be different. Whereas before 1917 imams could earn their living in their religious communities, these days they are dependent on external sources of support. A great number of mosques built in the period of extensive growth do not attract enough believers to sustain them. Small parishes cannot support their imams. It is interesting therefore, that most interviewees believe that the state must support imams and pay them wages, even though they are aware of the constitutional provision on separation of religion from the state. Generally, a desire to upgrade their own social status was a factor in politicization of Islam in the region. That was the context in which the religious schism took place.

There have been a number of explanations provided for the split in the literature. However, it seems that the authors' motivation, typically, was not so much to explain the split but rather to justify it.<sup>11</sup> Let me list the reasons for the split as I see them. The major reason was the struggle for power between the old leadership and the younger imams whose ambitions were not satisfied in the old Muslim authority. Furthermore, the struggle was precipitated by the emergence of significant material resources, such as the real estate and monetary flows, tightly controlled by the old religious authority.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the struggle took place mostly on the level of the top hierarchy, whereas on the county level and even more so on the local level it occurred only inasmuch as it was ordered

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11 См. Д.Исхаков, Р.Мухаметшин, Р.Набиев, А.Юнусова.

12 Cf. Юнусова А.Б. Ислам в Башкортостане, С.286

from above. Incidentally, the absolute majority of the interviewed imams and shakirds have a negative attitude towards «regionalization» of the Islamic authorities. It seems that the only exception to the rule are those people who in fact belong to the leaders of the newly independent structures.

Secondly, in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan the struggle between imams was conditioned by the nationalist political context. According to Damir Iskhakov, an ideologue of the Tatar national movement, «the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan, although an independent organization, developed as a faction of the national movement.»<sup>13</sup> Radical nationalists from the Milli Mejlis and the Ittifaq party were particularly bitter about Mr. Tajutdin's failure to cooperate, including his refusal to move his headquarters from Bashkortostan to Tatarstan and his failure to openly support their bid for Tatarstan's independence from Russia. Likewise, in Bashkortostan, the founders of the DUM RB were the Bashkort Popular Center «Ural» and the Bashkort People's Party, i.e. nationalist Bashkort organizations. On the other hand, the Tatar Public Center of Bashkortostan was against the split and in support of Mr. Tajutdin.<sup>14</sup> Later on, the ethnic component of the split in Bashkortostan ceased to be as salient as it originally was, but nevertheless the Bashkortostan parishes under Mr. Tajutdin's control consist mostly of ethnic Tatars.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the second major reason of the schism is to be found in the interests of the nationalist movements and of the two republics' authorities. The political elite of the «sovereign» republics needed the ideological support of the traditional religion. Mr. Tajutdin, however, distanced himself from what at that time were in fact separatist movements and from the two presidents who were trying to ride the two nationalist waves. Furthermore, as a very popular leader in both republics, Mr. Tajutdin could be viewed as a potentially dangerous political rival, especially in Tatarstan where he was elected the most popular Tatar of 1989. Therefore, Tatarstan's leadership took the side of the alternative Muslim authority, the DUM of RT. The supporters of Mr. Tajutdin were

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13 Мухаметшин Р. Указ. соч., С. 250-251

14 Этнополитическая мозаика Башкоргостана: Очерки. Документы.Хроника. - М. 1992. - т.2 - С. 250-251

15 Юнусова А. Ислам в Башкоргостане, С.291

softly repressed and by 1999 there were virtually no parishes under his control and very few open supporters in the republic.

The situation in Bashkortostan is quite different. Firstly, Mr. Tajutdin's headquarters are located in its capital city, which on the one hand provides a symbolic status to the republic as the center of the Russian Islam. The mufti's refusal to move his headquarters to Kazan, negatively taken in Tatarstan, could be appreciated by the leadership of Bashkortostan. On the other hand, the location of the headquarters in Ufa makes it logistically simpler for the supporters of Mr. Tajutdin to mobilize locally and defend their interests in the republic. Secondly, Mr. Tajutdin drawing on the negative experience in Tatarstan made an effort to engage President Rahimov of Bashkortostan in order to secure his neutrality, if not support. Therefore, his position in that republic, although still disadvantaged, is far better than in Tatarstan. Mr. Tajutdin's TsDUM as of March 1, 2004 controls 490 parishes in Bashkortostan, although with only 184 of them registered by the government, whereas the DUM RB controls about 300 parishes, 227 of which are registered. Registration or lack thereof indicates the local authorities' attitude to the two religious organizations. Incidentally, the unusually short time taken to register the new religious organizations in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan at the moment of their inception in late 1992 is also an interesting fact suggesting they had chosen against Mr. Tajutdin's authority a long time ago. Several imams in Bashkortostan subordinated to Mr. Tajutdin's TsDUM told stories of how DUM RT tried to seize their mosques with the help of county or city administration. At least one of them has beat back several such attempts.

Finally, as I have mentioned earlier, the third major factor in the religious schism was conditioned by increasing resources at the disposal of the Muslim authorities which the younger imams would like to take control of. Encouragement from the foreign sponsors in 1992 might have proven to be the decisive last straw.

AFTER THE SPLIT the pace of the Islamic renaissance slowed down but still continued. The number of parishes in Tatarstan at this time is about a thousand. The slower pace may be explained by the satiation of the population of the faithful with religious organizations and perhaps also by diversion of the resources to factional struggle. The latter worked to further politicize the Islamic religion in the Volga-Ural region.<sup>16</sup> Most imams (about 2/3) in my small sample in both Tatarstan and Bashkortostan think negatively about politicization of Islam, although all agree that Muslim authorities should be involved on the level of local communities. (Thus, if Islamic renaissance continued, the local religious community could eventually become an important element of the civil society.) However, many younger imams, also believe that Muslim authorities should participate in politics, some of them actually saying that «Islam is politics». To the contrary, the supporters of Mr. Tajutdin are typically against politicization of Islam. (To be fair, some of them are against politics as such, for instance, against political parties that supposedly destroy the unity of people.)<sup>17</sup> Anyway, Islam has so far been rather weak in the Russian political context. Indeed, in all national and provincial elections in post-Soviet Russia the Muslim parties could not create a stable political party to represent their interests, even at the time when the degree of political freedom could permit such a party in principle. (The current federal legislation bans religious and ethnic parties.)

Nevertheless, in some sense politicization of Islam has taken place. Firstly, bitter debate between the rival religious organizations taken place publicly, with appellation to authorities is an indication of such politicization. Secondly, provincial Muslim authorities in the region are under the control of the provincial government. Imams themselves are recruited by the republics' authorities for various political actions, including rallies and elections inasmuch as the symbolic resource of Islam is a valuable asset. It was especially evident during the fall 2003 presidential elections in Bashkortostan when all of the sudden the elections seemed really competitive, for the

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16 Nail Mukharyamov distinguishes between politicization of Islam, which in his opinion has taken place, and islamization of politics, which may happen some time in the future. Мухарьямов Н. Ислам в Поволжье: политизация несостоявшаяся или отложенная? // Ислам от Каспия до Урала: макрорегиональный подход. Саппоро (Япония): Центр славянских исследований Университета Хоккайдо, 2007.

17 Мухаметшин Р. На путях к конфессиональной политике: ислам в Татарстане // Преодолевая государственно-конфессиональные отношения. Н.Новгород: 2003, С.193-194.

first time in ten years. Imams supported different parties, depending on their own preferences but also on who the benefactor of their parish was, sometimes engaging in public discussions with each other. Last, but not least, is the financial and administrative support, especially strong in Tatarstan, provided by the republic-level government to its favorite religious organization, which is in fact just another form of the government control. Direct evidence is scarce, although the people I talked with agree that Mintemir Shaimiev's administration creates strong «incentives» for the local entrepreneurs to support parishes, mosques, and DUM RT itself. Regardless, there are some realities one cannot help but notice in Tatarstan that witness to its administration's partiality to the competing religious organizations. One such reality, for instance, is the pro-active stance of Mr. Shaimiev's administration in the «unification» congress of the Tatarstan Muslims in February 1998 in which they in effect «helped» choose the right leaders of the DUM RT.<sup>18</sup> After the congress the DUM RT got a very nice building in the downtown Kazan for its headquarters and direct investment from the republic's budget.<sup>19</sup> In June 1999 the Republic of Tatarstan adopted the Law On Freedom of Confession and Religious Organization whose Article 10 stated that «the Muslim religious organizations are directed by one centralized religious organization, the DUM RT.»<sup>20</sup> In effect, the Law on Freedom of Religious Organization was a misnomer, as it banned all Muslim organizations but the one recognized and supported by the authorities. The republic's leadership, in fact, took the traditional Russian approach to religion whereby a centralized religious authority works as a government agency. All parishes remaining under Mr. Tajutdin's TsDUM or under other alternative leaders were forcefully transferred to DUM RT.<sup>21</sup>

The government in Tatarstan also tries to finance parish-level imams, for instance, by making them a part of staff in agricultural enterprises where they are responsible for «spiritual education».

They also introduced the *waqf* system (Arabic *waqf*, or in Tatar *waqyf*, refers to public property

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18 Мухаметшин Р. Татары и ислам в XX веке, Казань 2003, С.175-216

19 Мухаметшин Р. Татары и ислам в XX веке, Казань 2003, С.194-204

20 См. Мухаметшин Р. Указ.соч.-С.199; Набиев Р.Р. Оттенки зеленого цвета: развитие ислама в Волжско-Камском регионе // Ислам в советском и постсоветском пространстве, С-112-115.

21 Article 10 was eventually abolished in 2004 under the pressure of alienated imams who appealed to the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation.

belonging to a religious community the profit from which, among other things, pays their imam).<sup>22</sup> Still, these measures cannot deliver high living standards to most imams. Therefore a typical village imam is an older person retired from a regular job who is ready to work for food and small money. Some of them, incidentally, are former Communist party officials, which most people think is just fine.

Under such circumstances extra money offered by foreign charities remain a very important resource both for official religious authorities and even more so for those imams who are not supported by the Tatarstan's leadership. Generally, the influence of foreign Islamic organizations on Mr. Tajutdin's TsDUM is by far smaller. He keeps an especially good distance from people coming from Saudi Arabia and calls to conduct studies abroad only in the Sunni countries of the Hanafi tradition (to which most Russian Muslims also belong), such as Turkey and Egypt. This is also where he invites foreign instructors from, although he emphasizes the need to rely on local instructors when teaching the basic principles of Islam. In the alternative religious structures both in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan there is some evidence of Saudi presence. For instance, interviewees in Bashkortostan report that some mosques currently under construction are being financed from there. In Tatarstan the situation in this respect is similar. A senior Muslim cleric in Kazan, in a personal interview noted that radical Islamists expand their influence by paying money to imams (typically, in rural areas), effectively buying out their mosques: "They start helping [an imam] with money and then he gets attached to them. To leave them then [becomes] difficult or impossible." Iskhak Lotfullin, the imam-hatib of a Kazan mosque told a similar story to a correspondent of the Moscow *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*. According to him, Arab and local radical Islamists, once they have bought a mosque out, organize prayers after their own custom. He accused the current mufti in getting kickbacks from such deals and also said that: "Mufti Gusman [Iskhakov] has made me an offer to pass my mosque to his men."<sup>23</sup> Damir Iskhakov noted in

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22 Мухаметшин Р. Татары и ислам в XX веке, С.214.

23 Postnova, V. Мечети обороняются от ваххабизма// Независимая газета. - 280 (3393) 24 декабря 2004

*Zvezda Povolzh'ia* in the days of the millennium celebration of Kazan that the first prayer in the grand Kul Sharif mosque was conducted according to the Salafite custom, rather than the traditional Hanafi style.

Another fact I find significant is that generally there is very little overt theological disagreement or discussion between the rival Muslim organizations, and yet the hottest critics of «Euroislam» (a less dogmatic and more compatible with the Western civilization version) proposed by Rafael Hakimov are Valiulla Yakupov and Mukkadas Bibarsov, both senior clerics in the structures independent of Mr. Tajutdin's TsDUM.

ANOTHER IMPORTANT FACTOR is the consolidation of political power in Tatarstan after 1994. By the time of the religious split in late 1992 the Tatarstan leadership no longer saw the feeble federal center as a major threat to its power. Even though Mr. Shaimiev supported the August 1991 coup, Mr. Yeltsin proved unable to remove him in the wake of his victory in Moscow. The strong support rendered to Mr. Shaimiev by the Tatar nationalist movement made him invulnerable against the ire of the federal president.<sup>24</sup> Rather, Shaimiev saw the major threat to his grip on power in the popular nationalist leaders who he deemed too popular. Consequently, as soon as he had secured a number of privileges for his republic by concluding a very favorable treaty with Moscow in 1994, his policies with respect to the nationalist movement changed. He continued co-optation into his government of those nationalists who he deemed less dangerous and sought to marginalize those he felt he could not trust. Among the latter happened to be the most popular nationalist leader Fauziya Bairamova (elected the Tatar Woman of 1990), the chairman of the *Ittifak* party. Soft repression against her and her associates included the closure of her party office in Kazan in 1995 and of the *Altyn Urda* newspaper in 1996.

Likewise, Mr. Shaimiev wanted to ensure political control over the continuing religious renaissance. Once a local Muslim governing body had been established, Mr. Shaimiev chose to

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24 Якупова В. 100 историй о суверенитете. Казань, «Идел-Пресс», 2001. – С. 99-102.

support it to the detriment of the Soviet-era Islamic leader Talgat Tajutdin. Consequently, the 1992 schism among the Muslims of Tatarstan had been overcome by soft repression of those who chose to stay loyal to Mr. Tajutdin. The process was accompanied by a campaign against Mr. Tajutdin in the local press, including the government newspaper *Watanym Tatarstan*. Seizure of mosques and other premises by the supporters of the new Tatarstani mufti followed. In January 1995 a Congress of Tatarstani Muslims recognized the new status quo.

However, the head of the newly established religious body, Gabdulla Galiulla, very soon found that the republic's leadership would not tolerate independent political actors in Tatarstan. His attempt to seize another mosque and a Muslim school in the city of Kazan in the fall of 1995 suddenly resulted in a criminal case opened against him. His position of leadership was shaken and in February 1998 another cleric, Gusman Iskhakov, with support from Mr. Shaimiev was elected the republic's mufti. Mr. Galiulla condemned the government interference and got support from the opposition nationalist parties including *Ittifak* and *Milli Mejlis*. According to him, the county-level government leaders handpicked delegates to the Congress and instructed them on who they should support in the elections.

Even before he was ousted, Mr. Galiulla initiated a rapprochement with the opposition nationalist forces to strengthen his position within the republic: in 1996 he became the head of the "Tatarstan Muslims" movement and later, in 1998, attempted to participate in the local elections as the leader of the *Omet* movement and a member of the Popular Patriotic Union of Russia. However, the authoritarian nature of the local government left no chance to any opposition leader to win elections in the republic. At that time all heads of the county-level government had become members of the local legislature. Tatarstan had turned into one of the least democratic regions of Russia.<sup>25</sup> In 1999, Mr. Galiulla initiated a hunger strike to demand a change of the electoral law of the republic. Representatives of fifteen opposition parties and movements, including *Ittifak*, *Milli*

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25 Социальный атлас российских регионов// Независимый институт социальной политики.  
<http://atlas.socpol.ru/portraits/tatar.shtml>



*Mejlis*, and *Omet*, organized a demonstration in his support and against the authoritarian rule of Mr. Shaimiev.

Meanwhile, Gusman Iskhakov quickly consolidated his position of leadership, thanks to a strong backing from the local government. And he knows very well that his leadership depends on Mr. Shaimiev's support. As the Chairman of the Milli Mejlis party writes: "[Gusman Iskhakov] was and still is an obedient tool of the authorities."<sup>26</sup> The domination of Mr. Shaimiev, a secular leader, in religious matters is exemplified by his personal choice of an imam for the newly opened Kul Sharif grand mosque in Kazan in 2005. Political loyalty of the current mufti has won him a second re-election in February 2006, in spite of the rule that no more than two consecutive elections are possible and even though local nationalists, including some of those co-opted in the government, unleashed a vicious campaign against him on the eve of the elections.<sup>27</sup> It also allowed him to make a personal fortune of the money gotten from various foreign charities and remain unaccountable.

YET ANOTHER COMPLICATING CIRCUMSTANCE is the complex relationship between the federal center and the provinces under President Putin. The center's demand to bring local laws in agreement with the Russian federal laws (1999), imposition of the seven federal districts that brought together various provinces and introduction of plenipotentiary representatives of the Russian president in those districts (2000), cancellation of some rights of the local government (in particular, with respect to use of natural resources), increasing share of taxes to be paid to Moscow, and finally cancellation of the gubernatorial elections combined with the right of the Russian president to disband regional legislatures (2005) makes one discern the growth of unitary if not authoritarian trends. People in those ethnic republics that are economically advanced and/or rich in natural resources, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, have exhibited particular

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26 Амирханов И. Какой муфтий нам нужен?// Звезда Поволжья. – 2006. – 9-15 февраля (№ 5(308))

27 See for instance: Исхаков Д. Угроза фундаментализма в Татарстане// Звезда Поволжья. - № 4 (307). – 2-8 февраля 2006 г.

displeasure with the newly emerging Russian political system. In addition to economical complaints, the political actors in such provinces also grumble against what they see as Moscow's attempt to undermine their nationhood. Nevertheless, the republics seem to have given in for the time being, although there have been quite a few episodes in the past fifteen years when local elite did use ethnic and religious differences to advance their position in the federation. Ten-thousand-strong demonstrations are still fresh in people's memory. Separatist ideas are still found in the local press and sometimes seem to have an unofficial blessing of some local officials. The current situation is that of a frail balance between local religious and nationalist activists, the local government, and the federal center.

The position of the ruling elite in Tatarstan is, generally, to protect and expand the powers of the local government. To quote Rafael Hakimov, a political advisor to President Shaimiev of Tatarstan: "Ceding regional powers to the federal center was obviously a losing strategy, it has become almost a nightmare now." Yet the end result of Mr. Shaimiev's policies of the nineties whereby he was able to subdue and marginalize the nationalist movement and secure his own grip on political power in the republic, even as he boosted the status of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation, is a political void. Although the status of the republic was temporarily elevated, elimination of the nationalist mass movement tipped the balance of power toward the federal center by the late 1990s. Consequently, it was hard for the republic's leadership to rely on the power of nationalism when President Putin started to revise the relationship between Moscow and ethnic republics like Tatarstan. Indeed, Moscow feels so secure that it has recently found it safe to return some powers back to its provinces. This issue was further discussed on a special session of the State Council (gubernatorial assembly) in Kazan, during the celebrations of its millennium in August 2005. Tatarstan remains the only republic in Russia, except Chechnya, bound with Russia by a special power-sharing treaty.

The example of Chechnya was also important in that Putin's resolution in fighting the

second Chechen war inhibited the leadership of Tatarstan from rekindling nationalist mobilization. In trying to resolve the Chechen standoff, Putin chose a tough approach that did not cost him popular support. For President Shaimiev, this made a possible reinvigoration of the Tatar nationalist movement he had undermined a doubly dangerous strategy, as he risked the retaliation of both frustrated nationalist leaders and the consolidated center. Finally, the example of Chechnya was important for Mr. Shaimiev because it showed how a popular movement might oust regional leaders. Being an authoritarian ruler might make Putin's authoritarianism look like a lesser evil compared to an unpredictable grass-root movement.

THE EMERGENCE OF RADICAL ISLAM among a once thoroughly secular people is a nascent phenomenon, at this point only a remote possibility. Tatar leaders might use their Islamic identity for instrumental reasons on the global stage and did so on numerous occasions. Islam in the post-Soviet context is an important asset for Tatar leaders, and may prove instrumental for achieving their symbolic interests and maybe even economic interests in various Muslim countries. Emphasis on Islamic solidarity may be interpreted as a tool to ensure a privileged position in a world that has not been very generous to Tatars.

The pressure of the federal center to curb the powers of the local government may exacerbate the situation in the republic even though the leadership is afraid of, and attempts to distance itself from, radical political Islam. Rather, the Tatar leaders would like to promote a modernized version of Islam compatible with the Western civilization. Rafael Hakimov in particular champions his vision of 'EuroIslam' and makes a particular emphasis on religious tolerance. Addressing the discontent of some Muslim and nationalist leaders regarding the effort of the Kazan city government to return a famous Russian icon from Vatican to Kazan, he advised them to re-read the Koran: "All world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have common roots."<sup>28</sup>

When Farid Mukhametshin, the Chairman of the Tatarstan legislature, addressed the last World

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28 Читайте Коран внимательно// Восточный экспресс. - № 135 (387), 4 августа 2005 г.

Tatar Congress in 2005, he never uttered the words 'Islam' or 'Muslim'.<sup>29</sup> In general, secular nationalists co-opted in the local government perceive Islamic universalism as a threat to the Tatar national particularism. They sometimes accuse the current religious leaders of Tatarstan in betrayal of the Tatar national idea for the sake of international Islam. On the 2005 World Tatar Congress, Damir Iskhakov and Rafael Hakimov criticized what they called the Arab methods of schooling in the Islamic schools of Tatarstan.

At the same time, the ruling elite of Tatarstan is anxious to bring expressions of Islamic identity (as well as nationalism) under its control, although one cannot help but wonder as to how adequate their control is. The leaders of Tatarstan feel that they cannot afford to lose control over this situation and therefore must cooperate with the federal center in their struggle with radical forms of Islam. For its part, the federal center is happy to oblige, which results in a crackdown on Islamic zealots. A side effect of this marriage of convenience between Moscow and Kazan is that the balance of power has further shifted toward the federal center. This is probably why the Kremlin feels so confident these days that it is not afraid of returning to the republics some of the powers that it has earlier taken away.

Between November 2004 and January 2005, several dozen members of the international Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami party (the Party of Islamic Liberation) were arrested in Tatarstan. Their local leader was an internationally wanted Uzbekistani national Alisher Usmanov. Russian human rights organizations suggest that at least some of the cases were falsified and some evidence was gotten by means of torture. On the other hand, President Shaimiev in a recent interview said that there were real attempts to commit terrorist acts in the city of Kazan on the eve of its millennium celebrations.<sup>30</sup> The explosion of a gas pipeline near the town of Kukmor a year earlier is likewise attributed to an Islamic sect popular in the town. (In the wake of that terrorist act, Mr. Tajutdin blamed a medrese in Bashkortostan whose alumnus was involved in it and secured its transfer to the

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29 Звезда Поволжья. - 2-7 сентября 2005 № 34 (286).

30 Ислам тревоги нашей// Звезда Поволжья. - № 5 (308). – 9-15 февраля 2006 г.

jurisdiction of TsDUM.)

Those Tatar nationalists who are not co-opted in the government and stay in opposition took the crack-down on radical Muslims as a convenient opportunity to appeal to the republic's Muslims. They turn the concept of Islamophobia into a political tool and suggest that this is just another con of the federal center to centralize the country. A joint appeal of the *Ittifak* and the *Watan* parties reads: "Under the veil of struggle against terror and right before the eyes of the international community, the authorities of the Russian Federation are committing violence against the Muslim peoples [thus] realizing the Russian emperors' colonial designs. . . It is clear that under the false pretext of the struggle with terror they want to eliminate [ethnic] republics and the very peoples of the republics."<sup>31</sup>

A concern with Islamophobia has been also expressed by mainstream national leaders. In particular, Rinat Zabiroy, the current World Tatar Congress chairman said in March 2005: "These days, some forces actively use the label of 'Wahhabism' with respect to believers and negate our ancestors' experience of Islam's co-existence with other religions." Nationalists, including some of those co-opted in the local government, supported (although in vain) the former mufti Gabdulla Galiulla against Mr. Shaimiev's preferred Gusman Iskhakov during the last Congress of Tatarstan Muslims (February 2006).

For many Tatars who are concerned with their national and religious rights a mix of religious and national ideas remains an attractive ideology. A union of radicalized nationalists in opposition and religious opposition is an emerging reality. It is not unlikely that even mainstream nationalists may eventually support the union, provided a political opportunity. Russia has witnessed similar scenarios in the North Caucasus. The political void Mr. Shaimiev has created seems to leave him no other way but to follow the general line of President Putin. Thus political and religious dissent is below the heavy authoritarian lid, much as Tatar nationalism was in Soviet

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31 [http://www.azatlyk.com/news/news\\_264.html](http://www.azatlyk.com/news/news_264.html)

Tatarstan when it was hardly visible twenty years ago.

THERE ARE PERENNIAL CALLS in Tatarstan to establish a single centralized authority in the Volga-Ural region, if not in all Russia, and overcome the schism between TsDUM and the structures created by independent DUMs in Bashkortostan and elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> People who make such suggestions assume that an important step in this direction would be for Mr. Tajutdin to go and pass his authority to new structures. I do not think that this scenario would benefit Russia in general or Tatars in particular. Why remove a man who has consistently defended the local Hanafi tradition and distanced himself from the Saudis? Under whose own leadership the Islamic tradition was spectacularly reborn? Whose organization represents the interests of ethnic Tatars in the neighboring republic?

Pluralism of religious organization has its advantages. When there is legal opposition, the opposition has fewer reasons to espouse political radicalism; rather, it becomes a part of the establishment. Variety of organization, as in the case of political parties, allows ambitious individuals more choice and opportunity. At the same time, as the incident with the mentioned transfer of an Islamic school from DUM RB to TsDUM after the Kukmor explosion suggests, pluralism does not necessarily mean an absence of responsibility. In the situation where the alternative DUM structures were originally dependent on the Saudis (sometimes still are) creates a situation in which secular nationalists worry about an undue prominence of Arab methods and styles in Tatar Islam. Why not take advantage of an alternative structure under such circumstances? Its parallel existence in Bashkortostan not only provides an example of local tradition but also probably curbs extremists within its competitor.

Another problem is that exclusivity of religious organization in Tatarstan is matched by close

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32 Д. Исхаков Открытое письмо М. Шаймиеву объединения татарских интеллектуалов «Клуб джадидов»// Звезда Поволжья. – 2001, 23-29 августа (№ 33 (86)) See also the site of DUM RT <http://www.e-islam.ru/books/public/center/> for more recent such calls and denunciations of Mr. Tajutdin.

correspondence between nationhood and religion. This facilitates an alliance of non-coopted nationalists (such as Ms. Bairamova) with alienated Muslim clerics in Tatarstan (such as Mr. Galiulla) where political Islam has a potential to emerge as a powerful force and maybe eventually even to supercede secular nationalism. This is another reason to let other clerics be.