The Tatars of the Russian Federation and National-Cultural Autonomy: A Contradiction in Terms?

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Abstract

This chapter explores the recent fate of the Russian experiment in national-cultural, non-territorial, autonomy (NCA) through the prism of the experience of the Tatars. The Tatars are the most numerous minority in Russia, and have achieved, peacefully, a very high degree of autonomy, in contrast to the Chechens. I seek to answer two questions. First, why did the NCA form at first appear so attractive to the Tatar elite? And second, why has it almost lost all significance to them and to others in Russia? It should be noted that this experiment is still presented by Russia as the centerpiece of its “nationalities policy”. Following some reflections on the importance of theory, I set out the latest Russian government depiction of the NCA experiment, as well as its critique by leading scholar Aleksandr Ossipov, and the Russian Constitutional Court. I follow with an account of the history and influence of the Tatars in Russia. Fourth, I turn to the relationship of the Tatars to the theory and practice of NCA since 1917. Fifth, I analyse the Tatar response to the Federal Law “On National-Cultural Autonomy” of 1996, and its amendment in 2004. Finally, I reflect on Ossipov’s epitaph for the Russian NCA experiment.

Introduction

This essay explores the recent fate of the Russian experiment in national-cultural, non-territorial, autonomy (NCA, as it is abbreviated in Russian) through the prism of the experience of the Tatars. The Tatars already have the richest and most successful ethnic – in Russian, “national” – territorial autonomy in Russia, possibly in the world. I seek to answer two questions. First, why did the NCA form at first appear so attractive to the Tatar elite? And second, why has it almost lost all significance to them and to others in Russia? It should be noted that this experiment is still presented by Russia as the centerpiece of its “nationalities policy”, in its second (2005) periodic report to the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), of 26 April 2005.

In this essay, following some reflections on the importance of theory, I set out a recent Russian government depiction of the NCA experiment, as well as its critique by Aleksandr Ossipov, who has published a magisterial definitive account of the NCA experiment (Ossipov, 2004), and by the Russian Constitutional Court. I follow with an account of the history and influence of the Tatars in Russia. Fourth, I turn to the relationship of the Tatars to the theory and practice of NCA since 1917. Fifth, I analyse the Tatar response to the Federal Law “On National-Cultural Autonomy” of 1996, and its amendment in 2004. Finally, I refer again to Ossipov, whose work can be taken as an epitaph for the Russian NCA experiment.

Personal cultural autonomy is the theory usually associated with the “Austro-Marxists” Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, whose theories Ephraim Nimni has done so much to rehabilitate (see Nimni, 2005). I have written twice previously about the ironies of the return of Austro-Marxist theory to Russia (Bowring, 2005; Bowring, 2003). My interest in the NCA experiment was sparked by the Russian government’s reference to NCA in its first periodic report on its performance of its obligations under the Council of Europe’s *Framework Convention on the Protection of National Minorities* (hereafter FCNM), in 2000. My first essay was written in 2001, when the NCA project was in its early stages.

A recent event of symbolic significance

Anthony D Smith has with others developed a theory of “historical ethno-symbolism” as an alternative approach to an understanding of “the continuing power of nationalism and the nation in the modern world…”, overcoming the problems of “primordialism”, “modernism” and “social constructivism”, to which I refer briefly below (Smith, 1999: 9-10). The fourth major claim of ethno-symbolism is that “the pre-existing components and long-term continuities of ethnic communities and nations are cultural and symbolic rather than demographic.” (Smith, 1999: 14) This, broadly, is an approach to which I subscribe.

The Tatars have, as I show below, are a significant demographic presence in Russia. They have also acquired a major new symbol. On 24 June 2005 the largest mosque in Russia opened in Kazan, capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, as part of festivities marking the city's 1,000th anniversary. The rebuilding of the Qol Sharif Mosque began in the mid-1990s, on the site where the old Qol Sharif Mosque once stood. That mosque was destroyed after Ivan IV (the Terrible)’s conquest of Kazan in 1552. The new Qol Sharif Mosque stands opposite, and is much larger

http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/2._framework_convention_%28monitoring%29/2._monitoring_mechanism/3._state_reports_and_unmik_kosovo_report/2._second_cycle2nd_SR_Russian_Federation.asp#TopOfPage

Kazan is situated on the river Volga, only an overnight train ride to the east of Moscow.
than, an Orthodox cathedral (Pannier, 2005). It has become the symbol of Tatars all over Russia, emblazoned on all Tatar public and private spaces.

The Tatars of the Russian Federation are an ancient people, but not quite a “primordial” nation. As Davies explained: “The Mongol invasions of the 13th century transformed the face of several countries… The khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, which were eventually to be annexed by Muscovy in 1552-6, put an Asiatic population in place that is the basis of the modern “Tatarstan” (Davies, 1997, 364). Nevertheless, seven centuries is not a short period of settlement, and the Tatars, individuals who choose to describe themselves as such under the new Russian census law, are now the largest national (ethnic) minority in the Russian Federation. According to the 2002 census, there are now five and a half million Tatars (by self-identification) living in Russia, about 3.8% of the total population.4

Tatarstan is an ‘ideal type’ territorial autonomy. It is one of 21 national (ethnic) republics in the 86-member Russian Federation, and the Tatars are its “titular people”. It is their homeland. Tatarstan is about the size of Ireland, with a similar population of nearly 4 million. Kazan has a population of just over 1 million.5 However, Tatars, both within Tatarstan and dispersed throughout Russia, have been among the most enthusiastic creators of “national-cultural autonomies” (hereafter NCAs). NCAs are, by definition, non-territorial autonomies.

A question of theory

I wrote some years ago about the highly contested theoretical debates in Russia, which mirror Western disputes between “primordialists” and “social constructivists” (Bowring, 2002). These debates can help to throw light on the origins of the Russian territorial autonomies, and the more recent NCAs. Valerii Tishkov6 has made it very clear that the Soviet regime was involved in an extraordinary policy of nation-building. He wrote:

“The nation-building process in Imperial Russia was abruptly halted by the Bolshevik regime, and the whole vocabulary was changed in favour of Austro-Marxist ethnonational categories. Now the ‘socialist nations’ were proclaimed and constructed in the Soviet Union on the basis of existing or invented cultural differences. Soviet ideology and political practice, while pursuing declaratory internationalism, also enforced mutually exclusive ethnic loyalties on the principle of blood, and through the territorialisation of ethnicity on the principle of ‘socialist’ (read; ethnic) federalism. The

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3 It should be noted that although the Russian language has a separate word for “ethnic” ("etnicheski"), the word “natsionalnii”, “national”, is used in the same context and with the same meaning as the English word “ethnic”.
4 A table of the national (ethnic) populations of Russia is shown at Annex 1
6 He is Director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, and was in the early 1990s himself Minister for Nationalities
very process of civic nation-building lost its sense, replaced by the clumsy slogan of “making the Soviet people’ from many nations, instead of making one nation from many peoples.” (Tishkov, 1997: 250)

I cannot agree with Tishkov’s interpretation of Russian history. As is clear from my analysis below, nation-building was initiated at a fairly late stage in the history of the Tsarist empire. But, more interestingly, Tishkov’s views are very close to the analysis of the “social constructivist” Rogers Brubaker (Brubaker, 1996: 29). In his stimulating account Brubaker wrote:

“… the Soviet Union was neither conceived in theory nor organised in practice as a nation-state. Yet while it did not define the state or citizenry as a whole in national terms, it did define component parts of the state and the citizenry in national terms. Herein lies the distinctiveness of the Soviet nationality regime - in its unprecedented displacement of nationhood and nationality, as organising principles of the social and political order, from the state-wide to the sub-state level. No other state has gone so far in sponsoring, codifying, institutionalising, even (in some cases) inventing nationhood and nationality on the sub-state level, while at the same time doing nothing to institutionalise them on the level of the state as a whole.”

This account in my view pays insufficient attention to Tsarist nationalities policy and practice, Nevertheless, Tishkov, writing in 1997, found particular support and significance in Brubaker’s theoretical position, especially his claim that the Soviet Union went so far as to “invent” nations. For example, Brubaker also wrote:

“Nationalism can and should be understood without invoking “nations” as substantial entities. Instead of focusing on nations as real groups, we should focus on nationhood and nationness, on “nation” as practical category, institutionalised form, and contingent event. “Nation” is a category of practice, not (in the first instance) a category of analysis. To understand nationalism, we have to understand the practical uses of the category “nation”, the ways it can come to structure perception, to inform thought and experience, to organise discourse and political action.” (Brubaker, 1996: 7)

Tishkov was delighted to find that this view exactly coincides with his own conclusion, published in 1996, that “nation” does not constitute a scientific category, and ought to be expelled from the discourse of science and politics. His slogan was “Forget the nation!” (Tishkov, 1996). As will be seen, Tishkov was a leading proponent of non-territorial autonomy.

It is noteworthy that, by 2001, Tishkov appeared to be much more sympathetic to the Soviet nationalities policy. He wrote:

“Here [in the Soviet world] there took place the institutionalisation of ethnic groups ,and the codification of state building was based on it, and here the situation is completely different [from the West] and was already reflected in the institutions of federalism in the Soviet time. And this attitude is actually an inheritance which we received and the ethno-territorial form of Soviet federalism has played a great positive role. Ethnic federalism or ethno-territorial autonomy – this is recognized on the world level as the
most suitable form of self-determination. Therefore, the republics, I consider – this is the form of ethno-territorial self-determination, ethno-territorial autonomy within Russia.”

(Tishkov, 2001)

Perhaps this reflects the growing disillusionment with the NCA experiment in Russia.

Ossipov, who shares Brubaker’s theoretical outlook, is much more skeptical about group or collective rights, especially to self-determination. He notes that “practically all Russian laws relating to ethnic questions, beginning with the Law “On rehabilitation of repressed peoples” of 1991, are based on the concept of group rights.” This is also true of the Russian Constitution of 1993. However, he considers that it is Russia’s great misfortune that the discourse of group rights is to a significant extent based on disagreement or misunderstanding (Ossipov, 2004: 442). This article will explore the extent to which this is the case.

The Russian government’s claims for NCA

The Russian Federation is the largest and most differentiated federative polity in the world. It has 86 “subjects of the Federation”, each of which has formal equality under the 1993 Constitution, as well as formidable legislative and executive competence. However, it is important to remember that of at least 150 nationalities in the Russian Federation, only some 30 have their own territorial autonomies. Not only do 2 million Tatars live outside Tatarstan, but each of Russia’s regions contains a plethora of minorities. Russia’s policy towards its minorities, “national minorities”, is of key importance for conflict prevention and for the stability and security of the Federation as a whole.

The second Russian periodic report for the FCNM places the Russian experiment in NCA at the centre of Russia’s compliance with its obligations under the FCNM. The Report notes that the Federal Law “On National and Cultural Autonomy” of 19967 defines the NCA as

“a form of national and cultural self-determination constituting a public association of citizens of the Russian Federation, identifying themselves with certain ethnic communities, based on their voluntarily chosen identity for the purpose of independently solving the issues of their identity preservation and their linguistic, educational and national cultural development”.

The Government cites as a step forward the fact that an amendment to the 1996 Law enacted in 20048 give the regions of the Russian Federation the right to render financial support to NCAs “for the purpose of preserving the national identity, developing the national language (mother tongue) and national culture and implementing national and cultural rights of citizens of the Russian Federation, identifying themselves with certain ethnic communities…”. Thus,

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7 No. 74-ФЗ of June 17, 1996, as amended on June 29, 2004
8 No. 58-FZ of 29 June 2004
according to the amendments, “the constituent entities of the Russian Federation can participate in the implementation of state policy related to national and cultural autonomies.”

The Government add that:

“This amendment doesn't exclude the possibility to provide financial support from the Federal authorities, but enlarges such possibility through drawing in resources from Russia's regions. Given the fact that regional and local public associations to a great extent outnumber federal ones, this amendment makes it possible to optimize development potentials by hastening of financial sources.”

Ossipov comments that the amending law of 2004 was in fact rather radical, especially in substantially reducing any obligations on central or local authorities to fund or even consult NCAs; but “… it practically speaking did not call forth significant public resonance.” (Ossipov, 2004: 97-8)

According to the Ministry of Justice of Russia, in 2003–2004 16 federal NCAs have been created and function in the Russian Federation. The Government further emphasize that:

“…some national republics of the Russian Federation pursue the policy of uniting the members of their ethnic groups living outside the territory of their major residence. For example, the authorities of the Republic of Tatarstan took part in establishing 131 national and cultural centers…”

The Report does not reflect the noisy controversy surrounding the question whether ethnic Russians should be able to create NCAs (Kuznetsov, 2001).

Ossipov carried out his own research, and found that at the end of 2004 registered NCAs existed in 68 subjects of the Russian Federation (out of 89 – there have been some mergers since then), and did not exist in eight oblasts of central Russia (Belgorod, Bryansk, Vologda, Novgorod etc), in 5 ethnic republics out of 21 (Gornii Altai, Ingushetiya, Tyva, Khakassiya, Chechnya), and in 6 out of 10 autonomous okrugs, and in the Jewish autonomous oblast. Thus, there are radically different numbers of NCAs in one region compared to another. However, he found no discernible connection with type of subject of the Federation, the ethnic composition of the population, or the character of the policies carried out (Ossipov, 2004: 162).

In fact, in many places NCAs and “simple” social associations (NGOs) exist in parallel. Ossipov identifies three models for such co-existence (Ossipov, 2004: 178-9). The first and most widespread is the NCA as one of the local national-cultural societies. Usually it is started by

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9 These were (1) the Russian Germans; (2) the Russian Koreans; (3) the Russian Ukrainians; (4) the Tatars of the Russian Federation; (5) the Russian Belarusians; (6) the Jewish community of Russia; (7) the Russian Azerbaijani; (8) the Russian Roma; (9) the Russian Kurds; (10) the Russian Armenians; (11) the Russian Chuvashes; (12) the Russian Karachais; (13) the Polish Congress in Russia; (14) the Lezgin NCA; (15) the Russian Serbs; (16) the Russian Lithuanians. Moreover, there are 173 regional and 315 local NCAs in the regions of the Russian Federation.
activists wishing to raise the status of their organization or to find their own place in relation to the other groupings. Relations between NCAs and the others can range from competition to cooperation. The second model is that the NCA is created as a “spare part” legal person as a supplement to an already soundly functioning ethnic association. Thus in the ethnic republic of Mordovia there exists a well-known and authoritative Tatar society “Yaktashlar”. Its leadership took the decision to found an NCA, first, so as to demonstrate their loyalty to the authorities, and second, to make use of the financial and other benefits promised by the Law on NCA. Thus, in 2001 all the activists of “Yaktashlar”, about 50 people, joined the NCA, but “Yaktashlar” continued its independent existence. The third model, the best from the point of view of the authorities and the authors of the “Law on NCA”, but also the most rare, is to create an NCA as an “umbrella” organization. The social associations (NGOs) which are the founders of the NCA keep their independence and carry on working, and the NCA serves as a meeting place to agree their positions, and also carry on their own projects. The regional Tatar NCA of St Petersburg works in this way (Ossipov, 2004: 180).

Thus, the Government’s Report while promoting the NCA model as a significant contribution by Russia to minority rights, says nothing about the relationship between NCAs and other forms of non-governmental organization; nor about the relationship between individual and collective rights in the NCA experiment.

This is an issue which received authoritative interpretation by the judges.

**The Russian Constitutional Court on the “rights of nations”**

The theoretical issues to which I referred earlier in this chapter found practical expression in a crucial decision of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation; albeit a decision which Ossipov described as “… one of those which makes me evaluate skeptically the perspectives for the Russian judicial system as a whole.” In his view, the decision was based on “conjectures” (Ossipov, 2004: 155-159).

On 16 March 2004 the Court published its decision in the case “On the constitutionality of Article 5(3) of the Federal Law “On NCA” 10. The case was brought by two Russian citizens who were ethnic Germans, A Kh Dits and O A Shumakher, residing in Altai Krai. 11 The judge-

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10 Published in the *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (Russian Gazette) on 16 March 2004, at http://www.rg.ru/2004/03/16/ks-dok.html

11 There are many Russians who are ethnic Germans – descendants of the farmers attracted to the Volga region by Catherine II in the 18th century, as well as of the Baltic German aristocracy, many of whom served the Tsars at the highest levels
rapporteur who prepared the Court’s judgment was the ethnic Karachaevan Boris Ebzeyev\(^ {12} \), whose commentary of the same day was aptly entitled “What is higher – the right of the nation or the right of the individual?” (Kozlova, 2004).

Article 5(3) of the Law on NCAs provides that local NCAs, created in municipalities, can form a regional NCA. The applicants complained that this provision appeared to exclude the possibility of creating more than one regional NCA within a subject of the Russian Federation. This was indeed what the courts in the Altai Krai, and the Russian Supreme Court, had decided. Ebzeyev noted that there are 170 peoples in Russia, so that the Court was obliged to take into account the principles of equality and self-determination of peoples, and the international treaties ratified by Russia, especially the European Convention on Human Rights – and the FCNM.

The Court held that NCAs are on the one hand the institution of self-determination of peoples in the Russian Federation, and on the other, one of the means of citizens to associate in the form of social organizations. Protection of the rights of the ethnic Germans in Altai must defend the ethnic community as a whole, without restricting the constitutional rights of citizens to association. As Ebzeyev insisted, the right of the nation must not be higher than the right of the individual; while at the same time the protection of individual rights must not lead to discrimination against national (ethnic) rights.

Moreover, in his view, NCAs are not concerned with “national territorial”, but “national cultural” self-determination, that is, the rights of persons living as members of a national minority in a certain territory. That is why NCAs have special public law status, distinguishing them from many other forms of social associations.

Thus, the Court upheld the Federal Law, since it is intended not to restrict but to protect national minorities. However, the Court added that the creation of a regional NCA does not lead to the dissolution of the local NCAs which created it. Nor are citizens prevented from creating other social associations on the basis of ethnic communities. But these will not have the status of NCAs. Thus, Judge Ebzeyev congratulated Dits and Shumakher on bringing such an important case to the court, and said they should not consider themselves victims.

\(^ {12} \) The Karachaev are an ethnic minority in the North Caucasus.
However, it is a fact that the ethnic Germans have never had their own territorial autonomy, either in the Soviet Union, or in the post-1991 Russia Federation. The Tatars, on the other hand, have had both. Why should they be interested in cultural, non-territorial autonomy?

**The Tatars of Russia**

At this point, it is necessary to sketch the history – or at least the self-perceived history - of the Tatars in Russia. There has recently been a thorough re-assessment of the position of Muslims, and especially Tatars, in Tsarist Russia. First, it should be noted that “Tatar” was the name given by the Russians to the Mongols (Ziyatdinova, 1995). Tatars are the most numerous Muslim population in Russia, and belong to the Hanifi13 Sunni branch of Islam. Islam began to spread in the VII century. So how did the Tatars become Muslim?

Tatars were first noted in history in the period of the Golden Horde, which the Tatars themselves called the “Urdai-muazzam” or “Ulug Ulus” - meaning great, vast state. In 1312-1313 the Khan Mukhammed Uzbek made Islam his state religion, and the Golden Horde was transformed into a genuine Muslim state. Its capital, the city of Sarai, became one of the centres of the Muslim world. After the destruction of the Golden Horde by Tamerlan at the end of the XIV century, Tatar khanates, of which the most notable were the Kazan and Crimean khanates, came into existence; Islam was the state religion (Mirgaleyev, 2001: 73).

In 1552 to 1556 the Kazan khanate was conquered by Moscow. Zverev the following historical contradiction. A Russian scholar might well describe St Basil’s Cathedral in Red Square in Moscow as a monument of Russian architecture of the period of Ivan IV. He would say that it was built to celebrate the capture of Kazan. A Tatar historian might reply that that temple was a replica of the Qol Sharif mosque in Kazan, destroyed by the Russians during the capture of the city. For the Tatars, Qol Sharif is indeed a symbol of the lost Tatar culture and the need to rebuild it (Zverev, 2002: 83).

**Tatars within the Tsarist Empire**

After 1556 the Tatars lost khanate after khanate. In 1783 the last Tatar khanate, in Crimea, was conquered by Russia. Nonetheless, the Russian Tsarist state decided to recognise Islam, albeit on condition (contrary to the decentralised nature of Islam) that it became a centralised institution. In September 1788, in two decrees, Catherine II called for the establishment in Ufa

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13 Hanafi is one of the four schools of thought (Madhabs) or jurisprudence (Fiqh) within Sunni Islam. Founded by Abu Hanifa, An-Nūmān ibn Thābit (699 - 765), it is considered to be the school most open to modern ideas - Wikipedia
of a *Dukhovnoye sobraniye magometanskovo zakona* (Ecclesiastical Assembly of the Mohammedan Creed), later known as the *Dukhovnoye upravleniye musulman* (Spiritual Administration of Muslims). Its leader was to be known as a *mufti*, a term previously unknown to Islam, and Islam thus recognised was brought within the Tsarist state (Crews, 2006: 52, 56).

Khenkin insists (Khenkin, 1997) that the fundamental task of the Russian Empire was not cultural or regional assimilation, but the security of the state. Even before Ivan IV, the Finno-Ugric tribes that populated the Oka basin and the upper Volga (whose descendants are the ‘titular’ nations of the republics of Marii El and Mordoviya) served the first Moscow princes (Tsimbaev, 1998: 59). Tsimbaev argues that “the heart of Russia’s policy with respect to the peoples it annexed was not national but social assimilation”, and that the “fundamental principle of the Russian Empire was social and class, rather than nationality or religious division.” (Tsimbaev, 1998: 61)

How did this come about? Suny writes that:

> “In her wisdom, the Empress Catherine II ordered that all religious faiths be tolerated in Russia. Herself a convert from Protestantism to Orthodoxy… through tolerance she bound Russia’s Muslims to her regime, guaranteed their loyalty… From the late 18th century to the end of the Romanov dynasty, a precarious but surprisingly benign symbiosis developed between the tsars and their Muslim subjects.” (Suny, 2006).

Russian imperial law required every subject of the Empire to be a member of a confessional community and to obey the clerical authorities of that community (Crews, 2006: 42). As Suny points out: “Over time, Muslims and others adapted to the Tsarist religious regime “as a potential instrument of God’s will”, accepted (though not without contestation) the clerics sanctioned by the state, and used official institutions to help regulate their own members and settle disputes among them.” (Suny, 2006) A mosque was constructed in Moscow in 1823, despite opposition from the Orthodox Church (Crews, 2006: 93). Russia’s Muslims accepted the Russian Empire as “dar al-Islam” (the House of Islam), that is, a country in which they were able to fulfil their religious obligations. The Ottoman Empire failed to persuade Russia’s Muslims that, on the contrary, Russia was the infidel “dar al-Harb” (House of War).

It should come as no surprise, then, that contemporary Moscow is home to more than two million Muslims, many of them Tatars, giving it the largest population of Muslims of any non-Muslim city in the world. Russia as a whole is estimated to have a Muslim population of between 18 and 23 million, at least 15% of its total population, at least one fifth of them Tatars. Since 2005, following an initiative by President Putin in 2003, Russia has been an Observer
State of the Organisation of the Muslim Conference, which unites 57 Muslim states (Alyautdinova, 2007).

If Muscovy conquered the Tatars, the Tatars thoroughly penetrated their conquerors. The Tatar-Turkic heritage is found throughout the language, and the cultural heritage. As Figes notes, “Many of the most basic Russian words have Tatar origins – *loshad* (horse), *bazar* (market), *ambar* (barn), *sunduk* (chest)… (Figes, 2003: 370-371) The sophisticated systems of administration and taxation of the Mongol-Tatars not only provided the basis for the structures of the Russian State, but is also reflected in the Tatar origins of words such as *dengi* (money), *tamozhnya* (customs), and *kazna* (treasury) (Figes, 2003: 367). And Imperial policy ensured that a significant proportion of the Russian aristocracy were of Tatar descent, with Turkic names (Figes, 2003: 361).

**The Tatars in the late Tsarist and Soviet period**

The first period of Tatar national revival was associated with the activity of Islamic reformers (the Jadids), Tatar cultural figures and politicians of 1880-1918, and the first Tatar political parties. According to Zverev “Their agenda included cultural-national autonomy, i.e., autonomy in matters of religion and education, without an army or a territorial administration other than that dealing with religious and educational matters (and the financing thereof).” (Zverev, 2002: 70) Thus, ideas of NCA played a key role in the first movement towards Tatar statehood.

Although the Austro-Marxist idea of NCA had many non-Bolshevik supporters in the years before 1917, one party in particular, the Kadet (Constitutional Democrat) Party, saw it as a universal method of resolving national questions in multi-ethnic Russia, and a real alternative to the territorial model favoured by the Bolsheviks. Thus, the ninth Congress of the Kadets in July 1917 supported national personal autonomy. Other parties – the Socialist Revolutionaries, Trudoviks, Mensheviks – saw this model as the optimum solution to the problems of dispersed ethnic groups and minorities.

The first body to put the model into practice was the national religious unity of Muslim Russia, since 1905 active within the Kadet Party (Nam, 2000). On 22 July 1917 the joint meeting of the three all-Russian Congresses (Muslims as a whole, military and spiritual) created the “Cultural National Autonomy of Muslims of Inner Russia and Siberia”. This day was declared a national festival of Muslims. On 31 July 1917 the Second All-Russian Muslim Congress adopted a document entitled ‘Foundations of the National Cultural Autonomy of Muslims of Inner Russia and Siberia’, which foresaw the creation of a ‘Muslim Turk-Tatar’ status of juridical person
(Davletshin, 1974). The Muslim Cultural National Autonomy incorporated non-territoriality and recognition as a subject of law, while the third element, personalism, that is, the voluntary entry of an individual to a national community, was replaced by confessional criteria, the fact that Turk-Tatars belonged to Islam (Ishaki, 1993: 45). At the National Gathering of Muslims (the Milli Medzhlis) held on 4 December 1917 in Ufa (now the capital of Bashkortostan) the participants split into two fractions: the “turkchiler”, who supported non-territorial NCA, and the “tufrakchylar” who supported territorial national autonomy (Urazaev, 2000).

For Tatar society during the early Soviet period, discussion concerning the status of the Tatars developed in the context of the division of the territories of the USSR into “union republics) (ie Ukraine, Belarus, Baltic states) and “autonomous territories”. Khakimov points out that: “The Tatars awaited the appearance of a Tatar-Bashkir Republic, and the development of national forms of life within the framework of the Tatar Soviet socialist republic.” (Khakimov, 2005: 46)

Instead, the Bolsheviks split the Bashkorts from the Tatars and on 23 March 1919 created the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). On 27 May 1920 the Soviet Government issued a decree to establish the Tatar ASSR. Only 1,459,000 of the 4,200,000 Tatars living in the middle Volga area were included in the republic. The Soviet Government also excluded, on 14 June 1922, the districts of Beleveev, Birsk, and Ufa where Tatars represented the majority of the population from the Tatar republic and joined them with Bashkortostan. This made the Tatars the second largest ethnic majority after the Russians in Bashkortostan, with contemporary consequences which I note below.

The question of elevating Tatarstan’s status was first raised on an official level during the adoption of the USSR (“Stalin”) Constitution in 1936. In response to the demand that Tatarstan be declared a union republic, criteria were formulated at Stalin’s initiative for distinguishing union from autonomous formations. According to this classification, Tatarstan, not having an external border, could not claim to have its status elevated (Khakimov, 2005: 46). However, the Chairmen of the Supreme Soviets of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, along with those of the Union Republics, were always members of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR - the only two “autonomous republics” so represented (Shaimiev, 1996: 1). By the end of the 1970s, more than half of the professional cadre in half of the Union Republics and 11 of the 21 autonomous republics in the RSFSR was composed of the titular ethnic group. Social mobility of ethnic groups was higher than that of Russians (Drobizheva, 1996: 2). Nevertheless, as Elise Giuliano shows: “The case of Tatarstan suggests that Tatars were not an aggrieved community
prior to the onset of national revival during the period of glasnost, but developed a grievance as a result of how the nationalist movement framed the issue of an ethnic division of labour.”
(Giuliano, 2006: 23)

The Tatars in the post-Soviet period

It was in Kazan, in 1990, that President Boris Yeltsin uttered his famous challenge to the regions to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow.” A few months later, Tatarstan declared independence. Tatarstan and Chechnya were the two subjects of RSFSR which refused to sign Yeltsin’s Union Treaty. However, events in Tatarstan took a rather different, and peaceful, course – compared with Chechnya. Indeed, Derlugyan compares Tatarstan with Scotland or Catalonia (Derlugyan, 2002).

Tatarstan adopted its own constitution in 1992 and signed a historic power-sharing treaty with the Kremlin two years later. In a masterpiece of creative fudging, Moscow was to retain jurisdiction over defence and foreign policy, but the treaty purported to put everything else under Tatarstan's control. It carefully avoided the question of whether Tatarstan was a subject of the Russian Federation, and declared that Tatarstan is “united” with Russia, without defining what this meant. It further declared that Tatarstan “participates in international relations” but never explained this either.

The Russian parliament refused to recognize the treaty. It insisted that the Russian constitution must take precedence over any regional constitutions. But Tatarstan ignored the pressure from Moscow and continued with further symbolic steps toward independence. (York, 1998). In Malik’s words, the Treaty “… was a big surprise, as well as disappointment, to the Tatar national movement which expected the treaty to bring about a well-defined independence.” (Malik, 1994: 1)

Ossipov (Ossipov: 2004: 73) notes that the results of the period 1992-1994 were much less evident on the practical level than on the ideological. However, tens of so called “congresses” or “assemblies” of “peoples” came into existence, sometimes with the financial support of the local or federal authorities. In February 1993 the II Congress of Tatars of Tyumen Oblast adopted the “Fundamental charter of the cultural-national autonomy of Siberian Tatars.” In this document the word autonomy was used in two senses. The first was the “right” of the Tatars, who do not enjoy “their own” statehood in Tyumen, to realize their own “originality” (samobytnost) in various ways. The second sense of “autonomy” was a centralized structure with a particular

social and State status. The “autonomy” was to be a component of the regional administration, with rights of legal personality, and financed by the local budget. However, this proposal was never put into practice (Ossipov, 2004: 73-74).

A component of the national revival in the period following the collapse of the USSR was the “appropriation” by the Tatars of their diaspora. This included, by 1992, the Lithuanian Tatars (including those living in Poland), the Tatars of Finland, the Tatars of the United States, the Crimean Tatars, the Tatars of Kyrgyzia, Baskortostan, and Ulyanovsk Oblast; the Tatars of the Urals, Orenburg, St Petersburg, Astrakhan, Siberia and Japan. (Ishakov and others, 2004-5: 14)

By 1994-1997, surveys showed that 55.3% of Tatars and 48.1% of Russians considered that Tatarstan should be a sovereign state within the Russian Federation; 81.9% of Tatars and 26.2% of Russians feel themselves only citizens of Tatarstan, or more so than citizens of Russia; and 14.5% of Tatars and 35.1% of Russians feel they are citizens of both. (Ishakov and others, 2004-5: 15).

According to the Russian Government’s second report to the FCNM:

“In the Republic of Tatarstan, there are 71 newspapers and 19 magazines published in the Tatar language… there are 30 TV companies, 20 of which broadcast programs in the Tatar and Russian languages, 3 in the Tatar language, and 7 in Russian. Of 41 republican radio stations, 15 broadcast programs in the Tatar and Russian languages, 7 in the Tatar language, and 17 in Russian.”

The issue of Tatarstan’s relation to the Federation is far from having been resolved. On 9 February 2007, the Russian State Duma ratified, by 306 votes to 110 (and one abstention), a new power-sharing agreement, “giving Tatarstan a degree of economic and political autonomy that no other region enjoys, especially as regards citizenship.” One commentator said that this directly contradicts Putin’s policy of centralisation. It was seen as a serious defeat for the “siloviki”, the “party of power” (Smirnov, 2007). However, on 21 February 2007 the Federation Council, the upper house, rejected the new treaty by 93 to 13, with 15 abstentions. This has led to speculation that the Kremlin wishes to remove Shaimiev, who on 22 February described the latest vote as “politicised voting”.

Both he, and his preferred successor, Farid Mukhametshin, Chairman of the State Council of Tatarstan, are determined that the treaty will be enacted, with

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16 http://president.tatar.ru/pub/view/2081; and an interview with Shaimiev on 2 April 2007, at http://www.intertat.ru/?st=1&pg=8&b1=1&md=3&iddoc=2819
the support of United Russia, the “Party of Power”. The treaty is by no means dead; it is at the
time of writing again under consideration in the State Duma.

Indeed, the only possible conclusion is that nothing has been resolved in the constitutional
position of Tatarstan; and that there will have been further important developments by the time
this article is published.

NCAs as the path to Tatar rebirth?

Why, then, has the NCA experiment been of interest to the Tatars?

In 1998, a Tatar writer was able to describe NCA as “the way to rebirth” for the Tatars
(Iskandyarov, 1997). Farit Urazayev, the Responsible Secretary of the Federal NCA of Tatars,
also spoke of “national re-birth” (Urazaev, 2000). He identified three genuine historical events.
First, the declaration in 1990 of the sovereign Republic of Tatarstan as the incarnation of the
statehood of the whole Tatar people. Second, the formation at the beginning of the 1990s of the
Tatar Public Centre, and on that basis the creation in 1992 of a united World Congress of Tatars,
registered by 2000 with the status of an International Union and including over 130 social
associations. Third, the creation in 1998 of the Federal NCA of Tatars of the Russian Federation
(FNCAT). By 2000, the FNCAT included 13 Regional NCAs of Tatars. About 3.5 million
Tatars live in these regions.

Unfortunately, Urazayev felt constrained to add that by 2000 not a single decision had been
taken to include NCAs in developing Russian state nationalities policy. There had been just two
organizational meetings of President Putin’s “Consultative Council on NCAs”. The
Government, while formally accepting the status of the NCAs, had reduced them to the level of
rank and file social organizations. Urazayev drew attention to the fact that while no money
could be found for NCAs, Russia was able to spend 3 billion roubles a month on the Chechen
war. That was the real nationalities policy of the government!

Testing NCAs in a conflict situation

The region of Russia in which the NCA should have had the greatest significance is, as outlined
above, Bashkortostan. However, this is the test-case which casts the most doubt on the NCA
experiment.

17 http://www.tatar.ru/?DNSID=da2369990eb81854364c0b89b0f9d0e2%page=23&full=25877
On 21 August 1999 the founding congress of the NCA of Tatars of the Republic of Baskortostan (RB) took place in Ufa, on the initiative of a number of Tatar social associations (NGOs)\(^\text{18}\), and 68 delegates from 24 districts and 11 towns participated (Ishakov, 2000). After the congress the relevant documents were deposited with the Ministry of Justice of the RB. The NCA’s founders believed that since it was part of the FNCAT which had been registered with the Russian Ministry of Justice on 25 September 1998, it must be registered in the RB. However, on 12 December 1999, after a long delay, the RB Ministry refused registration on the following grounds:

\(\text{i)}\) the legislation of the RB does not contemplate the creation of NCAs on the territory of the RB

\(\text{ii)}\) in accordance with article 1 of the Law of the RB “On national-cultural associations of citizens in the RB” of 10 February 1998 the form of national cultural self-determination of citizens of particular ethnicity in RB must be the “national-cultural association of citizens”.

According to Iskhakov, this meant, in effect, that the Federal Law “On NCA” of 1996 did not operate in the RB – a constitutional impossibility.

In his view, the real reason for refusal was that the very word “autonomy” evoked panic in the Bashkir elite. However, he recognised that a national-cultural autonomy could indeed become a mechanism for creating a territorial autonomy (Ishakov, 2000).

Between 1999 and 2005 very little progress was made. In February 2005, Farit Urazayev by then co-chairman of the FNCAT, and also a member of the Executive Committee of the World Congress of Tatars, considered that the “orange” events in Ufa (mass demonstrations against President Rakhimov) were to a great extent organized by the Tatar bourgeoisie of Bashkortostan. He noted the fact that the 2002 census showed a population of 1 million Tatars in Bashkortostan. Only by registering 200,000 Tatars as Bashkirs could the authorities put the Tatars into second place (Postnova, 2005).

Furthermore, of 86 subjects of the Federation Bashkortostan was still the only one in which the Federal Law on NCAs did not operate. After three years of court cases it had been possible only to register a local NCA in Ufa, in May 2003 (Ossipov, 2004: 151). The founding congress of the Regional NCA of Tatars in Bashkortostan had to take place in Moscow on 27 November 2004.

\(^{18}\) These were the Tatar social centre of the RB; the NGO “Union of Tatar youth ‘Azatlyk’ of RB”; the Medzhlis of Tatr murz; and the association “Miras”
Furthermore, President Rakhimov had broken his promise to make the Tatar language a second state language. It should be noted that on 12 May 2003 the Republic of Tatarstan adopted its own law on NCA\(^\text{19}\), fully in accordance with the federal law – a stark contrast from Bashkortostan (Ossipov, 2004: 143).

**The vexed question of the Tatar language**

This is another test-case for the NCA experiment. Wertheim argues that:

> “Tatar identity, in particular as constructed through linguistic performance, is inextricably linked with orientation towards or away from Russian language and culture, such that the integrity and cultural “purity” of post-soviet Tatars – thought by many to be necessary for the survival of the Tatar language, culture and nation – is equated with de-Russification.” (Wertheim, 2003: 347)

Indeed, the issue of orthography has become decisive. In 2003, Tatarstan's Constitutional Court recognised the right of Tatarstan itself to choose the script of its official languages. However, on 16 November 2004 the Russian Constitutional Court rejected a claim by Tatarstan's parliament seeking to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with the Latin alphabet. The court ruled that only federal-level legislators have the right to decide such matters, and that by introducing its own reform without special permission from Russian federal legislators, Tatarstan risked threatening the linguistic integrity of the Russian Federation. The Court based its decision on the law “On the Languages of the Peoples of the Russian Federation”, which requires the alphabets of all languages used by peoples in the Russian Federation to be based on the Cyrillic alphabet.

Following the decision, Tatar President Mintimir Shaimiev said that he did not consider the question closed. "I would say that yesterday's decision by the Constitutional Court does not deprive Russian Federation subjects of the right to consider this issue -- it can be resolved through the adoption of a federal law." Farid Mukhametshin said that the republic is not planning on removing street signs in Latin script because "there is a similar situation in Moscow, where I saw several buildings and restaurants [bearing signs] with Latin script."\(^\text{20}\)

Another writer did not think that this ruling would stop the Tatars from switching to the Latin alphabet.\(^\text{21}\) “They just have to do it quietly.” Mukhametshin told a press conference on 28 December 2004 that the ongoing experiment on teaching Tatar in Latin script in secondary schools will be continued. He said that "in the future, we will possibly raise the issue on the

\(^{19}\) Law No. 15-ZRT

\(^{20}\) http://www.geocities.com/ai320/volgauralregion.htm

transition of the Tatar alphabet to the Latin script and appeal to the federal legislature with such a proposal.“22

The end of the experiment?

There has been a radical change in official Tatar attitudes to the NCA experiment.

On 29 August 2002 the III World Congress of Tatars took place in Kazan (the II World Congress took place five years earlier). In his welcoming address, Shaimiev lauded the NCAs:

“On the basis of the Federal Law, NCAs of Tatars have sprung up all over Russia. … NCAs… today have become one of the most important levers for uniting Tatars. The period of founding such organizations has already passed. In a series of regions, with the help of Tatar businessmen, and sometimes with the support of local authorities, they have become a notable phenomenon in the Tatar world. The effectiveness of NCAs is redoubled if they work more closely with the Republic of Tatarstan…” (Shaimiev, 2002)

This was the last time that Shaimiev spoke at length on NCAs, and it is clear that he was well aware of the total absence of central or regional funding.

In March 2006, in his Annual State of the Republic Message, Shaimiev congratulated the World Congress of Tatars for helping to make the Tatar festival “Sabantui” a truly federation-wide festival bringing together various peoples of Russia. However, he added, “Unfortunately the potential of the Federal NCA of Tatars is not used, while the “not numerous” peoples of the country actively use this form of work.”23 This is strong language in Shaimiev’s lexicon: he means that NCAs are no longer of significance for the Tatars. And in an interview on 28 March 2006 his only mention of NCA was the fact that migrants from the zones of conflict in the North Caucasus were able to establish their own NCAs in Tatarstan. (Shaimiev, 2006).

This loss of significance for NCAs is mirrored at the Federal level. The last Russian government minister with responsibility for NCAs was Vladimir Zorin.24 He was Minister for the Affairs of Nationalities from 2001 to 2004, when his Ministry was abolished. The Ministry’s functions with regard to NCAs have now been spread among several government ministries and departments, and cannot be found on the Russian government’s web-sites. And in an interview on nationalities policy published on 15 September 2005 (Balakireva, 2005) Zorin had nothing to say about the NCA experiment, even though a hagiographical piece also published on the

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23 At http://kabmin.tatar.ru/events/e315n4.html?query=%ED%E0%F6%E8%EE%ED%E0%EB%FC%ED%EE-%EA%F3%EB%FC%F2%F0%ED%EE%E9%20%E0%E2%EE%ED%EE%EC%8%E8%E8
24 For his short biography, see http://www.pfo.ru/main/?id=8500. He has had a classically Soviet functionary’s career, and is now the Deputy Representative of the President in the Volga Federal Okrug.
government web-site Narody Rossii: Yedinstvo i Mnogoobraziye (Peoples of Russia: Unity and Diversity)\textsuperscript{25} on 21 April 2006 contains the following:

“However, one should consider the most acclaimed of the ideas of Vladimir Zorin until today to be the law on NCA, worked out and enacted with his participation. The fact is that the well-known slogan of the right of peoples to self-determination, thrown up by Karl Kautsky and taken up by the European social-democrats in the name of destroying the Austro-Hungarian Empire, spoils the nerves of many contemporary politicians up to the present day. The question of nationalities is rarely considered in isolation from the question of territory…

The Law on NCA gives more rights to citizens who have decided to create their own organization. They can receive support on the part of the authorities, necessary for preserving national originality, language and culture, to create their own mass media, educational establishments, and to present before the authorities their own national-cultural interests. But what they do not have is the right to national territorial self-determination.” (Stremidlovskii, 2006)

However, Rafgat Altynbaev, Chairman of the Federation Council’s Committee on Affairs of the Federation and Regional Policy, also recognized, on 26 April 2006, that in the summer of 2006 the 10th anniversary of the Law on NCA will be celebrated, with 300 NCAs registered with the Ministry of Justice, 16 federal, 100 regional, and 200 local. “However” he continued, “despite this, the State does not work with them to the required extent. Today at the federal level they have no platform where they can discuss their problems and exchange opinions.”\textsuperscript{26}

Conclusion

This article has shown that the NCA experiment, initially welcomed by the Tatars, is no longer of interest to them. In particular, the NCA form has manifestly failed in Bashkortostan. It has not helped to resolve conflict.

The key question remains the following. What does the NCA form offer to minorities in Russia, especially since the Russian state continues to present it as the centerpiece of Russian minorities policy? In my view Ossipov hits the nail on the head. He criticises all other Russian analysis of the NCA phenomenon for the fact that there is no serious attention to the most important question: how does an NCA differ in substance from a social association – an NGO? (Ossipov, 2004: 246).\textsuperscript{27}

He asks the question: what relationship does the institution of NCA have to the Russian state’s policy towards ethnic minorities and multi-culturalism? (Ossipov, 2004: 290) He notes that the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{25} www.narodru.ru
  \item \textsuperscript{26} http://www.narodru.ru/SMI5295.html
  \item \textsuperscript{27} This is a question which I have raised at each of the seminars organized by the Council of Europe on the FCNM, which I have attended as an expert. The answers to my question exactly replicate Ossipov’s findings.
\end{itemize}
authorities advertise the NCA policy as a great achievement and almost a corner-stone of the state’s “nationalities policy”. In fact, he says, the high-sounding term “autonomy” turns out to be just an inferior, indeed a worse, variation of “non-commercial organization”. The law gives the NCAs even fewer rights than “ordinary” social associations (NGOs), and on the contrary imposes new and material limitations on them. These are arbitrary and without apparent purpose. The Law does not set out clearly the way in which NCAs are to be supported by central or local government. There is provision for cooperation between the authorities and NCAs, but in such a way as to exclude in practice the implementation of long-term, technically complex or costly projects, especially in the field of education.

Ossipov insists that all the tasks for which the NCAs were established can with perfect success be accomplished by way of “ordinary” social associations (NGOs), even without giving them any kind of “ethnic” status.

All of the evidence shows that he is right. One conclusion, it seems, is possible. We are witnessing the end of a fascinating but doomed experiment.
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Annex 1

“National” (ethnic) populations of Russia by self-description, as at the 2002 census.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Million people</th>
<th>2002 in percentage to 1989</th>
<th>Percentage of total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>147.02</td>
<td>145.16</td>
<td>98.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russians</td>
<td>119.87</td>
<td>115.87</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatars</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>100.7</td>
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<td>Ukrainians</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>67.5</td>
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<td>Bashkirs</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>1.67</td>
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<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.64</td>
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<td>0.90</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>by 1.5</td>
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<td>0.53</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>by 2.1</td>
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<td>89.1</td>
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<td>0.34</td>
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<td>by 1.9</td>
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