

The 1992 Tatarstan Sovereignty Referendum

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21 March is a date that the people of Tatarstan will always remember: on that day 31 years ago, in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, Tatarstan voted to become an independent country. This post will reconstruct the run-up to the referendum and its consequences.

Under the Soviet Union, Tatarstan was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. This meant that the region had a measure of self-government and the constitutional right to choose between independence, staying part of Russia, or staying part of the Soviet Union should Russia ever leave the Union.

In August 1990, on the heels of the RSFSR's Declaration of Sovereignty, Tatarstan adopted its own Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Tatar Soviet Socialist Republic (Republic of Tatarstan). The document provided for the right of the peoples to "self-determination in national-state and national-cultural forms chosen by them." This move impacted not only the life of the young republic but also the course of political events in Russia.

The situation in the Republic was heating up. On 23 August 1991 the democratic forces organized a mass rally on Liberty Square. On 27 August representatives of the Tatar national movement held their own meeting in front of the Kamal's Theatre under the slogans "Full independence for Tatarstan", "Equality is the foundation of friendship", and "We do not need Tsar Boris". The participants demanded to put the issue of independence of Tatarstan on the agenda of the session of the government of the Republic.

A subsequent decree, "The Act of State Sovereignty of the Republic of Tatarstan," was published two months after the protest rally. The decree confirmed the commitment of the Tatarstan government to the principles proclaimed in the Declaration of State Sovereignty and emphasized the necessity of holding a referendum on the status of Tatarstan.

The referendum on the status of Tatarstan was held on 21st March 1992 and included the question, "Do you agree that the Republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state, a subject of international law, building its relations with the Russian Federation and other republics (states) on an equal basis?" 82% of citizens having a right to vote turned out, the majority of whom (61.4%) voted for Tatarstan's sovereign status.

Russia's reaction

Russian authorities responded negatively to this decision: they feared that it would stir up political controversy and would result in losing control of the country. On 5 March 5 1992, the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation addressed the President and the people of Tatarstan with a warning that the referendum could have negative consequences. Moreover, eight days before the vote, the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation demanded the referendum be cancelled. Russian President Boris Yeltsin appeared on TV and also called for voting against the sovereignty of the Republic.

We emphasize that Russia opposed Tatarstan's attempts to break free throughout. At no point was a free Tatarstan on the Russian agenda.

But the Tatar intelligentsia was not eager to promote a "pro-Russian" position in the Republic. Thus, the Tatarstan government's decision to hold voting for the Russian presidential election provoked a hostile reaction from the intelligentsia. In protest, Fauziya Bayramova, the leader of The Ittifaq Party, began a hunger strike at the Freedom Square on 14 May 1991 which lasted until 27 May. 16 people joined her in the course of the strike. During these days a group of 137 Tatar writers and representatives of the Tatar intelligentsia lodged a petition with the Supreme Council of Tatarstan demanding it revoke the decree providing for Russian presidential elections on the territory of the Republic.

The next step in strengthening the sovereign status of Tatarstan was the approval of the amendments to the Constitution of the Republic on 18 April 1991, which confirmed the sovereign status of the Republic and declared the supremacy of Republic laws on its territory. These regulations laid the grounds for future constitutional conflict with the Russian Federation.

Confirming the political status of the Republic of Tatarstan gave its people's self-determination a complete political and legal form. However, its sovereignty was not recognized by Russia.

After the establishment of the office of the President of Russia, the Republic suggested creating the office of the President of Tatarstan in order to strengthen its position and to invest sovereignty with real political meaning, and scheduled elections for 12 June 1991.

The introduction of the presidency in the Republic in difficult political circumstances was a significant achievement by the Republic authorities and guaranteed social-economic stability in the Republic for several years.

Back to today

In 2023 President of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov signed into law changes to the Constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan which came into force on 6 February. The amendment to the constitution which abolished the office of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan went viral. However, the bigger defeat is Russia's imperialist erasure of all mention of Tatarstan's sovereignty and legitimate autonomy from the constitution—and its attempts to erase it from the thoughts of Tatarstan's people.

These amendments to the Constitution of Tatarstan reveal that Russia will not allow any state to be freely "associated" with it (as the status of Tatarstan used to be defined) and will fiercely resist the cultural (and political) independence of non-ethnically Russian peoples. That is how its policy of cultural unification, imperialistic centralism, and the abolition of federalism works.

At the time, the referendum was a crucial step towards the development of democracy, the protection of human rights in accordance with international standards, and genuine self-government and economic sovereignty of the Republic of Tatarstan. Yet all of that irritated and continues to irritate the Russian government.

Of course, Mintimer Shaimiev (the President of Tatarstan from 1991 to 2010), also played a role in the erosion of the Republic's sovereignty. Like Yeltsin, he was often accused of not merely being deferential, but "capitulating" to Moscow: the people of Tatarstan demanded quicker and more radical action to create an independent Tatar state. However, Shaimiev did not even mention the word "independence" at the time, thus leaving himself room for negotiating with Yeltsin.

The results of the referendum held 31 years ago should have made the Republic of Tatarstan an independent sovereign state. But this democratic decision was annulled at the stroke of an authoritarian pen. We contend that self-determination of peoples is a crucial political right and that only a socialist democracy will give rights to the oppressed and allow for full equality.

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