

Bashkortostan: An exploration of protest potential during wartime

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This brief examines the protests that occurred in January 2024 in the small, working-class town of Baymak in Central Asia, Russian Federation, as a lens to analyse the potential for dissent during wartime.

THE BAYMAK PROTESTS IN 2024

On 15 January 2024, thousands of Bashkirs took to the streets in the small working-class town of Baymak¹ in the Republic of Bashkortostan, Russian Federation. The crowds gathered to protest the criminal proceedings against the environmental activist, Fail Alsynov, figurehead of the regional ethnic organisation Bashkort. The Baymak protests gained regional traction and spread all the way to Bashkortostan's capital, Ufa. The size of the assembly during this four-day period in January constituted the largest gathering of demonstrators since

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Subsequently, the authorities reacted by temporarily blocking WhatsApp and Telegram in the region. The anatomy of the protest was not inherently anti-war, but situated itself against the region's governing elites.

This brief uses the Baymak protests as a way to explore the protest potential in Bashkortostan during wartime. It clarifies that the myriad ethnic groups within the Russian Federation, often marginalised by Moscow, are not only insufficiently studied but are also crucial for a comprehensive understanding of present-day Russia.

¹ 17,710 inhabitants (2010 Census).

BACKGROUND

The republic of Bashkortostan is located on the eastern edge of European Russia, on the western side of the Ural Mountains, in the southern part of the Volga region. The republic is surrounded by Perm Krai to the north, Sverdlovsk and Chelyabinsk Oblasts to the east, Orenburg Oblast to the south, and Tatarstan and Udmurtia to the west. The current population is approximately four million; the republic dates back to 1917 in its current form. Bashkortostan was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a socialist autonomous republic in 1919.

Most of Bashkortostan's past leaders have been affiliated with the dominant ruling party, United Russia. Before 1 January 2015, the leader of the Republic of Bashkortostan was called "President." Thereafter, the leader has been referred to as "Head" (*Glava* in Russian). This brief uses "leader" and "regional leader" as synonyms for Head.

The republic's first leader, Murtaza Rakhimov, established his position both as an oil magnate and as a representative in the former Supreme Soviet. Rakhimov governed for almost twenty consecutive years between 1993 and 2010, establishing a loyal political machine under his leadership. In parallel, direct elections for Russian regional leaders, then called governors, were abolished in December 2005, which implied significant losses in regional autonomy. Following this reform in regional governance, Rakhimov led the Bashkir parliament, Kurultai, on Vladimir Putin's recommendation, but then-President Dmitry Medvedev removed him from office in 2010 due to corruption allegations. Following Rakhimov's tenure, Rustem Khamitov, an outsider to local networks, was sent out by the Kremlin and governed from 2010 to 2018. Since 2018, the Bashkir politician, Radiy Khabirov, has headed the republic under United Russia's emblem.

The republic has a multiethnic composition consisting mainly of Russians, Bashkirs, and Tatars, of whom the latter two mostly practice the Islamic faith. In addition to orthodox Christianity, many inhabitants of Bashkortostan primarily follow Islam, often influenced by Sufism or Turkish traditions. While the traditional Hanafi school of Islam remains prevalent in the republic, less "traditional" schools of Islam have also expanded here, influenced by religious practices from the Gulf and Central Asia. Islam is foundational in Bashkortostan, with the spiritual headquarters and administration of Russia's Muslim community located

in Ufa. Undoubtedly, Ufa is the wealthiest part of the republic, characterised by a highly stratified socio-economic structure in which Bashkirs living in rural or industrial communities (such as Baymak) face stagnant welfare. It is also in such industrial peripheries that protest culture and ethnic civil-society movements have gained momentum from around 2010 to the present.

TOP-DOWN ENFORCEMENT OF ORDER

Bashkortostan is among the regions closely monitored by Moscow, with the Kremlin signalling internally that concrete decisions may be made if the potential for protest in the republic escalates, though the situation has not yet reached a critical level.

Order in the regions is primarily maintained through institutional gatekeeping. This means that the channels of information and influence are guarded by individuals trusted by the regime. Barometer surveys measure the success of the above by assessing the popularity of President Vladimir Putin and regional leaders.

Any indicators of the status quo or signs of downward trends can necessitate the replacement of a regional leader of a republic. The Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) is among the executing parties in these sociological surveys, assessing the level of trust and satisfaction with the political performance of the federation's president and regional leader. It is likely that the Kremlin would interpret changes in the status quo in Bashkortostan or downward trends in the popularity of the regional or federal leaders as indicators that the regional leader of the republic needs to be replaced to ensure social cohesion.

EXCESSIVE LOYALISM

Drawing on Libman and Heckthaler's (2023) theoretical concept of "excessive loyalty," it should be noted that, as the Kremlin seeks to deepen its influence in the regions, regional leaders and their subordinates must increasingly navigate strict directives from the centre. This is particularly true during times of war. Excessive loyalty entails that regional leaders seek attention and signal their loyalty to an extent that may backfire, damaging the relationship and tolerance between ruling elites and civil society. The excessive dimensions are evident in local leaders taking punitive deterrence measures, such as cracking down on civil society both judicially and through violent repression, as well as using propaganda to satisfy the Kremlin's assumed



Map 1. Bashkortostan in the Russian Federation.

Source: Per Wikström, FOI.

political agenda and will. Excessive loyalism is largely correlated with geographic distance from Moscow and with a regional leader's will to obtain federal redistribution funds. Excessive loyalism may also be linked to the leader's desire to secure a higher position within the political echelons after their tenure.

DRIVERS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

Mass mobilisation and social organisation in regions such as Bashkortostan and the working-class town of Baymak is largely based on the successful expansion of minority-driven civil-society organisations. Such organisations gained local resonance after previously successful protests and campaigns in the 2010s.

The Bashkir spirit of protest is multifaceted, influenced by widespread dissatisfaction with industrial exploitation and inadequate welfare provisions. It is also shaped by the opposition of both the local population and resistant elites to the restriction of minority-language rights. For example, the regional leader

Khamitov, who was appointed from outside Bashkortostan, was pressured to resign in 2018 as discontent escalated over issues such as school closures, high infant mortality, and inadequate healthcare in the region. Bashkortostan's most recent leader, Rabiyy Khabirov, was also involved in the decade-long competition between elite factions, which permitted and promoted the growth of ethnonationalist groupings. When he assumed power in 2018 with United Russia's support, most civil-society organisations were de facto captured or pacified by the state, except for Bashkort, which remained independent.

Despite the Russian Supreme Court's classification of the ethnonationalist organisation Bashkort as extremist in 2020, its reputation remained intact in the region. Bashkort and its affiliates organised successfully using minority languages on social media and established rigid networks, whose mobilising capacity peaked in January 2024, when thousands gathered to express their collective dissatisfaction in Baymak over the arrest of Fail Alsynov, an ecoactivist and Bashkort's figurehead.

EVENTS AT THE FRONTLINE IN UKRAINE

Fail Alsynov's arrest and sentencing had repercussions for Bashkir servicemen on the front lines in Ukraine. Reports indicate that his punishment, following the January protests, has altered the dynamics at the front. The repercussions of the protests prompted Bashkir officers to reassign their comrades to non-combat units. Along the Kreminna line near Avdiivka in eastern Ukraine, Bashkir's contribution to the fighting has primarily involved providing logistical support, repairs, and evacuation services among Russian offensive units. Bashkir units seem to have a tendency to protect each other on the frontlines.

CONCLUSION

The Baymak protests can be fruitfully used to explore the potential for wartime protests in Bashkortostan. Given the above analysis, it can be concluded that collective action is driven by minority organisations of local civil society. Occurrences such as the arrest of Fail Alsynov may influence events on the front lines in Ukraine, with possible repercussions for Bashkortostan. Consequently, if such events recur frequently, the war itself could become a destabilising factor for the Russian Federation as a political entity. ■

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