



Russia: Leadership Transitions In Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, And Dagestan

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Russia is currently in the midst of a political transition that has already seen or will soon see several veteran regional leaders retire. Until 2004, Russia's regions had direct elections for presidents and governors, as is the case in the US. However, after the Beslan school siege in the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, then-president (and now prime minister) Vladimir Putin abolished these elections and the Kremlin took direct charge of appointing regional leaders. This was a major step towards recentralising power after the devolution of the Yeltsin era (1991-99). The Kremlin retained most regional leaders, but has now begun the process of bringing in new blood.

Drawing my attention right now is who will accede to the presidencies of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Dagestan.

Tatarstan has already provided the answer. Last Friday it was announced that long-time President Mintimer Shaimiyev, 73, will be succeeded by his handpicked successor, Prime Minister Rustam Minnikhanov, 52. Tatarstan is of tremendous importance because it is an oil-rich region, a Muslim republic, and home of Russia's second-largest ethnic group, the Tatars (3.8% of the population in the 2002 census). In the early 1990s, Tatarstan's bid for a high degree of autonomy raised concerns that Russia itself might break up. Unlike Chechnya, Tatarstan never chose to break free, but the Kremlin has found Shaimiyev difficult to control, hence rumours that it may have forced his retirement.

Shaimiyev's impending exit has led to speculation that neighbouring Bashkortostan's veteran president, Murtaza Rakhimov, 76, may be next. The Bashkirs are Russia's fourth-biggest ethnic group (though only 1.2% of the population) and also live in an oil-rich Muslim region. Rumours of Rakhimov's 'imminent replacement' have circulated for years, but his age gives them greater weight this time. Both Shaimiyev and Rakhimov have effectively ruled their own fiefs since the early 1990s, and naturally there are question marks about whether their successors can govern effectively.

Also noteworthy is that Dagestan President Mukhu Aliyev's term is due to expire in the next fortnight. Dagestan, along with Chechnya and Ingushetia, has emerged as one of the most violent parts of the troubled North Caucasus, and its importance stems from the fact that it lies on the Caspian Sea and has pipelines running through it. If Dagestan descends deeper into violence, this could exacerbate matters in the whole region.

Beneath these successions lie two key problems for the Kremlin. The first is how Moscow can balance federal versus republican (i.e. local) interests. If the latter are not sufficiently cared for, opposition to the centre – and possibly separatist sentiment – could gather force. Secondly, there has been considerable speculation that President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin are locked in a power struggle, and that they are competing to have their loyalists installed in the regions. Therefore, much is at stake for the future of Russia.