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Tatar Nationalists Demonstrate on Eve of Clinton's Kazan Visit

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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VIENNA &mdash For the 20th time since the end of Soviet power, Tatar activists on Sunday marked the anniversary of Ivan the Terrible's conquest of the Kazan khanate in 1552 with a demonstration to protest Moscow's policy of Russification and to call for the national independence of the Tatars and other peoples oppressed by Moscow.

The demonstration, which attracted upwards of 400 people, was more vocal than previous ones, a development that some Russian observers suggested reflected the convergence of nationalist and Islamic sentiments in the region and that others argued was intended to attract the attention of U.S, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Kazan Wednesday.

Organized by the All-Tatar Social Center (VTOTs), the World Forum of Tatar Youth and the Uzebez Movement, the protesters included both longtime nationalist activists, many from the older generation who focused on Tatar themes, and also younger Islamic activists

who stressed the common fate of Muslim peoples in the Russian Federation.

In addition, and identified by the Tatar speakers as honored "guests," were representatives drawn from the other peoples of Idel-Ural &mdash the Bashkirs, the Mordvins, the Mari, the Udmurts and the Chuvash &mdash as well as from Muslim peoples hailing from further away, including at least some from the North Caucasus.

Among the slogans chanted or appearing on posters were "Freedom for Tatarstan," "The Holocaust of the Tatar People [began] in 1552," "We demand a ban on Russian language in education," "Allah is Great," "Stop the Genocide of the Indigenous Peoples of Idel-Ural" and "Vote Against Putin in 2012!"

The speakers included Tatar activists like Fauziya Bayramova, Rafiz Kashapov and Alfiya Adiatullina among others, all of whom have had difficulties with the authorities because of their outspoken nationalism and opposition to Putin's elimination of the so-called "national component" in schools that has limited the use of the Tatar language.

The meeting adopted an appeal addressed to President Dmitry Medvedev and other leaders of the Russian government —an appeal that Moscow agencies pointedly noted was the only thing in Russian at the meeting. It noted that "the empire is destroying the people of its own colonies, in particular the Tatars" and that Moscow is "violating the norms of international law."

The appeal continued by denouncing the Russian government's persecution of the Milli Mejlis, a self-proclaimed Tatar parliament that seeks independence for Tatarstan, and Moscow's equation of "the national-liberation movement [of the Tatars and other Middle Volga peoples] with terrorism."

And it concluded with the observation that today, the Tatars are facing a new test: "Globalization is promoting assimilation, [especially among the peoples of the Russian Federation because] the federal authorities continue to show [their] complete indifference to the needs of national minorities."

"May the Day of Memory [of the tragic events of 1552] become for us," the appeal said, "an occasion to remember that each person has the right to freedom: freedom to live in a state where you feel yourself a full citizen and not a 'second-class' human being, freedom to write and speak one's native language and freedom to see that one's culture and traditions are respected and thus be proud of what you will bequeath the next generation."

Not surprisingly, most Moscow commentaries on this event have been extremely negative. Russkaya Liniya, a portal with close ties to the Russian Orthodox Church, suggested that the activists in Kazan had tried to dramatize their position simply because U.S. Secretary Clinton was coming there this week.

That Internet publication also stressed that the Tatar nationalists were a type of group that leaders like Tatarstan President Mintimir Shaymiyev routinely manipulated like "a joker in a deck of cards" in order to present themselves as moderate, even though such meetings highlight the "marginal nature" of such nationalism.

But as its main reason for ignoring what the Tatar activists are saying, Russkaya Liniya advanced the argument that the Tatar national movement is now highlighting its links with Islam. This year, as in the early 1990s, its leaders talked about not just a Day of Memory on the anniversary of the fall of Kazan but also a Day of Memory of Shahids.

If in fact the Tatar national movement and Islam are coming back together &mdash and there is evidence both ways &mdash that may be damning from Russkaya Liniya's point of view. At the same time, however, it could point to more problems ahead for Moscow in the Middle Volga.

In the past, the Russian government has sought with more or less success to play off Tatar nationalism against Islam as part of a "divide and rule" strategy. If those two forces are coming together in Tatarstan as they have in the North Caucasus, then the combination could prove dangerously explosive in a region that so far has been relatively quiescent.

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