



Soviet soldiers and Interior Ministry troops on the streets of Baku, Azerbaijan on "Black January" (January 21, 1990 / Photo by AP)

EUROPE

Are Russia’s Governments-in-Exile Actually Western Intelligence Ops?

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Seemingly forgotten by the Western world, governments in exile might be a serious security vulnerability for Russia. In a recent meeting on May 24th, the Director of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), Alexander Bortnikov, claimed the West is using opposition or separatist movements within Russian republics to form ‘governments-in-exile,’ in order to take advantage of subsequent socioeconomic ‘deterioration’ and ‘mass riots,’ according to Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti. Speaking to the Council of Heads of Security Agencies and Special Services of CIS Countries in Bishkek, Bortnikov reportedly mentioned possible ‘color revolutions’ within the Russian Commonwealth States as a result of these operations. According to Russian military officers, the term ‘Color Revolution’ refers to the Ukrainian crisis and to the new approach of US and European states to warfare that seeks to destabilize other countries at low cost and with minimal casualties by creating or supporting revolutions.

Governments-in-exile are complex but significant threats to stability within Russia, and have the power to encourage opposition sentiments broadly across the Commonwealth States. Bortnikov outlined a strategy in which foreign agents develop and influence seemingly organic non-profits or opposition movements in Russian republics. These groups lobby and protest for independence from the Russian Federation. Western intelligence has historically supported dissident and opposition groups in Russia—take, for example, the CIA’s Operation QRPLUMB, which supported anti-Soviet groups in Ukraine during the Cold War. On the other hand, Russia typically is quick to blame the rise of dissident voices on the West. So how much of an opportunity do they provide for regional instability in Russia, and do foreign powers even need to intervene?

Intelligence Operations in Tatarstan

Aida Abdrakhmanova, Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Independent Tatarstan in exile, claimed on March 25th that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) was utilizing Telegram channels to discredit Tatar history and its national movement. Two Telegram channels, supposedly managed by the FSB, cited the men responsible for creating the Government of Independent Tatarstan in exile’s birth in 2008, claiming it was with the help of Western and Turkish intelligence. The message framed Mirzayanov, former President and Prime Minister of the ‘Government of Independent Tatarstan in exile,’ as a CIA asset. They also claimed Rafis Kashapov, an outspoken Putin critic, Tatar activist, and now current PM of the government in exile, is a British intelligence asset. Although the message failed to elaborate on the Turkish intelligence community’s role in the Tatar National Movement, it was presumably referring to Tatarstan’s independent bilateral relationship with Turkey. The message emphasized foreign interest in leaders of the National Movement, and suggested terrorism could come out of the movement.

ФСБ России заинтересовалась Правительством Независимого Татарстана в изгнании!
Два подконтрольных ФСБ России Telegram-канала ОБХСС и Замполит Татarii опубликовали информацию с целью дискредитации Правительства Независимого Татарстана в изгнании.<https://t.co/10Fshl8IUz>
— Aida Abdrakhmanova (@Tatarradio) March 25, 2024

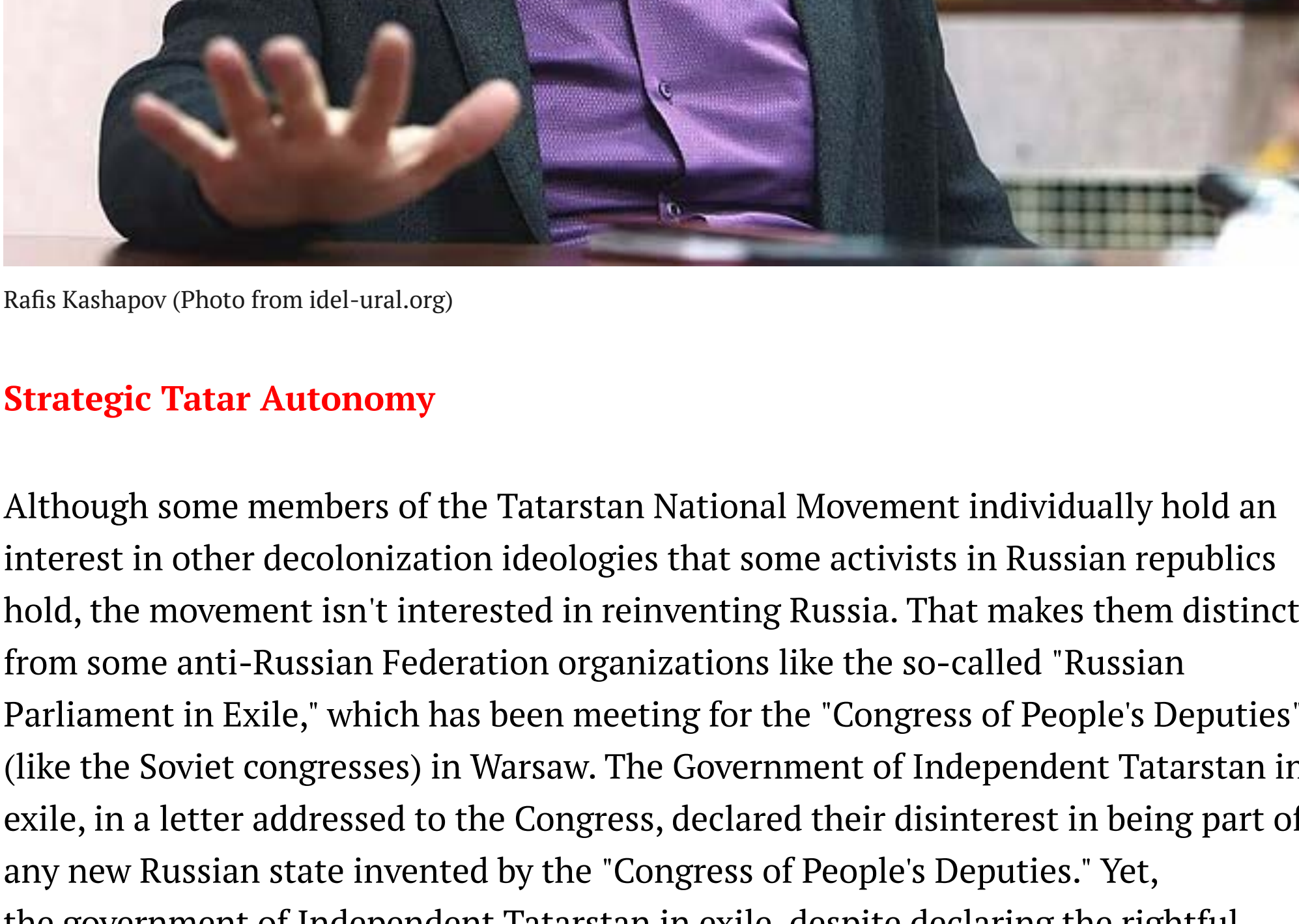
Aida’s assertion about this being an FSB plot to discredit the so-called ‘separatist’ movement may not be a bad guess. Bortnikov’s more recent warning about the vulnerability of governments-in-exile to foreign intelligence communities seems in-line with the assertive Telegram message, although Bortnikov never mentioned Tatarstan by name.

The Republic of Tatarstan, a subject of the Russian Federation, lost its autonomy after the fall of the USSR. Tatarstan held a referendum in 1992, ratifying an earlier declaration of sovereignty and calling for recognition by the UN. The referendum sought to establish dual citizenship for Tartar citizens. A bilateral treaty with Russia was established, permitting Tatarstan a large degree of autonomy. Throughout Russian President Vladimir Putin’s reign since 2000, Tatarstan’s treaty and subsequent autonomy have slowly been erased, leaving Tatarstan without any sovereignty or treaty by 2017.

Historical Context

Vil Mirzayanov, famous for leaking military secrets in the 90s, moved to the United States and was elected to a Tatar nationalist organization called the ‘Milli Mejlis’ in 2008 before being elected Prime Minister and President of the government-in-exile. Rafis Kashapov, meanwhile, a representative and recently elected leader of the government of Tatarstan in exile, formerly spent over a year in prison in 2009 for supporting Tatar nationalism, and later three years in jail in 2014 for critiquing the Russian occupation of Crimea. He fled from Russia to the United Kingdom in 2018.

The messages from the Telegram Channel say Rafis Kashapov was ‘captured by British secret intelligence services,’ an unsubstantiated claim. Rafis was labeled a ‘foreign agent’ by the Russian government at the start of 2023. Reportedly, Russian law permits non-profit organizations with funding from abroad and political activities to be labeled as ‘foreign agents.’ Recently, a criminal case was opened against Rafis for hosting a Ukrainian journalist on his show, or participating in the activities of an ‘undesirable organization.’



Rafis Kashapov (Photo from idel-ural.org)

Strategic Tatar Autonomy

Although some members of the Tatarstan National Movement individually hold an interest in other decolonization ideologies that some activists in Russian republics hold, the movement isn’t interested in reinventing Russia. That makes them distinct from some anti-Russian Federation organizations like the so-called ‘Russian Parliament in Exile,’ which has been meeting for the ‘Congress of People’s Deputies’ (like the Soviet congresses) in Warsaw. The Government of Independent Tatarstan in exile, in a letter addressed to the Congress, declared their disinterest in being part of any new Russian state invented by the ‘Congress of People’s Deputies.’ Yet, the government of Independent Tatarstan in exile, despite declaring the rightful autonomy of Tatarstan, still called for the complete dismantlement of the Russian Federation.

If taken seriously, then, the government of Independent Tatarstan in exile poses an existential threat to Russia. But by taking exiled governments seriously, Russia both gives them credence and press coverage. Moscow’s plan is to repress until separatist voices lose energy. As Paul Goble, a specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia, notes in his research, most governments ignore such governments-in-exile, but Russia takes excessive interest in them.

On the one hand, a republic like Tatarstan has more of a chance than others at fighting for independence. The region is well-developed, well-populated, and resource-rich. Tatarstan has come under more international press coverage recently as Ukrainian drone strikes have continually hit deep into Tatarstan (considered ‘deep’ because it shares no borders with Ukraine). Tatarstan is a large producer of Russian drones. If Tatar nationalist movements continue fighting to regain lost ground in autonomy from the Russian Federation, they could perhaps capture international press coverage. More likely, however, is the inspiration of other marginalized governments-in-exile within Russian borders, like the exile government of Ichkeria, for example.

On the other hand, although the ethnic Tatar population—around 2 million—is relatively large, another 2 million or so ethnic Russians live in Tatarstan. These ethnically-Russian majority districts opposed the sovereignty of Tatarstan in the 1992 referendum. In addition, although Tatarstan is resource-rich, it’s also entirely enclosed by Russian borders and consequently lacks trading partners. Tatar nationalist activists, many of whom affiliate with anti-imperialist and decolonization Russian movements, have little to no leverage in their fight for independence. With many leaders of nationalist Tatar organizations being removed from political office or otherwise persecuted under charges of terrorism, Tatar national ideology might actually be lower than previous times. Currently, many of these affiliated activists are seeking to unite Tatar peoples globally, many of whom remain scattered across parts of Eastern Europe. Russia is home to five million ethnic Tatars, but only two million reside in Tatarstan.



President of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov (Photo from president.tatarstan.ru)

A republic like Tatarstan does hold strategic value for foreign governments interested in civil unrest. Mass riots, like the recent ones in Bashkortostan last January, have the most potential to draw international attention and outrage. However, mass protests and social unrest are oftentimes triggered by the Russian response to activist agendas. For example, in Bashkortostan, which also has a large ethnic indigenous population, thousands began to protest in January after the imprisonment of Fail Alsynov. Alsynov was the leader of a group seeking to preserve Bashkir culture and language, which also condemned mining operations in the region. He was charged with the disparagement of other ethnic groups. Russian state media and officials frequently attribute social unrest in the republics of the Russian Federation to Western intervention or incitement. While Western intelligence could seek to incite arrests and political action from Russian officials against minority and separatist groups across the nation, claims of orchestrated ‘color revolutions’ are typically unsubstantiated.

More Case Studies of Governments-in-Exile



Protestor in Ufa, the capital of Bashkortostan, on January 19th, after the imprisonment of an activist (Photo by Reuters)

But more exile governments in the Caucasus are perhaps becoming potential stages for ‘color revolutions.’ The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, for example, is the government-in-exile that declared independence from Russia in the early 1990s, leading to the two Chechen wars. Ukraine formerly recognized the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as ‘occupied’ by Russia in 2022. The Ingush Independence Committee of Ingushetia, which is another Russian republic located in the Caucasus just north of Georgia, recently formed the *Ingush Liberation Army* last year, hailing the independence of Ingushetia. Ingushetia, stuck in poverty and subject to violence, is a prime ground for the development of an insurgency, despite the FSB’s claim in 2017 that insurgency groups had been eliminated in North Caucasus.

Color Revolutions

Moscow seems convinced that the only appropriate way to deal with these separatist voices is through strong repression. Putin perhaps fears another Bolshevik revolution occurring every time voices in Russia call for the ‘decolonization of Russia’ and are not dealt with harshly. It’s unlikely that organizations like the ‘Russian parliament in exile’ cause too much worry for the FSB. Of greater importance to them are local cultures in republics where calls for independence have not been lost to history or modernity. If the FSB is indeed waging to discredit regional calls for independence with social media and the prosecution of organizations as ‘foreign agents,’ that could make it harder for Western intelligence apparatuses to create and fund pseudo-nonprofit organizations and opposition movements. Ethnic Russians or non-Ethnic Russians with few other cultural ties could be persuaded of the inauthenticity of these calls for independence.

But ethnic Tatars and ethnic Bashkirs, for example, are unlikely to be persuaded. When Russia mandated the end of local language learning courses in Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, Tatar authorities put up a fight. Despite the resistance ultimately failing, Tatar locals reportedly still provide locals with resources to learn Tatar. Even so, Moscow perhaps believes they won the fight. According to one local news source Posle, a Ukrainian tabloid, Tatar language media outlets are censored far less than Russian ones. If that’s true, then Tatar-speaking media is seen as a negligible threat. If the local governance of these Russian republics is composed of a regionally ethnic majority, then time will tell if these leaders are loyal to Moscow out of patriotism or survival. Bashkortostan and Tatarstan also both have local Muslim populations. Although the Tatarstan National Movement is secular as of right now, other Islamic movements could gain traction.

Western powers might consider further supporting these opposition parties and separatist movements within Russian borders, whether covertly or overtly, as the West continues to seek more levers of influence over Russia’s actions. Additionally, the more Russia responds to threats from governments-in-exile and opposition movements with repression, the more potential the movements have to attract media attention. Many of the separatist movements near Russia’s borders have support from a diaspora throughout Europe. If Russian repression of local movements for independence viewed as culturally or historically imperative were covered by international media, this could mobilize supportive communities in other parts of the world under less repression and censorship from Russia, and lead to further destabilization of the region.

Analysis

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