

# The “Tatarstan Model”: Shaimiyev’s Authoritarianism and Russia’s Power Vertical

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## Abstract

During the 1990s and early 2000s the Tatarstan Model was a key framework in Russia’s federal system, based on a power-sharing arrangement with Moscow, granting it more autonomy over its economy, culture, and policies, while still maintaining allegiance to the central government. The primary purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the Tatarstan model of governance during the four terms as president of the Republic of Tatarstan (RT) of Mintimer Shaimiyev (1991-2010). This model exemplifies a unique blend of authoritarian leadership, regional elite management, and crony capitalism. By examining how these elements interact within the context of Tatarstan, the paper aims to illuminate the implications for regional autonomy, economic development, and political stability in Russia.

Based on an extensive review of theoretic literature, archival, local and national press sources, the present research employs a mixed-methods approach combining case-study, process-tracing and historical institutional analysis to examine Shaimiyev’s rule in Tatarstan.

The paper details and provides evidence for the relevance of the main pillars of the TM, that have been major sources of stability for both the Tatarstan political establishment, and the RF’s “vertical of power” under Putin. Conclusions are drawn as to the crucial historic role of the Model for the overall vitality of the centre – regions power vertical in Russia.

**Keywords:** Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, caciquismo, machine politics, crony capitalism, electoral authoritarianism, sovereignty

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## Introduction

The war in Ukraine has placed additional pressure on the Russian government to maintain internal stability. Regional disobedience or dissent could embolden opposition movements, create logistical and administrative challenges, and undermine the government's narrative of national unity in the face of external threats. Moreover, as the conflict has strained resources and led to casualties, maintaining the loyalty of regional leaders and the broader population has become even more vital to prevent unrest or rebellion that could destabilize the regime. A model of relations between the federal centre and the regions, which was developed in the 1990s and the early 2000s by the Republic of Tatarstan's (RT) first President Shaimiyev and the Russian Federation's (RF) Presidents Yeltsin and Putin, may provide part of the answers to the question why there is no visible dissent in Russian regions despite the Ukraine war's staggering costs that tend to be even higher for poorer ethnic regions in the RF (Bessudnov, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

Tatarstan's importance in Russian politics can hardly be overstated (Matsuzato, 2001: 43). The republic is the home of the second largest ethnic group in the RF – the Tatars; it possesses significant oil and gas reserves, vital for the Federation industrial enterprises, educated and ethnically diverse population, rich ancient culture and statehood traditions.<sup>3</sup> All these coupled with its strategic location and traditional role as a bridge between the Russian East and West, Islam and Christianity, influenced the path that the republic would pursue following the collapse of the Soviet Union and contributed to its preeminent position among Russian regions.

During the course of the 1990s the republic's leadership followed a two-pronged strategy – it persistently strived after greater autonomy from Moscow promoting Tatarstan's claim of state sovereignty as the “guiding principle of its political, economic and cultural development”; at the same time, using this “sovereignty project” (Graney, 2009: xx) as a legitimization tool, Tatarstan's leadership proceeded to build a highly centralized semi-authoritarian political system in the republic and establish complete control over the most important sectors of the economy.

“The architect of Tatarstan's post-Soviet political course” (Walker, 1996: 11) was Mintimer Shaimiyev, an ethnic Tatar who, prior to becoming the Republic of Tatarstan's (RT) first President in 1991, had been occupying important political and state positions in the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR).<sup>4</sup> An exceptional political figure,

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<sup>2</sup> Analyses of crowdsourced data of Russian military fatalities in the Ukraine war show that there are significant regional socioeconomic and ethnic disparities in Russian fatalities, with residents of poorer ethnic regions like Buryatia and Tuva four times more likely to be killed in Ukraine than ethnic Russians (Bessudnov, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Modern-day Tatars' heritage is a diverse Eurasian mix of Volga Bulgarian and Golden Horde lineage.

<sup>4</sup> Since 1969 Shaimiyev has held consecutively the positions of Minister of Land Improvement and Water Management, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, First Secretary of Tatar Regional Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Committee, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the TASSR.

Shaimiyev had a keen awareness of the republic’s “fundamental structural limitations”<sup>5</sup> (Graney, 2009: xxxii) and was intent on deriving maximum political rent from the ambiguity inherent in the concept of sovereignty – described as “[...] never absolute, always partial and parcelled among multiple levels of government” (Kahn, 2002: 98) – from the very outset of Tatarstan’s sovereignty project.

This awareness of the unattainability of complete independence led Shaimiyev to opt for a moderate political course seeking “maximum possible levels of empirical sovereignty without making explicit claims to juridical sovereignty” (Graney, 2009: 33). Hence, this deft political strategy can be perceived as the hallmark of the “Tatarstan Model” (hereinafter TM or the Model). Thanks to this strategy Shaimiyev was able to extract numerous political concessions from Yeltsin in the 1990s and to position Tatarstan as the pioneer of regional sovereignty-seeking in the Federation thus making the Tatarstan Model an object of emulation by other subjects of the Federation.

On the other hand, the internal dimensions of the Tatarstan Model were characterized by extensive centralization of political and economic power under Shaimiyev and his close relatives and associates (i.e. the “Shaimiyev clan”). In this research I argue that the internal and external dimensions of the Model were complementary, and mutually enhanced each other – the strengthening of Kazan’s position vis-à-vis the federal centre led to a strengthening of Shaimiyev’s regime and vice versa. My main point, therefore, is that authoritarian leadership played a decisive role in the establishment and development of the TM, and that such a model could hardly have materialized in the chaotic and turbulent post-Soviet period had democracy and genuine pluralism been the prevalent conditions in the RT.

The primary purpose of this paper is to critically analyze the Model of governance under Shaimiyev, which exemplifies a unique blend of authoritarian leadership, regional elite management, and crony capitalism. By examining how these elements interact within the context of Tatarstan, the paper aims to illuminate the implications for regional autonomy, economic development, and political stability in the Russian Federation. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on regional governance in authoritarian regimes and the impact of elite networks on Russian federalism.

The main objectives of the current study are as follows:

a/ To examine the role of authoritarian leadership for the success of the Model, focusing on how this style of governance shapes the political dynamics between the Kremlin and the regions in Russia;

b/ To demonstrate how Kazan’s sovereignty discourse in the 1990s served the ruling elite in the Republic to consolidate their power;

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<sup>5</sup> These refer to the Tatarstan occupying an enclave position within Russia; the multi-ethnic population divided almost equally between ethnic Russians and Tatars; the very high proportion of mixed marriages between the two ethnicities; and the fact that the majority of Tatars in the RF live outside Tatarstan. These factors would render any attempts for secession a highly risky and uncertain affair.

c/ To discuss the origins and characteristics of Tatarstan's political system and to assess its role in the elite bargain between Kazan' and Moscow during Yeltsin's and Putin's tenures;

d/ To explore regional elite management by investigating the strategies employed by Tatarstan's leadership to manage regional elites, including the establishment of patron-client relationships and the distribution of resources to maintain loyalty and control;

e/ To discuss the TM implications for regional autonomy within the Russian Federation, considering how authoritarian governance may both empower and restrict regional self-determination.

This study employs a case-study approach combined with process-tracing and historical institutional analysis to examine Shaimiyev's rule in Tatarstan during the 1990s and early 2000s. Tatarstan was selected due to its distinctive political trajectory and the prominent role of Shaimiyev in shaping regional governance during a transformative period in post-Soviet Russia. The process-tracing method is employed to identify causal mechanisms and key events that influenced the evolution of Shaimiyev's governance strategies and the Model. The analysis focuses on pivotal moments, such as the adoption of the 1992 Tatarstan Constitution and negotiations with the federal government. The historical institutional analysis framework facilitates an examination of how historical legacies and institutional arrangements shaped the interactions between Tatarstan and the federal center. By analyzing formal and informal institutions, the study assesses their impact on regional autonomy and governance. Primary data sources used include government documents, speeches, and archival materials from Tatarstan's political institutions, alongside media interviews with key political actors and analysts familiar with the period. Secondary sources encompass scholarly articles, books, and reports on Tatarstan's political landscape and federal relations. This mixed-methods approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the political dynamics under Shaimiyev's rule and the significance of the Model in the context of Russian federalism.

## **Tatarstan's push for sovereignty as Shaimiyev's successful power-consolidation project**

### ***The struggle for sovereignty as a means of neutralizing Tatar nationalists***

Tatar nationalists saw the downfall of the Soviet Union as a historic opportunity to put a Tatar state back on the world map after nearly 440 years<sup>6</sup>, and "to assert its identity and try to mold a coherent political, social and cultural whole" (Zverev, 1998: 120). Naturally, the looming Russian dominance was seen in Tatarstan as a threat to such aspirations, and historic parallels with Russian policies of colonization, forceful conversion into Orthodoxy, and widespread mosque destruction, spread intermittently across 17th, 18th and 19th centuries (Broxup, 1996: 76), and Soviet repressions toward

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<sup>6</sup> The last independent Tatar (or Volga) Bulgarian state, the Kazan' Khanate, was conquered by Ivan Grozny in 1552.

Volga Tatars (Davletshin, 1974), seemed to substantiate Tatar fears. However it was not only recent and distant history, and romantic notions of the rebirth of the Tatar people that gave widespread legitimacy to the calls for greater independence from Moscow. Tatarstani residents, ethnic Russian and Tatar alike, were wary of the possibility that a would-be independent post-Soviet Russia might further restrict the little economic control that Tatarstan had over its industry, trade and resources. Notably, some 60% of ethnic Russians in Tatarstan supported greater independence from Russia in the early nineties (Toft, 2006: 49). Thus, the Republic's leadership had to take into account and devise a strategy for dealing with, and using to its own ends, a potentially fervent mix of nationalistic and economic grievances.

Recognizing that endorsing popular demands for upgrading Tatarstan's status from an autonomous to an independent from Russia republic within the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), would win it wide support among Tatarstan's population, the ruling elite in the republic took control of the national movement from 1990 and began the pursuit of *sovereignty*. The republic's leadership managed to do that adeptly by assuming some of nationalists' rhetoric while marginalizing nationalist organizations and excluding them from decision making on either economic or political issues, which is one of the main reasons for the decline of radical Tatar nationalist organizations in the mid-nineties (Mirsiapov, 2004: 134). Despite an arguably active nationalist mobilization in the early nineties, radical groups striving for complete independence such as Ittifaq, enjoyed only 2.5 percent popular support in 1991 and failed to attract moderate Tatarstanis to the independence cause (Kaplan, 1997: 53). Thus, the ruling establishment in the republic was able to monopolize the struggle for sovereignty, securing for itself popular support, and buying the time it needed to build a strong political machine that would allow Shaimiyev and his circle to entrench themselves in power. With this goal in mind, they viewed the national issue of sovereignty not just as "mastery over the republic's natural resources and the possibility of freely establishing political, economic and cultural ties with Russia, the Soviet republics and foreign countries" (Zverev, 1998: 123), but also as an ideological legitimization of their pursuit of political and economic monopoly in the republic.

It is noteworthy, however, that while Shaimiyev's political strategy in the early years of Tatarstan's post-Soviet period was aimed at neutralizing Tatar nationalists' influence on society and marginalizing politically their organizations, he did not hesitate to use the "radical Tatar nationalism and separatism" threat in his negotiations with Moscow, something that was tacitly admitted even by a loyal to Shaimiyev Tatar scholar (Bukharaev, 1999: 102). Acutely aware of the unattainability of full independence, Shaimiyev opted for a moderate political course declaring unequivocally his commitment to a multinational understanding of Tatarstan's statehood and policies reaching out to both Tatars and Russians (Walker, 1996: 11). To this end, the promotion of national civic (Tatarstani), rather than ethnic (Tatar) identity has been one of the staples of Shaimiyev's state-building policies (Hanauer, 1996: 83). By stating firmly that Tatarstan was not striving for complete independence (Graney, 2009: 33), Shaimiyev was able to allay Moscow's fears and convince

the centre that his regime was a far lesser evil for the RF than the radical Tatar opposition. Shaimiyev's multi-level political maneuvering proved particularly successful and he managed to secure Moscow's support in critical situations, reduce significantly nationalists' influence in Tatarstani political life, and portray his regime as a staunch champion of Tatarstan's sovereignty all at the same time. Tatar nationalists soon realized Shaimiyev's preeminent concern was power, and the dynamic events of the early nineties confirmed to a large extent their claims that the ruling class in Tatarstan has abandoned the independence cause and the interests of the people in favour of accommodation with Moscow and control over the economy. Employing a "shifting with the wind" strategy, the republic's leaders played the "sovereignty card" when it served them, and made deals with the Russians when it did not (McAuley, 1997: 82).

***"Ambiguity as political strength"***

Legal purity has never ranked very high on Tatarstan's list of priorities in the republic's struggle for sovereignty (Graney, 2009: 19). As Sakwa (2008: 228) puts it, "In international affairs sovereignty is an absolute [...]; whereas in domestic politics sovereignty is a far more malleable notion." Matsuzato (2001: 66) contends that "the operative usage" of ambiguity in Tatarstan's sovereignty discourse requires that "Kazan' would never burn its bridges for the sake of some theoretical purity". Starting from the August 1990 Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Republic of Tatarstan the republic's leaders have systematically used the ambiguity inherent in the notion of sovereignty to their advantage. Tatarstan's sovereignty declaration was motivated by the republic's hurry to sign the Union Treaty as an independent subject of the USSR. It set the example for all other republics of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) to declare state sovereignty triggering the so-called "Parade of Sovereignities" (Khakimov, 1996). The 1990 Declaration, signed by the then-Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the TASSR Mintimer Shaimiyev, stated that Tatarstan is a sovereign state but failed to point out as to neither how this sovereignty was to be exercised, nor what the legal relationships between Tatarstan and the USSR, and between Tatarstan and the RSFSR were to be (Graney, 2009: 25). Tatarstan's leadership realized that such a declaration's potential economic benefits could be substantial, and also seemed to be acutely aware that projecting sovereignty at home would be an important factor for mobilizing support for the republic's government, and achieving regime consolidation. Thus, Tatarstan's ruling elite entered the long and arduous bargaining game with the federal centre over the empirical meaning and practical realization of the republic's sovereignty resolved to make the most of the concept's malleability.

The first opportunity for defending Tatarstan's sovereignty came towards the end of 1991 when it refused to sign Yeltsin's Federation Treaty and later, in March 1992, held a referendum on the issue of the republic being a sovereign state and a subject of international law building its relations with Russia and other republics on the basis of equal treaties. The 62 percent support for sovereignty was a resounding political victory for the republic's government, all the more so as it signalled that many ethnic Russians in Tatarstan also supported its greater independence from Moscow. According to Walker (1996: 17),

the ambiguous wording of the referendum's question contributed to its success by allaying both Russians' and Tatar moderates' fears that the republic was opting for secession.<sup>7</sup> This success accomplished the task of permanently isolating nationalist organizations. As Matsuzato (2001: 72) puts it: "At the same time, Shaimiyevites contained the quest for independence by Tatar radical nationalists through vague counter-proposals such as 'sovereignty' and 'being subject to international law'."

The victory also gave Tatarstan the confidence to continue asserting its will by adopting its own Constitution. Tatarstan's Constitution heralded a prolonged period of legal collisions between republican and federal legislations. The Constitution asserts that the republic is a subject of international law associated with Russia, while according to the Russian Constitution Tatarstan is a subject of the federation and a part of Russian territory. Here, one should note the vagueness of the term 'association', implying neither federative nor confederative relationship (Matsuzato, 2001: 67). Another contentious issue that would remain unresolved until Putin's federal reforms took effect was the fact that each constitution provided for the supremacy of its own provisions (Nikraves, 1999: 237). The reason for such contradictions' durability was that neither Moscow, nor Kazan were interested in removing them and establishing transparent and non-arbitrary mechanisms regulating their bilateral relations. Instead, the two parties wished to keep maximum room for personal deals and under-the-carpet bargaining, using ambiguity as political strength (Makarychev and Valuev, 2002: 18). Thus, a salient feature of Russia-Tatarstan relations was that legal controversies were mainly resolved with political means. A statement by Shaimiyev illustrates the Tatarstan leadership's flexibility, pragmatism, and willingness to negotiate informally: "... we do not think sovereignty is an absolute, neither have we pushed it forcefully in those directions where there is no way to go – for example in defence or finance matters. Should the circumstances change, we shall react" (Shakhrai, 2001).

Such approach defined by Makarychev and Valuev (2002: 21) as "piecemeal sovereignty" suited both Moscow and Kazan Kremlin during Yeltsin's tenure in power: it allowed Shaimiyev to portray his regime as one actively pursuing a symbolic and widely popular goal; at the same time it reassured the centre that Tatarstan was not striving after independence, and given certain concessions, would pose no threat to the Federation's integrity. This elite bargain finds its most prominent manifestation in the 1994 bilateral Treaty.

The February 1994 Treaty on Delimitation of Jurisdictional Subjects and the Mutual Delegation of Powers between the State Bodies of the Russian Federation and the State Bodies of the Republic of Tatarstan (hereafter "the 1994 Treaty") proclaimed Tatarstan as a "state united with the Russian federation" on the basis of constitutions of the two units and the Treaty, and stipulated that relations between the two governments were guided by both constitutions and by the Treaty itself. In legal terms the Treaty was meant to serve as a sort of a buffer between the Constitutions of Russia and Tatarstan (Khakimov, 1996). It also signalled that Moscow did not require Tatarstan to bring its constitution in line with the

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<sup>7</sup> Polls suggested that the majority of Tatarstanis supported increased autonomy within the Russian Federation, but that an even higher percentage of the electorate opposed secession.



Russian one, which in turn implies preeminence of Tatarstan laws over RF laws. The Treaty represented a compromise, based on the de facto separation of spheres of influence: Tatarstan would be part of the Russian Federation but under special circumstances (Sergeev, 2018).

There is a consensus among scholars of Tatar-Russian relations that the 1994 Treaty did not resolve the fundamental contradictions that had been characterizing bilateral relations (Graney, 2009; Mukhariaimov, 1997; Slocum, 1999). Moreover, it could be argued that its provisions were drafted in a deliberately vague way in order to allow for alternative interpretations and political flexibility much needed by both parties (Graney, 2009: 38). The 1994 Treaty was also fraught with contradictions, as the federal center interpreted the articles in its own favor, while Tatarstan always tended to enlarge the grey zones in favor of its sovereignty projection (Dinç, 2021). Despite its apparent juridical defects, the Treaty was a document of momentous significance for both Russian federalism and the republic of Tatarstan, and would become the basis for developing Moscow–Kazan’ relations.

Although Shaimiyev tried to portray the Treaty as a political success and use it domestically as proof of the leadership’s firm commitment to sovereignty, from both Russia’s and Tatar nationalists’ perspective the Treaty was a political victory for Russia: by signing it Tatarstan surrendered its sovereignty, delegated political power to Moscow, and had its hard-gained de facto economic independence cancelled (Broxup, 1996: 85). Basically, Tatarstan was brought back firmly and as it now, sixteen years later, seems, permanently, into Russia’s orbit. The reaction of famous Tatar writer Zulfat Hakim in his letter to the President epitomizes the prevalent mood among Tatar patriots after the signing of the 1994 Treaty: “This treaty... will bring no blessings to the people of Tatarstan. On the contrary, tragically, it has confirmed the subjugation of Kazan to Moscow. It is the first time in our history that a document, legalizing the rule of Russia over Tatarstan, has been signed. It is a crime against our ancestors, a crime against the nation...Our nation, unfashionably naive, has trusted you with its destiny, and you have behaved as a Muscovite...” (quoted in Broxup, 1996: 87).

Naturally, there was no place for admitting the objective unfeasibility of independence in nationalist discourse. Still, reactions to the Treaty similar to Hakim’s were symptomatic of the fact that Shaimiyev’s regime from its early stages of consolidation had the retaining of power as its main political objective. Pursuing this goal, the republic’s leadership found a strategic ally in Moscow, and did not hesitate to trade de facto sovereignty for regime stability. Despite the widespread perception of betrayal, there were no mass protests against the 1994 Treaty, and Shaimiyev and the moderates who supported him remained firmly in control of government (Slocum, 1999: 57). This paved the way to the authoritarian system that would emerge in Tatarstan as a consequence of the elite bargain.



## The centralization of power under Shaimiyev as the core of the “Tatarstan Model”

The development and endurance of Tatarstan’s authoritarian political system fits in a general pattern of “authoritarian stability” in the post-Soviet space described by Way (2010). In his study of the sources of authoritarian stability in the former Soviet Union Way identifies three pillars of incumbent strength: a single highly institutionalized ruling party, an extensive and cohesive coercive apparatus, and state control over the economy (Ibid.: 230). The empirical data from seven post-Soviet states presented in his study show convincingly that autocratic survival is crucially dependent on leaders’ access to at least one of these three pillars of authoritarian strength. In the case of Tatarstan, where the only real party has been the party in power (Yemelianova, 2000: 43), and the state exercises extensive control over key sectors of the economy, the longevity and stability of the Shaimiyev regime comes as another confirmation of Way’s findings.<sup>8</sup>

The political stability in Tatarstan under the hegemonic rule of Shaimiyev provided the regime with strong bargaining chips in its negotiations with Moscow, and the numerous concessions Tatarstan got from both Yeltsin’s and Putin’s presidencies were in turn used domestically to enhance the regime’s legitimacy and to portray Shaimiyev’s rule as the only pragmatic and sensible choice Tatarstan had. The Tatarstan Model was thus a product of this authoritarian stability and the result of the specific path that the republic’s leadership chose to follow both domestically and in its interactions with the centre.

As a consummate politician possessing strong political intuition Shaimiyev was aware that any challenges to the regime could pose a threat not only to his circle’s hegemony, but to the very balance that has been struck in the course of the bilateral negotiations. This in mind, the president quickly moved to impose his control on all key spheres in the republic creating a semi-authoritarian<sup>9</sup> oligarchic system that made use of the “successful Tatarstan Model” as a source of legitimacy and a proof that the leadership’s policies are the right ones for the people of Tatarstan. The result is one of the most stable and enduring political regimes in Russia, “an ideal-type monocentric regime viewed as an example by Russia’s other republics and regions” (Sharafutdinova, 2007: 7).

### *Origins of Tatarstan’s political system*

Tatarstan’s political system exhibits significant continuity with institutions and practices of the TASSR. A number of observers point out the fact that the bulk of Tatarstan’s political

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<sup>8</sup> On a regional level Matsuzato indicates that it is Shaimiyev’s regime strength that makes the use of coercion needless. Comparing Tatarstan’s and Bashkortostan’s non-competitive regimes he concludes that the latter’s use of coercion indicates its weakness and the former’s non-use of coercion is a proof to the regime’s strength (Matsuzato, 2001: 73).

<sup>9</sup> Semi-authoritarianism is an ambiguous system combining “rhetorical acceptance of liberal democracy, the existence of some formal democratic institutions, and respect for a limited sphere of civil and political liberties with essentially illiberal or even authoritarian traits” (Ottaway 2003: 3). This ambiguity is seen as deliberate with such regimes being determined to maintain the appearance of democracy without exposing themselves to the political risks of free competition.

elite after the collapse of the USSR came from the ranks of the former communist party-state *nomenklatura* in the republic (Farukhshin, 2002; Kondrashov, 2000; Matsuzato, 2001, 2004; McAuley, 1997). Tatarstan's post-Soviet development attests to the fact that the elite employed methods of rule that they already knew and understood such as the institutionalized mechanisms of elite recruitment and cadre policy, the machine politics that relied on 'pliable populations'<sup>10</sup> in order to achieve the desired electoral results, and the high degree of state control over the republic's economy. However, Hale (2003) warns against assuming that present political regimes in Russian regions are predominantly the product of Soviet regional political machines, and advocates a more balanced approach whereby post-Soviet transition and strong leadership have played an equal, if not more important, role in influencing the development of political systems in the regions.

According to Matsuzato (2004: 99), among the ethnic republics on the Volga Tatarstan was the only one "blessed" with an unimpeded transformation of the former obkom (regional committee of the CPSU) to the present political regime. One author notes that in the last days of the Soviet Union the Party *nomenklatura* in TASSR moved "in flocks from the Party apparatus to positions in the republican government" (Kondrashov 2000: 92). Thus, while the political weight of the Party diminished, the role of government institutions now staffed predominantly with Party *apparatchiki* was increased. This exodus from party to state positions gave birth to the present political and economic elites that were monolithic enough to allow for its further consolidation. Once it had established itself, Tatarstan's political leadership had to construct for a short time under the conditions of dynamic change and severe uncertainty a mechanism of elite recruitment in order to ensure the stability and coherence of the system. The establishment's solution was simple and as later evidence shows, effective: they recruited their own kind (McAuley, 1997: 86). This is how Tatarstan's political "village culture" was born. Starting from the President himself, the majority of people occupying the high political echelons in the republic come from a village background and have a degree in agriculture or veterinary medicine.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, a republic with a highly developed industry and a significant technical potential is governed by specialists in agriculture (Farukhshin, 2002: 194).

This "agrarian bureaucracy" (Matsuzato, 2001: 53), or "Tatar agrigarchy" (Derrick 2009: 54) has its roots in the Soviet policies of institutionalization of ethnicity which gave the

<sup>10</sup> The USSR kept large groups of people, especially in rural areas, highly dependent on the state, allowing regional authorities to manipulate them, thus stimulating clientelistic electoral exchange (Hale, 2003: 229).

<sup>11</sup> For statistical data on the predominance of *raion* (district) chief executives with agricultural and veterinary education see Matsuzato (2001: 74). A revealing statement by Shaimyiev explains the reasons for this predominance: "I think the best and most desirable cadres are raised in villages. Why? Because they receive a real labour-practice education" (quoted in Mustafin and Khasanov, 1995: 12). Tatarstan's inumbent President Rustam Minnikhanov (in office since 2010), like his predecessor, also has a degree from Kazan' State Agrarian University.

leaders of titular ethnic minority regions special privileges<sup>12</sup> that allowed them to cultivate machine politics (Hale, 1998; Hale, 2003). The fact that the majority of ethnic Tatars in Tatarstan live in the villages, helps explain the correlation between the high percentage of ethnic Tatars promoted to positions of power under Shaimiyev and the predominance of rural cadres in republican institutions (Yemelianova, 2000: 44). Thus, the ruralization of Tatarstan's ruling class was vital in the overall process of Tatarization of the state apparatus under Shaimiyev. Typical Tatar mentality, best preserved in villages, which commands loyalty to the chief and subservience to authority, played its part in the strengthening of Shaimiyev's rule (Yemelianova, 2000).<sup>13</sup>

### ***Main features of Tatarstan's political system***

Apart from the predominance of rural and ethnic Tatar cadres, Tatarstan's political system exhibits several other important characteristics that have become trademarks for Shaimiyev's regime, and have had a crucial role in both the emergence of the Model and in its status as a 'model' in the strict sense of the word, i. e. as an object of emulation not only by regions striving "to catch up with Tatarstan" (Matsuzato, 2004: 103) but also by the federal authorities themselves. In his perceptive work on the origins of the Tatarstan political regime Matsuzato identifies three main pillars of this regime: "the corporate solidarity of the elite, a sturdy and indivisible electoral machine, and the appointment system of local chief executives" (Matsuzato, 2001: 72). These pillars, integrated under the personality of Shaimiyev, along with the state control over the economy and media gave the hegemonic regime a strong bargaining starting position in Tatarstan's negotiations with Moscow. The autonomy it earned from the federal centre allowed the regime to pursue its own programme of state building amid high levels of internal legitimacy and electoral support for the permanent incumbents.

Elections in Tatarstan have systematically been used by the republic's leadership as an instrument of strengthening their power and consolidating their rule (Löwenhardt, 1996: 134). This was the main reason which made some observers of the Shaimiyev regime define Tatarstan as a "strictly controlled Khanate" (Ibid.: 133).

Shaimiyev's effective electoral machine derives its strength from the peculiar system of appointment of local chief executives defined by Matsuzato (2001) as "centralized *caciquismo*" – a political regime in which heads of local government (*caciques*) play the role of electoral machine intermediaries between the central authorities and local communities.<sup>14</sup> The *caciques*' main role in the three-level hierarchy (centre, regions, and localities) is to mobilize votes during elections in exchange for patronage from above (Matsuzato, 2001:

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<sup>12</sup> For a captivating discussion of the Soviet policies of *korenizatsiia* and other types of affirmative action designed by the Bolshevik ideologues to win the support of non-Russian populations in the ethnic republics, and at the same time speed up their process of social evolution towards the ideal *Soviet man*, see Martin (2001).

<sup>13</sup> The same author claims that by 1998 90% of Tatarstan's political elite had a village background (Yemelianova, 2000: 44).

<sup>14</sup> The origins of the term *cacique* are discussed in Kern (1973: 7).

54). Local governors are thus dependent on the centre for their positions and are motivated to use all the available administrative resources to achieve the election results that the regime would like to see in their localities. Moreover, local chief executives are appointed by the President himself and are obliged to stand in elections for Tatarstan's Parliament, the State Council. When chief executives are released from their positions by Shaimiyev, they are also obliged to resign as deputies in the State Council. When a newly appointed chief loses either local or republican elections, Shaimiyev immediately dismisses him from his executive position. Thus, local governors are expected to be able to mobilize votes despite the fact that their posts as local chiefs are not elective. This idiosyncratic practice allows Shaimiyev to combine the benefits of both electoral and appointment systems and derive maximum political dividends: while the local chief executives are highly motivated to mobilize votes, their obedience is also secured.

As a typical representative of electoral authoritarian regimes, Tatarstan's "plays the game of multiparty elections" and allows some limited competition to take place. Yet, the gravity of the regime's violations of democratic principles renders elections "instruments of authoritarian rule rather than instruments of democracy" (Schedler, 2006: 3). Farukhshin (2002: 196) and Löwenhardt (1996) attest to the fact that election outcomes in Tatarstan are heavily influenced in the regime's favour by the extensive use of administrative resources and outright fraud. A peculiar proof to this end is the President's 'uncanny' ability to predict correctly election results well in advance.<sup>15</sup> These 'predictions' provide valuable insight into Shaimiyev's political strategy: by making them he demonstrates to the centre that he is in full control of the republic and can always be trusted to secure the expected outcome of elections. Besides, by announcing the results of the elections beforehand, the President sets targets for heads of local government indicating what figures he expects them to provide from their regions. Thus, playing successfully the role of a *cacique* himself in the federal hierarchy who operates between the federal centre and the federative regions, Shaimiyev has been able to guarantee the Kremlin the 'appropriate' federal election results in Tatarstan – an important factor securing him Moscow's full support on numerous occasions. In short, having Shaimiyev to control firmly a key region like Tatarstan, proved to be a valuable asset for the Kremlin in establishing and strengthening Russia's power vertical.

The 1996 and 2000 RF presidential elections are perfect illustrations of Shaimiyev's utility to both Yeltsin and Putin. In 1996, just three months after the Tatarstan president was reelected with the Soviet-era result of 97.1% support, Shaimiyev was expected, as a part of the bargain between himself and Yeltsin, to deliver a convincing victory in Tatarstan for the incumbent Russian President. His failure to do so in the first round, which Matsuzato puts down to Shaimiyev's "relaxing his guard" after his own earlier triumph, made the Tatarstan President convene local chief executives and indirectly threaten them that if such

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<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the 1999 State Duma and the 2000 presidential elections when Shaimiyev promised Motherland – All Russia and Vladimir Putin fifty and seventy per cent respectively, and the results in the republic were just that (Farukhshin, 2002: 196).

poor performance was repeated in the second round, he would not hesitate to dismiss them. As the second round results showed, the threat was so effective and administrative resources so well-mobilized that Yeltsin managed to gain double the result of his opponent (Matsuzato, 2001: 62). Such extreme mobilisation of votes for Putin in Tatarstan was observed in the 2000 presidential elections as well. Matsuzato's conclusion is that Tatarstan enjoys a privileged status in the Russian Federation not because of the permanent effect of the 1994 power sharing treaty, but because Shaimiev exhibited his allegiance to Yeltsin "at any critical moment and at any cost". This enabled Tatarstan to initiate the all-Russia process of caciquismo-building in 1994–1996, in which federal, regional and sub-regional bosses "constituted a political order on the axis of their electoral abilities" (Matsuzato, 2001: 62).

### ***Crony capitalism***

The homogeneity and cohesiveness of the Tatarstan political and economic elite has been a major source of stability for Shaimiyev's regime in the two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drawing on the classification proposed by Gel'man et al. (2000: 55) of Russia's regional regimes on the basis of the balance of power among elites and the character of the rules of competition among these privileged groups, Matsuzato (2001: 45) considers Tatarstan as an example of the 'elite settlement' model due to the highly developed mechanism for the prevention of intra-elite conflicts.

The state-led form of capitalism that emerged in Tatarstan initially shielded the republic from some of the worst excesses of Russian transition economic reform (McCann, 2004: 350). However, Tatarstan's economic strategy, consisted basically in establishing control over the key industrial enterprises and avoiding rapid privatization in order to prevent the formation of potential alternative centres of power (Sharafutdinova, 2007: 7).

The high degree of institutional and economic autonomy from Moscow allowed Tatarstan's leadership to build a centralized power pyramid in which the incorporation of economic elites (the managers of large industrial complexes) was an important element securing the system's sustainability. The 'crony capitalist' system that developed and flourished in Tatarstan under Shaimiyev's rule has been marked by the domination of informal elite groups which receive preferential treatment and privileges, and accrue wealth not through market mechanisms but thanks to support from the state.<sup>16</sup> These networks are largely based on kinship ties and exhibit a certain degree of similarity with kinship-based clans in Central Asia, although Tatarstan's social structure is much closer to the Russian one than to the one in Central Asian countries (Ibid.: 11). The results of a field research in Tatarstan show that the salience of informal elite networks for the republic's economy has not diminished with time (McCann, 2005: 42). The most important industrial enterprises in the republic are controlled by Shaimiyev's relatives

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<sup>16</sup> A classic example of such privileged status is the "Tatar-American Investments and Finances" (the TAIFF empire), which, thanks to unlimited state support, expanded rapidly in all sectors of the economy and became a huge holding "involved in virtually everything" (Sharafutdinova, 2007: 10).

and close associates.<sup>17</sup> Although some companies are officially private, their owners are totally dependent on the state for their positions, effectively making the companies state-owned (Ibid.: 49, 183).

An important political consequence of the 'crony capitalist' economic system is noted in Sharafutdinova (2007). Comparing Tatarstan and Nizhnii Novgorod, she concludes that under the conditions of crony capitalism the lack of meaningful political competition increases the legitimacy of the regime in power. An active opposition voicing loudly corruption charges, unpredictable elections fraught with negative campaigning, and blatant manipulative practices tend to devalue the electoral process undermining voters' trust in the political system as a whole and in the incumbents in particular. In Tatarstan where the monocentric regime does not leave space for such outpouring of criticism, "not only are public perceptions of corruption and cronyism controlled [...] but the absence of strong opposing voices allows the ruling elite to develop a positive image of the situation in the republic" (Sharafutdinova, 2007: 27). As a consequence Shaimiyev's rule enjoys a much higher degree of legitimacy than do competitive regimes like the one in Nizhnii Novgorod. Thus, the non-competitive nature of Tatarstan's regime helps Shaimiyev promote the Model without the risk of a political challenge against the regime's "ideological production" (Ibid.: 22).

#### ***Concluding remarks on Tatarstan's political system***

Under the banner of sovereignty Tatarstan's political elite fought with the weakened federal centre aiming to achieve much more political and economic power than their predecessors enjoyed prior to 1990. The relatively high degree of autonomy they won was used for establishing and strengthening a personalistic highly centralized regime where all important appointments in the republic – from the Prime Minister to leaders in the state-owned mass media to heads of local bodies of state institutions are made personally by the President (Farukhshin, 2002: 194). President Shaimiev and his close circle enjoy a complete hegemony over political life in the republic. The State Council's role has been reduced to a mere rubber-stamp of presidential legislative initiatives (Hutcheson, 2003: 42); the Prime Minister and Cabinet are directly dependent on the President for their positions, and for the past twenty years no cases of inter-institutional conflict have been reported. The opposition parties lack leaders of Shaimiyev's calibre and charisma and have been weak and fragmented which rendered them incapable of putting up a political challenge to the regime.<sup>18</sup> The appointment system of local heads of government guarantees the President full control over the regions and over the administrative resources, which invariably have been providing the 'correct' election results. The media is either owned or controlled by the state<sup>19</sup> and the information it feeds to the population is carefully selected so that a picture

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<sup>17</sup> For an account of the successful business careers of Shaimiyev's two sons see Sharafutdinova (2007).

<sup>18</sup> The opposition's lack of unity, at least in the early nineties, could be explained by the extreme antagonism between the radical Tatar nationalists and the ethnic Russian political organizations. A united front against Shaimiyev's leadership was thus impossible.

<sup>19</sup> In 2008 nearly 25% of all media in the republic were state-owned (Mmd Corporate, 2008: 5).



of a successful development of the republic as compared to other regions, and Russia as a whole, is presented (Vasiliev, 2001: 15). Shaimiev’s clan controls the most important oil-producing, petrochemical and heavy-industry enterprises which gives Matsuzato (2001) the reason to define Tatarstan as a ‘developed oligarchy’ and Sharafutdinova (2007) as ‘crony capitalism’. Generally speaking, the establishment’s “expressed support for democratic norms and principles was a fig leaf which disguised strong authoritarian tendencies” (Farukhshin, 2002: 194).

## What is the “Tatarstan Model” and who benefits from it?

The term ‘Tatarstan Model’ was first introduced by the American journalist Bruce Allyn after President Shaimiev’s visit in Harvard University in 1994 (Bukharaev, 1999: 3). In his article Allyn enthusiastically promotes the peaceful and civilized solution reached by Moscow and Kazan with the 1994 Treaty which not only helped avoid the bloody conflict that seemed to many an analyst to be only a step away, but allowed Russia “to preserve its territorial integrity while providing Tatarstan significant autonomy in a form reminiscent of the ‘sovereignty association’ of Quebec and Canada” (Allyn, 1994). At that time this innovative document was seen by many as a ground-breaking political achievement of international significance that could provide the methodology for resolving regional conflicts in the post-Soviet space and elsewhere (Shakhrai, 2000; Shakhrai, 2001). Tatarstan has been the most influential of Russian republics, and Yeltsin himself confirmed this by stating that the Tatarstan Model for resolving tensions between the federal centre and the autonomous republics would prove the saviour of the Russian Federation (Walker, 1996: 4). The inevitable comparison with the Chechen tragedy brings out the peaceful solution that Moscow and Kazan Kremlin reached after arduous negotiations as the defining feature of the Model, with the easing of the tensions between Russians and Tatars within Tatarstan and resolving the question of conflicting loyalties between the population and the local leadership as another important achievement of the political strategy pursued by Tatarstan’s ruling elite (Zverev, 1998: 119).

The political momentum that the leadership in Kazan gathered through its bargaining with the centre allowed it to translate its increased leverage into a seemingly very considerable degree of autonomy, amounting almost to self-governance (Walker, 1996: 35).<sup>20</sup> Apart from the symbolic marks of sovereignty<sup>21</sup>, Tatarstan also “defines its own structure of government, elects its own president and legislature, adopts its own laws, collects all taxes on its territory, determines taxation rates in the republic,

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<sup>20</sup> However, authors like Iskhakov (1995: 2) dismiss the notion of Tatarstan’s sovereignty by defining the republic as a “half-state,” i.e. one that lacks basic preconditions for independent and continuous development.

<sup>21</sup> Such as, for example, the fact that in the 1990s and 2000s the Russian flag did not fly over government buildings in Kazan (Walker, 1996: 35; Graney, 2009: 57).



and has trade and political links with other republics and regions and with foreign governments” (Walker, 1996: 35). These diplomatic achievements of the “internationally marketed Tatarstan Model” (Sharafutdinova, 2007: 20), however, did not translate into a democratic system of separation of powers. Iskhakov (1995: 2) lists several elements of the “internal dimension of the Tatarstan Model” supporting his claim that the political system that emerged after the signing of the Treaty could best be termed as “developed feudalism”: clientelistic electoral models where voters are dependent to a varying degree on the candidate for their livelihood or even basic communal needs; predominantly personalistic leadership, and a rule by Presidential decrees. The result is a lack of genuine separation of powers and the subjugation of parliament by the executive<sup>22</sup> in a system where bureaucracy has enormous clout<sup>23</sup>. Thus, reality after ten years of political evolution of the Tatarstan Model “does not come close to meeting the heady expectations of 1994” (Crosston, 2004: 51).

Mukhiamov and Mukhiamova (2004: 317) note that apart from the “standard” definition of the TM as “treaty mechanisms for regulating of conflicts between the centre and the subjects of the Federation”, a more original outlook on the problem could be found in Matsuzato (2004: 110) who stresses the importance of two aspects of the Model that were exported to the federal authorities and other regions: the mechanism of using multilateral forums for declarative diplomacy while pursuing the region’s real interests through bilateral negotiations (asymmetrical federalism); and the criterion of the electoral effectiveness of the regional political machines (*caciquismo*). The latter is a crucial one because the electoral “abilities” of regional authorities become a vital political resource allowing regional leaders to wrench from the centre compromises advantageous to them.

### ***The elite bargain with Putin: expendable sovereignty***

The asymmetric devolution of power that occurred during Yeltsin’s tenure in the Kremlin resulted in a chaotic, *ad hoc* Federation where 89 republics and regions have 89 separate and unique relations with the centre, and where consensus was impossible. An effective “stop-gap” measure, asymmetry helped keep the Federation from disintegrating until a better system was devised. By that time, however, the regions would be reluctant to give up the privileges that they had secured for themselves in their struggles with the centre (Hanauer, 1996: 84). Therefore, when in 2000 the then new Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his plans for a thorough reform of the Federation and the strengthening of the “vertical of power”, the regions were expected to oppose vehemently the loss of some of their hard-earned privileges. It would be particularly painful for Tatarstan, being one of the most influential opponents and at the same time privileged partners of the Moscow Kremlin, to part with some of the

<sup>22</sup> Tatarstan’s State Council did not have a say even on the 1994 Treaty, which was signed by the executive without passing an approval procedure in the State Council (Iskhakov, 1995: 3).

<sup>23</sup> The Shaimiyev regime’s apparatus is notable for its sheer size. With over 450 000 loyal *chinovniki* (officials) out of the republic’s population of under four million, Tatarstan is suspected to occupy “first place in the civilized world, including Russia, in the number of bureaucrats” (Postnova, 2004: 1).

achievements of its “sovereignty project”, all the more so as the reforms appeared to target above all this republic’s differentiated status (Cashaback, 2007: 78). However, analysts who predicted a serious confrontation between the Tatarstan leadership and the centre were proved wrong mainly for lack of understanding of the strong instinct for political survival, and the adaptability of the Tatarstan President and his circle. Leaving aside the federal reforms and the way they affected Tatarstan’s sovereignty<sup>24</sup>, the analysis henceforth focuses on the bargain that was soon struck between Shaimiyev and Putin, and its impact on the future of bilateral relations and of the Tatarstan Model itself.

I argue that the elite *deal* reached by Putin and Shaimiyev was to a great extent predetermined by the reality in both the RF and Tatarstan, and was the only logical outcome of the negotiations between the two leaders for several reasons. First, by the time Putin became President, Shaimiyev and his clan enjoyed hegemony over the republic’s political and economic life. Naturally, Tatarstani elite and its pragmatic leader would not risk losing their dominant position by putting up a futile fight against Putin’s resolute centralizing policies for the sake of keeping the privileges of the nineties, alongside with some purely symbolic notions of “sovereignty”. On the other hand, from Putin’s point of view, having a regime at the same time controlling firmly a key region and complying with the centre was the optimal solution. Putin was aware that having the extremely effective Tatarstani electoral machine that would deliver the necessary results for him in any elections was an important asset and was worth the face-saving concessions that he offered Shaimiyev.<sup>25</sup> The “electoral meritocracy” (Matsuzato 2001: 43) that Tatarstan was able to export to Moscow<sup>26</sup>, which became a nationwide feature of the Russian political system after the presidential elections of 1996, immediately proved its value for Putin in 2000 when an extreme mobilization of votes for him in Tatarstan assured Putin that Shaimiyev would be a loyal and predictable partner. Overall, not only in the case with Tatarstan, Putin’s mastery of regional “elite management” (Sharafutdinova, 2015) through a combination of patronage, coercion and economic redistribution helped ensure that governors and local leaders align with the federal government’s directives.

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<sup>24</sup> For detailed accounts of Putin’s federal reforms and their impact on Tatarstan see Cashaback (2007), Derrick (2009), Mukhariamov and Mukhariamova (2004).

<sup>25</sup> The signing of the 2007 bilateral Treaty on the division of powers between Russia and Tatarstan was the biggest, if mostly symbolic, “political bone” that Putin threw to Shaimiyev. Thus, at that time, Tatarstan remained the only region in the RF that still had a bilateral treaty with the centre. Other concessions include: the keeping of the requirement for Tatar language knowledge by the President of Tatarstan in RT Constitution; the appointment of Shaimiyev as head of a State Council working group on the federal division of powers; and Putin’s active participation in the marking of Kazan’s millennium (Graney, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Ross (2005: 364) asserts that “officials at the federal level have taken up the cry of regional dictators, such as [...] Shaimiev in Tatarstan – ‘It is not so important how the votes are cast but rather how they are counted!’”

Tatarstan's principal reaction to Putin's recentralizing efforts was a typical Shaimiyev manoeuvre: reforms were officially criticized but tacitly complied with and endorsed (Cashaback, 2007: 89). By putting up with federal policies that not only abolished the nineties' extended political and economic autonomy of Tatarstan, but also went directly against Tatar cultural autonomy<sup>27</sup>, Shaimiyev provided the ultimate proof that his main concern was the preservation of the regime's hegemony in the republic, and that the "sovereignty" rhetoric was little more than "a smoke screen masking intensive activity based on mutual agreement between the ruling elite in Kazan' and that in Moscow on spheres of interest and responsibility" (Matsuzato 2001: 77).

It is important to note that Putin's attack on the republic's autonomy failed to provoke a significant popular backlash in Tatarstan. The main reason for Tatarstanis' mild response is economic: people had become disillusioned with the "sovereignty script" as they felt they had gained nothing from sovereignty. The nineties' promises that sovereignty and oil would turn Tatarstan into a new Kuwait never materialized. Instead, people witnessed the extreme concentration of wealth in the Shaimiyev clan. Damir Kismetdinov, a specialist on interethnic relations for the Tatar Congress, summarizes: "We were promised that oil would make us all wealthy. What happened? Nothing. For ordinary people, life today is harder than it was in the Soviet Union" (quoted in Derrick, 2009: 62).

In a survey by *Vecherniaia Kazan* respondents were asked to answer two questions: "What did sovereignty give you?" and "What will you lose when our sovereignty is taken away?" The overwhelming majority of respondents' answer to both questions was simple and straightforward: "nothing" (Kuznetsov, 2000). With the average salary in Tatarstan a thousand roubles lower than the Russian figure for 2004 and the average pension the lowest in the Volga federal region it was clear that "Tatarstan's petro-dollars clearly were not used to build a Kuwait in the Eurasian heartland" (Derrick, 2009: 62). Naturally, Tatarstan's population could not be blamed for remembering "the ethno-national discourse used to justify the Tatars' sovereignty claim [...] as a cynical ploy, an instrument wielded by Tatarstan's political elites for their own enrichment" (Dogmatov, 2001: 2).

Ironically, the *Qui bono?* question with regard to Tatarstan and the Model could be answered by paraphrasing a loyal to Shaimiyev scholar's statement that the TM is a "combination of ideology and political finds that equally meet both Russia and Tatarstan's national and state interests" (Tagirov 1996: 7). Yet, a disillusioned Tatarstani citizen would likely view the Model as a bargain that equally meets both Russian and Tatarstani elites' interests and disregards Tatarstan's national and state ones.

<sup>27</sup> The breaking-up of Tatars into 9 separate ethnic categories for the 2002 census and the federal ban on the adoption of the Latin alphabet for writing the Tatar language caused a major outcry among Tatar public figures, and only muted protests by the political establishment in the republic. On the Latin alphabet controversy see Derrick (2009: 55) and Mukhariamov and Mukhariamova (2004: 354). On the 2002 census see Derrick (2009: 58).

## Conclusion

The focus of this paper is the relationship between the authoritarian political system that developed in post-Soviet Tatarstan, and the leadership’s ability to negotiate successfully with Moscow and use the concessions it gained in these negotiations to further consolidate its political and economic power in the region. This represented a classic feedback loop: the strength of the authoritarian regime in Kazan forced Moscow to make some important concessions which were then used domestically to further strengthen the leadership’s position in the republic. During the twenty-year political exchange between Kazan’ and Moscow, President Shaimiyev established himself as a formidable political figure<sup>28</sup> who successfully neutralized his political opponents and monopolized the struggle for sovereignty which helped him and his circle build an effective political machine that secured the regime’s successful development as a stable and coherent whole. In his quest for hegemony in the republic Shaimiyev built an extensive state apparatus relying on cadres coming from the old nomenklatura and from village backgrounds whose main assets were their loyalty and obedience. With a flawless mechanism of elite recruitment the regime was able to reproduce itself and secure control over all the important sources of political and economic influence in the republic. It also succeeded in building an effective electoral machine, based on clientelistic exchange and the loyalty of “meso-elites” that guaranteed Shaimiyev success in all elections held in Tatarstan (Matsuzato, 2001). This electoral machine also provided him with a valuable bargaining chip in his interactions with Yeltsin and Putin: his ability to deliver the results that the incumbent Russian President needs in the key region.

The regime’s stability and strength, alongside with its non-competitive nature and the skilful projection of sovereignty at home, allowed it to sustain high levels of internal legitimacy and made the use of coercion unnecessary. Thus, despite the monopoly on state power and the fact that critical observers have made analogies with Shaimiyev’s rule and that of a khan in a khanate (Yemelianova, 2000; Graney, 2009), Tatarstan’s regime has not proceeded to impose a dictatorial or a sultanistic system in the republic (Matsuzato, 2001).

It would be difficult to imagine the Tatarstan Model developing in the dramatic period of the nineties, and influencing federal policies to the extent it did, if it were not backed by a monopolistic regime, coherent and popular enough to be able to stand its ground in the difficult negotiations with the centre. Sharafutdinova’s observations of competitive ‘crony capitalist’ regimes like the one in Nizhnii Novgorod, and Matsuzato’s (2004) discussion of weaker than Tatarstan’s regimes in the mid-Volga region are a case in point. The former lack legitimacy, and the latter’s weakness makes them more likely to resort to coercion thus leading to loss of legitimacy and hence – loss of the popular support and internal coherence making an autonomous political course vis-à-vis the centre possible. Tatarstan’s “ideal-type

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<sup>28</sup> Even one of Shaimiyev’s most prominent critics, Kazan’ journalist Ovrutskii (2000: 44), admits that Tatarstan’s first President is beyond doubt a statesman of high calibre.

monocentric regime”, on the other hand, was able to capitalize on its monopoly in the republic and reach an accommodation with Moscow under both Yeltsin and early Putin.

Led predominantly by considerations of keeping the *status quo* and ensuring regime perpetuation, Shaimiyev and his circle not only did not push sovereignty in those directions where there is no way to go but easily succumb to Putin’s recentralization reforms and traded much of the republic’s autonomy for regime stability. Enjoying firm control over both the political system and the economy of the republic, Tatarstan’s establishment did not need powerful (and dangerous) legitimizing symbols like “sovereignty” anymore and quietly replaced them with a rhetoric that stresses the importance of stability and sustained economic development. Tatarstan’s retreat from the sovereignty discourse continues to this day under the leadership of Rustam Minnikhanov, who succeeded Mintimer Shaimiyev as president of RT in 2010. This retreat is the result of Putin’s phased dismantlement of almost all (symbolic and de facto) achievements in regional self-governance<sup>29</sup>, with Minnikhanov and his circle doing little to oppose this vehement recentralization effort.

The Tatarstan Model represents a significant framework in the relationship between the federal center and the regions within the Russian Federation, contributing to the current regional stability and the relative lack of dissent during the war in Ukraine. This model, developed in the 1990s, is characterized by a high degree of autonomy granted to the Republic of Tatarstan, one of Russia’s most economically and culturally significant regions. Tatarstan negotiated a special power-sharing agreement with Moscow, allowing it greater control over its economy, cultural affairs, and internal policies while remaining loyal to the federal center. In essence, the Tatarstan Model exemplifies the effectiveness of a flexible yet controlled federal approach in managing regional relations within Russia, ensuring that the federal center retains its grip on power even during challenging times.

Thus, the elite settlement between Russian regions and the Kremlin, which the Tatarstan Model epitomises, guarantees the stability and obedience of Russia’s regions as an indispensable element of the overall stability of Putin’s rule, serving as a bulwark against both internal dissent and the broader implications of the war in Ukraine.

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<sup>29</sup> See Dinç (2021: 150-186) for a lengthy list of the privileges that Putin took away from the subjects of the Federation.

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