

More protests in Bashkortostan

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On 17 January, Fail Alsynov, one of the informal leaders of the Bashkir national movement, was sentenced to four years in a penal colony for allegedly inciting ethnic hatred. Protests in defence of Alsynov broke out in the town of Baymak, where the court announced the verdict. Around 10,000 people took to the streets on 15 January, when the court originally was expected to pass the decision. There were also clashes with law enforcement forces there. On 19 January, a demonstration numbering up to 1000 people also took place in Ufa, the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan. The protests died down after a few days. So far, several demonstrators have been sentenced to administrative detention, and criminal proceedings have been initiated against six of them. The republic's authorities claim that the protests are part of extremist and separatist activity inspired by external forces (allegedly including the intelligence services of the Baltic states and Ukraine). Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov downplayed the protests, belittling their scale and suggesting that the issue fell within the competence of local authorities.

Commentary

- The demonstrations were triggered by a number of factors. The protests were directly provoked by the harsh sentence for Alsynov, which was even stricter than the prosecutor had demanded. The court's location was also meaningful because the Baymak region is predominantly inhabited by ethnic Bashkirs. On a deeper level, the protests were also triggered by socio-economic problems in Bashkortostan, which are partly due to the region's high level of spending on support for the war with Ukraine (in 2024, over 4.5 billion roubles were allocated for this purpose, with an expected budget deficit of 10 billion roubles). Another difficult issue is that of the high level of war casualties among the region's residents; over 1300 soldiers have died, which places Bashkortostan among the Russian regions most affected by the war in terms of absolute numbers. Ethnic Bashkirs, who constitute only 31% of the republic's population, are also dissatisfied with their cultural and linguistic situation (since 2018, learning the Bashkir language in schools has been optional) as well as environmental issues caused by the extraction of natural resources, largely by companies registered outside Bashkortostan. In recent years, ecological and cultural protests have been seen on a regular basis in Bashkortostan. Some of them were successful, such as the protests against the industrial exploitation of the Kushtau Hill (2020), which has symbolic meaning for the Bashkirs, and the archaeological site in Ufa where an Orthodox church was to be built (2023), which is important from the point of view of their history.

- Alsynov, who previously led the Bashkort nationalist organisation banned in 2020, is an important figure in the protest movement. The official reason for his conviction was his controversial speech during a rally protesting against the illegal extraction of gold in April 2023, during which he used expressions that a court expert interpreted as offensive to expatriate workers from Central Asia and the North Caucasus. The verdict against Alsynov can be seen as an attempt by the Governor of Bashkortostan, Radiy Khabirov, to improve his image in the Kremlin (Alsynov has criticised the war in Ukraine on several occasions), to take revenge on behalf of the republic's authorities (Alsynov was personally denounced by the leader of Bashkortostan), and/or in response to pressure from Moscow (on 16 January, Alsynov was placed on the federal list of extremists and terrorists).
- The regional government has used the allegations that external actors were involved in the demonstrations in defence of Alsynov for political and propaganda whitewashing, to improve their image not only for the public but also the Kremlin. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it significantly intensified repressions against the opposition, national activists and their families. In fact, the demonstrations were grassroots-led, and the demonstrators carefully avoided any pro-independence, anti-Moscow or anti-war symbols and slogans, limiting their demands to the liberation of Alsynov and Khabirov's resignation from his position (the protesters publicly appealed to Vladimir Putin to dismiss him). It is quite unlikely that separatist tendencies will develop in the republic, given the minority share of Bashkirs in the demographic structure, economic factors, and the lack of an organised political base. Radical emigree activists and movements, such as the Bashkir Resistance Committee, are of marginal importance to the situation in the region.
- Although the scale of the protests in Bashkortostan is unusual as compared to other protests seen in Russia in the last two years, they are objectively still relatively small and local in character; they are unlikely to escalate or spill out to neighbouring regions. However, the existing situation may further fuel the dissatisfaction among the Bashkir population, provoke more protests in the near future, and also lead to personnel reshuffles in the republic's government (Khabirov's term of office expires this year). Given the upcoming presidential 'elections' (which are crucial from the point of view of the system's legitimacy), the Kremlin is trying to avoid any public tensions that may affect Putin's results, and is distancing itself from the events in Bashkortostan.