

The Earth Charter in Tatarstan

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The Earth Charter initiative seeks to establish a sound ethical foundation for the emerging global society and to help build a sustainable world based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Ten years in the making, the Earth Charter was officially launched in June 2000. Since then the initiative has moved into a new phase, from idea to implementation. Hundreds of individuals and organizations across the globe are now using the Earth Charter as a tool to stimulate learning and guide action.

Among the most inspiring and promising of these early experiments is the effort of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia to engage the Earth Charter as a roadmap to a new kind of society.

Tatarstan's State Council (parliament) formally embraced the Earth Charter in April 2001, becoming the first provincial government in the world to adopt the Earth Charter as a guide for conducting affairs of state. In doing so Tatarstan establishes itself as a potential world leader in charting a new course to development and building of a civil society based on tolerance and non-violence. Tatarstan's example is important not only for what it says about Tatarstan, but for how it shows the power of the Earth Charter.

So why did Tatarstan accept the Earth Charter? What does Tatarstan's action mean for itself and for the Earth Charter movement?

At first glance Tatarstan might seem an unlikely candidate for embracing the Earth Charter. The Republic of Tatarstan is located about 700 km east of Moscow. It has a total population of 3.76 million and occupies an area of 68,000 sq. km, about the same as Ireland. Modern Tatarstan lies at the northern end of the confluence of three great cultural streams: a Mongol/Asian stream from the east, a Turkic then later, a Moslem stream from the south, and a Slavic Russian Orthodox Christian stream from the West. Tatarstan's population remains highly diverse, with a mix of about 50 percent Moslem Tatar peoples, 40 percent Orthodox Russians, and the remainder a variety of other ethnic groups.

Tatarstan is one of the more affluent and heavily industrialized regions of Russia. A leading oil and gas producer, Tatarstan may be best known in the West as the starting point for the Friendship pipeline to Eastern Europe. By some estimates, the largest petrochemical plant in Europe is located in the Republic. Tatarstan also supports a variety of other heavy industries, including automobiles, military systems, electronics, and chemicals. These industries have placed a heavy burden on the natural environment in the Republic, and it faces serious challenges in improving water and air quality, protecting soil, and managing wastes.

Politically, Tatarstan has long maintained a somewhat uneasy relationship with the Russian Federal government in Moscow. With the breakup of the USSR in 1991,

Tatarstan proclaimed its independence from the Russian Federation, but eventually negotiated an agreement with Moscow that provided an unusually high degree of local autonomy. The issue remains contentious, however, as Tatarstan continues to take additional steps that declare its independence from the center. For example, Tatarstan recently decided to begin a transition away from using the Cyrillic alphabet in favor of the Latin alphabet.

The combination of these factors point to three key challenges facing Tatarstan: balancing development with environmental protection, ensuring peaceful coexistence among differing ethnic and religious groups, and sustaining national identity. In the face of these challenges Tatarstan's progressive, yet assertive political leadership, especially President Shaimiev, sees the Earth Charter as a vital instrument for achieving its goals.

What has come to be called the "Tatarstan Model" seeks to establish Tatarstan as a tolerant society that enjoys sustainable environmental development and a high degree of independence within the Russian Federation. The constitution of Tatarstan is notable in this regard because it advocates non-violent resolution of conflict and establishes an unprecedented relationship with the Federal government in Moscow. President Shaimiev has spoken repeatedly in a variety of domestic and international settings of the desire of the people of Tatarstan to build a peaceful, tolerant society. Moreover, Tatarstan is the only Republic in Russia that retains a Ministry of Environment, and the President has devoted a substantial portion of a recent "state of the nation" address to environmental matters.

With the support of Green Cross International and the International Public Foundation for Survival and Development of Humanity, key leaders in Tatarstan actively engaged the Earth Charter before formally adopting the document. In November 2000 senior government ministers, Members of Parliaments, representatives of other key institutions in Tatarstan, and foreign experts held a conference in Kazan to consider the Earth Charter. In tandem with the conference, the government of Tatarstan also analyzed in detail how well its key laws and policies stand up against Earth Charter principles. The State Council held hearings on the Earth Charter, at which the Council Chair declared his support for declaring Tatarstan to be an "experimental territory" to implement the Earth Charter and the Culture of Peace initiative of the UN. This level of attention to the Earth Charter, at high levels of government was virtually unprecedented at the time.

These efforts culminated with the State Council's vote on 27 April 2001, to endorse the Earth Charter. This is a major step both for Tatarstan, and for the international Earth Charter initiative. So, what next?

It is too early to judge Tatarstan's actions in implementing the Earth Charter. Regardless of what Tatarstan does with the Earth Charter on the ground, however, the symbolic value of its endorsement is enormous. Tatarstan lives in a tough neighborhood. It's population is highly diverse, split between Christian and Moslem, Slavic and non-Slavic. A similar mix led to war in Yugoslavia. Tatarstan has chosen a different course,

emphasizing the need to protect the natural environment and to create conditions that promote tolerance and social justice.

In general Russia has not been a congenial place for assertive environmentalism. Yet the government of Tatarstan has chosen to make a highly public commitment to sustainable development, which not only flies in the face of prevailing views in Russia, but may ultimately change how key industries in the Republic operate. While the impact on industry remains to be seen, the Earth Charter clearly challenges the status quo. By endorsing the Earth Charter, Tatarstan has taken a courageous stand in favor of changing how things are done in order to build a better future, while confirming its most deeply held values.

The importance of the Earth Charter in Tatarstan is that it has provided an organizing framework for the new agenda the Republic has set for itself. Clearly the Earth Charter has already made a difference in Tatarstan by helping to stimulate and channel the discussion of what kind of future the Republic wants for itself. Both Tatarstan and the Earth Charter movement now enter an exciting new period in which the challenge is to further embed the principles of the Earth Charter in the daily life of the Republic and its people.