

From February to February and From Ru ba Ru to Rastokhez: Political Mobilisation in Late Soviet Tajikistan (1989-1990)

*De février à février et de Ru ba Ru à Rastokhez. Mobilisation politique au
Tadjikistan soviétique finissant (1989-1990)*

*ОТ ФЕВРАЛЯ К ФЕВРАЛЮ И ОТ «РУ БА РУ» К «РАСТОХЕЗ». ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ
МОБИЛИЗАЦИЯ В ТАДЖИКИСТАНЕ В ПРЕДДВЕРИИ РАСПАДА СССР (1989-1990)*

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From February to February and From Ru ba Ru to Rastokhez: Political Mobilisation in Late Soviet Tajikistan (1989-1990)¹

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On February 24, 1989 a large group of young men gathered on the square in front of the Supreme Soviet (*Verkhovnyj Sovet*) building in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. They carried banners calling for a law that would make Tajik the official state language in the Republic; they declaimed the need to “revive Tajikistan’s ancient culture”; they refused to listen to the police’s requests that they leave the square (TadžikTA, 1989)². Estimates vary on the size of the crowd, but the total number of students, teachers, and others gathered on the square was most likely no greater than one thousand (Ganelin, 1989). For Tajikistan, however, which had for decades been quite justifiably considered one of the calmest and quietest corners of the USSR, this un-sanctioned gathering was both unexpected and unsettling. Never before in the memory of the Tajik SSR’s leaders had an organised group appeared

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² TadžikTA was a wire service in Soviet Dushanbe to which many local newspaper articles were attributed.

on the street, without government sanction, to make political claims and demands. In fact, the demonstration held in February 1989 was most likely the first independently organised political event in Dushanbe in more than fifty years: the whole of the post-war period in the republic had been marked by unremitting quietude and acceptance of the political order.³

Needless to say, the republic's political and party leaders were taken by surprise. A request to hold a meeting had been registered on February 21, but given the legal requirement that meetings be registered at least one week in advance, the request was declined and little further attention was apparently given to the question. On February 24, many of the republic's leaders were at work in the Supreme Soviet building, discussing possible approaches to developing Tajik as the republic's state language – a fact that only highlighted the organised and explicitly political nature of the meeting held in plain sight of the gathered politicians. For a lack of any established procedure in such circumstances, Tajikistan's political leaders took a risky step: they went outside to speak with the crowd. Led by Goibnazar Pallaev, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Tajik SSR, a group of government deputies spent around two hours speaking with those gathered on the square. By the early evening the protest had ended, the crowd was quietly dispersed, and the political leadership went back to their business of developing a new law on the republic's state language, now, at least nominally, with the demands of the crowd in mind.

Causes for Mobilisation

Questions remained, however, about how to respond to these demands – as well as who exactly was making them. The majority of the crowd that had gathered on February 24 was made up of university students and teachers, as

³ According to data collated by the KGB in 1988, over the preceding forty years only one major “disorder” (*besporâdok*) had been recorded in the Tajik SSR, which involved a large group of Tajik young men fighting with those of Slavic origin in 1985 (Spravka ot Predsedatelâ KGB Čebrikova M.S. Gorbačevu ot 4.3.1988. APRF, F. 3, Op. 108, D. 523, L. 27-34. Reprinted in *Istočnik: vestnik arkhiva prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii*, 19(6), 1995, 152). In the data published in support of his 2002 *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Mark Beissinger has identified one further “protest” event as occurring in December 1987 in Dushanbe. Upon review of his cited source, however (FBIS, 1989), it seems clear that the supposed event was little more than a group of students having an “agitated” discussion about the 1985 fight. For Beissinger's collated data, see “Mass Demonstrations and Mass Violent Events in the Former USSR, 1987-1992,” available via <http://www.princeton.edu/~mbeissin/research1.htm#Data>.

well as some journalists and members of the Tajik “intelligentsia.” Available reports on the meeting fail to identify any clear leaders, noting instead the generally disorganised nature of the meeting and the open dialogue that emerged with Pallaev and the other government representatives. Although in later publications and interviews certain individuals – many of whom would go on to become actively involved in Tajik politics – identified themselves as the meetings’ organisers, for the Tajik government in 1989 there seemed no clear organisation or group with which to hold negotiations.⁴ The overwhelming picture that emerged was one of undirected and angry young people who had grown politically aware over the years of perestroika and now found themselves without an outlet for their frustration and energy.

This picture also fit well with the overall development of perestroika that the republic’s leaders had been observing for the past four years. After Mikhail Gorbachev’s declaration in 1985 that the USSR needed to reform and the subsequent implementation across the Union of the complicated and often self-contradictory reforms that came to be known as “perestroika,” the Tajik SSR found itself in a complicated political and economic position. On the one hand, many of perestroika’s political and social reforms, which had been developed in and for a Moscow-based context, had little immediate impact in Tajikistan. Ligachev’s infamous anti-alcohol campaign met with little opposition in the Tajik SSR (TadžikTA, 1987); the lightening of censorship controls changed little in the publication practices of Tajik newspapers; the “democratisation” of party and factory elections had little effect on the ground in Tajikistan, where besides the Party there were literally no other organisational structures;⁵ given its largely agricultural economy, even the reforms meant to “speed up” production, increase labour productivity, and implement the self-financing of enterprises had at best limited effect on the lives and livelihoods of Tajik Soviet citizens.⁶

⁴ Based on what information is available from contemporary press sources and later interviews, it seems clear that amongst the organisers of the February 1989 meeting were Mirbobo Mirrahimov, Abdunaby Sattorov (Sattorzoda) and other future founders of the organisation “Rastokhez.”

⁵ By early 1990, for example, Communist Party leaders in Tajikistan were beginning to note the difference between their own single-candidate elections and the more “democratic” elections starting to take hold elsewhere in the USSR. See for example CC member Tagaev’s comments at a February 1990 Tajik Central Committee Plenum (Šabdolov, 1990, p. 23).

⁶ Labour productivity was actually falling in the agricultural sector in Tajikistan through the 1980s and growing at one of the lowest rates in the Union in the industrial sector over the same period (Orazmuradov & Zûzin, 1987, p. 28).

On the other hand, however, the aggregate effect of perestroika's reforms had by 1988 and 1989 begun to seriously disrupt the Tajik economy. Reforms to the structure and operations of Soviet enterprises enacted in 1987 led to a breakdown in the production and delivery of industrial goods to the Tajik SSR, which from year to year brought greater and greater slowdowns and losses on the Tajik side. As the Chairman of the Tajik Council of Ministers Izotullo Haëev and his deputy Georgij Košlakov frequently complained to the Council of Ministers of the USSR, by 1989 literally thousands of these orders were simply not being delivered.⁷ The “speeding up” (*uskorenie*) of the Soviet economy and attempts to increase labour productivity led to the firing⁸ of millions of workers across the USSR as managers were exhorted to “do more with less.” In the European parts of the USSR where this and other reforms were designed, endemic labour shortages at least during the first years of perestroika meant that these workers were quickly hired by other enterprises. In Tajikistan, however, where unemployment had been growing for decades and even before perestroika had reached double-digit levels, the reforms only increased the ranks of the unemployed.⁹ Although cooperatives' impact on the Tajik economy remained limited, they had by 1989 begun to act, much as across the whole of the USSR, as an indirect cause of inflation – not to mention as a convenient funnel for managers and enterprise directors to corruptly embezzle state funds. Rumours abounded about the involvement of leading Communist Party officials in the operations of larger cooperatives, while on the ground most people only saw a newfound abundance of expensive *šašlik* stands.¹⁰

⁷ Undelivered goods included lumber, tractors, machine equipment, and many others (GARF, F. 5446, Op. 150, D. 276, L. 25, 106-107, 129). The first secretary of the Kurgan-Tūbe Oblast Committee of the Tajik Communist Party, I. Khalimov, also noted in 1990 that his oblast was obligated to import “more than 6,000 different indispensable products,” failures in the delivery of which had led to “chronic deficits” across the oblast (RGANI, F. 1, Op. 10, D. 96, L. 31).

⁸ In the Soviet press and government documents this process was exclusively referred to as the “freeing up” (*osvoboždenie* or *vysvoboždenie*) of labour resources.

⁹ From 1987 to 1990 the official unemployment rate in Tajikistan rose from 26 to 30% (RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 160, D. 1672, L. 3). This rise was attributed across the board to perestroika-era reforms, and even the State Labour Committee in Moscow admitted that as early as 1987 the “freeing up” of workers had “caused problems employment in regions with superfluous labour supplies (*trudoizbytočnye raiony*)” (GARF, F. 5446, Op. 162, D. 153, L. 122-123).

¹⁰ For a discussion of the issues and concerns raised by early cooperatives in Dushanbe, see: Anonymous, 1988a; Demidov, 1990. Former employees of the Tajik Gosplan have

The economic changes on display in 1989 would have been both confusing and quite disturbing to the average citizen of the Tajik SSR. Inflation was on the rise at the same time as the deficit of basic goods; unemployment was increasing and the average wage was decreasing, notwithstanding increases to some (primarily managerial) positions.¹¹ As a result of delivery issues faced by Tajik enterprises, housing construction had fallen even further behind schedule in Dushanbe and around the republic. At the same time, there would have seemed little immediate cause or justification for this downturn: although the central press and television declared the “perestroika” of society and its newfound “openness” (*glasnost*), on the ground in Tajikistan political and social life remained almost unchanged. Newspaper editors, such as Khodžaev of *Komsomoli Tođžikiston*, were still fired for not toeing the party line; the republican government continued to go out of its way to highlight the dangers of Islam and religion; the leadership of the Tajik Communist Party never failed to emphasise its dedication to the established socialist order. The republican economy was slowly collapsing – and by 1989 officially in recession¹² – and yet on the ground in Tajikistan there seemed no obvious social or political justification for this.

This confusing and contradictory economic collapse was the backdrop to the February 1989 protest in Dushanbe, and remained a central part of daily life in the republic throughout the remaining years of perestroika. Inevitably, the deterioration of economic conditions in the Tajik SSR would come to play an important role in the processes of political mobilisation incipient in Dushanbe, even as the main claims voiced on the square in February 1989 focused on the Tajik language, culture, and process of “national” development. Economic degradation was deeply intertwined with localised feelings of injustice, imbalanced development, and linguistic imperialism: it is no historical accident that the latter arguments came to the fore at the exact point at which the Tajik SSR found its previously stable economy move towards decline and ultimate collapse. Understanding the process of Tajik political mobilisation that began for all intents and purpo-

also mentioned similar concerns from the period (Karimov, 2015, p. 350; also the author’s interview with Rahmat Ūsupovič Khakulov, Dushanbe, February 2015).

¹¹ The frequent imbalance between worker and manager salaries was commonly cited in the Tajik press (Umarov, 1988; Anonymous, 1987; Kletzkin, 1987).

¹² The Council of Ministers of the Tajik SSR reported a 0.4% drop in overall production for 1989 (GARF, F. 5446, Op. 162, D. 260, L. 16-18).

ses in February 1989 requires a detailed analysis of both the background processes in the republic as well the organisations that came to fill the demands for mobilisation.

While post-Soviet scholarship has analysed the political organisations that developed after 1989 in Tajikistan, little focus has been paid to the underlying political and economic conditions in the republic, nor to the details of these organisations' development. Attention has generally focused on the nationalist discourse of these organisations (Collins, 2006; Akbarzadeh, 1996; Markowitz, 2009), as well as their links to the "National Fronts" of the Baltic republics and the broader trends of glasnost and nationalism sweeping the USSR at the time (Atkin, 1997; Rubin, 1998; Dudoignon, 1998). This has aligned well with a broader literature on mobilisation and Soviet collapse that has emphasised Tajikistan's place at the ebb of a "tidal wave" of mobilisation moving across the USSR (Beissinger, 2002; Snyder, 1998). Although there is no doubt about the influence of outside actors and movements on the leaders of the political organisations developing in Dushanbe in 1989, this focus has tended to ignore the mobilised in favour of the mobilisers. The discourse of cultural imperialism and linguistic dominance may have been both linked to broader political trends and used to some efficacy in the Tajik capital, but the question remains as to why it was effective at mobilising Dushanbe's residents. By systematically tracking the history of the Tajik SSR's first effective political organisers over the course of February 1989 to February 1990, this article aims to fill this need in the literature for a "dense narrative" of the period – one that will elucidate both the weight of the organisations that developed and the economic contradictions in which they were able to mobilise.

An Outlet for Social Frustration

For its part, the Tajik leadership was well aware of these contradictions in 1989: for it had years been struggling with increasing unemployment and lowered opportunities for young people – including university graduates – in the republic. Perestroika had served to extenuate many of the economic problems faced by the Tajik SSR, and for the heads of the Tajik Communist Party and Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, there would have been little doubt about how these problems had led, slowly but surely, to the outburst of undirected frustration – such as it was seen – on the square

in February 1989. It was this reasoning that led the republican leadership, after the crowd had dispersed and emotions had calmed, to decide to properly redirect the anger and frustration they had observed: they would found a platform for discussion where such complaints could be voiced safely and constructively.¹³

The republican leadership delegated the development of this platform to the Tajik Komsomol, which began to conduct negotiations in March 1989 with the meeting organisers.¹⁴ By April an agreement was struck, and the political club “Ru ba Ru” (“face-to-face” in Tajik) was founded as a legal entity under the Central Committee of the Tajik Komsomol.¹⁵ It was agreed that Ru ba Ru meetings would be held once or twice a month in the House of Political Enlightenment (*Dom političeskogo prosveteniâ*), which the republican Komsomol provided for these purposes (Davlat, 2015b). As the Tajik republican leadership had envisioned, Ru ba Ru was organised as a forum in which citizens could meet with the Tajik SSR’s leaders and express constructive criticism about their work. Local and republican leaders were invited to its meetings with the intention of developing a mutually valuable exchange of ideas and opinions: the party and republican leadership would learn about the issues bothering Tajik Soviet citizens, and the citizens would have an opportunity to interact directly with those in charge of the local economy and political sphere. Over the course of the summer and fall of 1989 a number of meetings were held between Komsomol members, university students, and young academics together with leading political and social figures in Dushanbe. Among those figures invited were Džamšed Karimov, the First Secretary of the Dushanbe City Committee of the Tajik Communist Party, members of the Tajik SSR’ dele-

¹³ This initiative, it should also be said, was very much in line with the then official party position on growing incidents of “informal” organisations and demonstrations amongst young people. As I.M. Il’inskij, the director of the Komsomol Higher School’s Scientific Research Centre under the Central Committee of the Soviet Komsomol, put it in 1987, the main cause of informal movements’ growth was society’s failure to deal with young people’s “real problems.” The only solution, he argued, was to engage in dialogue with the “searching, unruly, spiny, contradictory, inconvenient young people” (Il’inskij, 1987, p. 94).

¹⁴ According to some commentators, the Komsomol had also been waiting for an opportunity to develop such a platform, having grown tired of waiting for informal groups to develop it on their own (Alimov & Saidov, 1991, pp. 84-85).

¹⁵ The concept of a “political club” predated Ru ba Ru; other organisations in Dushanbe had over the years formed such clubs for internal discussions and the dissemination of information. For a description of Ru ba Ru’s legal status, see: Anonymous, 1989d.

gation to the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, the editors of the newspaper *Večernij Dušanbe*, and others (Kurbonien, 1989; Abašin & Buškov, 1998, p. 29).

From the very beginning, however, the Tajik Republican Leadership's attempts to redirect the energy of the February crowd towards "constructive" criticism proved difficult to implement. Quite the opposite, in fact – it quickly became clear that Ru ba Ru was in many ways an uncontrollable political forum. During an early meeting of the club in July 1989, for example, the political leadership of Tajikistan, including Tajik Communist Party First Secretary Kahhor Mahkamov, Council of Ministers Chairman Izotullo Haëv and others were extensively harangued for the state of the Tajik economy and the government's failure to do anything about unemployment (Davlat, 2015c). Later meetings continued in this pattern, with government figures facing constant criticism for ecological, political, and cultural issues. As one observer put it, "In practice, at all of the meetings and discussions held with representatives of the leadership, the conversation followed one and the same pattern – proving that the invited leader had made only mistakes and blunders in his work" (Alimov & Saidov, 1991, p. 85). By and large, moreover, the government figures invited to Ru ba Ru meetings proved either unable or unwilling to answer the flood of criticism they faced, leaving the room red-faced and angry. "Tajikistan's ministers and bureaucrats came to the club "Ru ba Ru" with fat and full stomachs," one leading participant later wrote approvingly, "but left with sweaty faces, bowed with shame and disgrace" (Mirrahim, 1998, p. 78). Yet the emphasis on criticism came not only from the club's participants, but also from its Komsomol organisers, many of which had also been participants in the February 1989 meeting. One such organiser and Komsomol secretary was Džumakhon Isoev, who had been designated by the Komsomol Central Committee as responsible for Ru ba Ru's organisation and operations. In a September 1989 interview with the newspaper *Komsomolec Tadžikistana*, Isoev highlighted the critical and oppositional tone of the political club, going as far as to accuse the republican leadership of "lying" and "covering up" facts about the lives of young people in Tajikistan (Anonymous, 1989b).

The critical tone taken by Ru ba Ru clearly found support in the Tajik SSR: while not the first "informal" organisation to be founded in the Tajik SSR during perestroika, Ru ba Ru quickly outstripped its predecessors

and competitors. Earlier groups had been formed in 1988, but they had remained largely unknown outside of a small circle, and had been limited in their scope and focus. In late 1988, for example, a small group of intellectuals including the well-known poet Bozor Sobir had founded a group called “Ĕvaroni bossozi” (Helpers of perestroika), but the group’s activities remained generally unclear (Crow, 1990, p. 20). Other groups, including the Khujand-based “Ĕhĕi Khudžand” or “Dirafši koviĕn” from Nurek, promoted goals similar to Ru ba Ru’s (dialogue and political democratisation), but failed to gain the same political weight and broad support enjoyed by the latter (Davlat, 2015a; Usmonov, 2003, pp. 19-22). Other small groups continued to proliferate over the course of 1989, but most accounts of the period agree that Ru ba Ru retained its position as the most important political platform in the republic.¹⁶

Not only Ru ba Ru as an organisation, moreover, but over the summer of 1989 certain Ru ba Ru participants also began to gain notoriety in Dushanbe and elsewhere for the content of their political criticism. For the most part these were politically active university teachers and journalists – individuals who had been involved in both the organisation of the February 1989 meeting and had begun by August-September to agitate in relation to the upcoming February 1990 elections to the Tajik Supreme Soviet (Abašin & Buškov, 1998, p. 31). From what evidence is available, these individuals do not yet appear to have gained a great deal of popularity or influence amongst the population at large, but both the political leaders of the republic and the most politically active subsection of the younger generation seem to have noted their role by the fall of 1989. The most attention was paid to the philosopher Mirboboi Mirrahimov (Mirboboi Mirrahim), who was labelled an “extremist” by the KGB and considered an “idol” by a number of Ru ba Ru participants.¹⁷ Mirrahimov had gained fame as early as 1988 as a defender of Tajik cultural values, and had published articles advocating for increased use of the Tajik language (and even the pre-Soviet Persian script), including his famous “To ba kai ob az tagi ākh meravad” (“How long will

¹⁶ This has also been confirmed in conversation with former Ru ba Ru participants (author’s interview with Abdullo Gafurov, Dushanbe, February 2015).

¹⁷ Interviews with former Ru ba Ru participants in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, February 2015. For its part, the republican KGB was particularly displeased by calls made by Ru ba Ru participants to voters to vote on national grounds and only for “Tajik” candidates (Press gruppa KGB TSSR, 1989).

water flow under the ice?”).¹⁸ In addition to having been amongst the first to raise issues of Tajikistan’s cultural development in the popular press, Mirrahimov gained in notoriety when it was also claimed in Dushanbe that the decision to fire the editor of *Komsomoli Todžikiston*, A. Khodžaev, had been connected to the latter’s agreeing to publish Mirrahimov’s articles.¹⁹ One way or another, although Ru ba Ru continued to hold meetings and harangue politicians until January 1990 (Davlat, 2015e), by the end of the summer of 1989 it was clear that the political club had come to be dominated by Mirrahimov and a group of like-minded journalists, writers and academics. Soon, moreover, this group would outgrow the confines of the political club in which it had developed and become the founding membership of Tajikistan’s first independent political movement, Rastokhez.

Building a Political Platform

Officially founded on September 14, 1989, the national movement Rastokhez (“rebirth” in Tajik) called upon the leadership of the Tajik SSR to assist in the revival of the Tajik nation, including through the promotion of Tajik language, culture, and traditions (Davlat, 2015d). Its founders, who included in addition to Mirrahimov the economist Tohir Abdudžabborov (Abdudžabbor), journalist Akhmadšo Komilov (Komilzoda), professors Haifabobo Hamidov and Šarofiddin Imomov, and poet M. Kanoatov, published an official Programme and began to lobby the republican government for change.²⁰ In many ways Rastokhez’s Programme aligned with the

¹⁸ Mirrahimov’s article (1988) created a great deal of controversy both upon its publication and in recent years. For an early (negative) response, see: Ūsupov, 1988. More recently, arguments have arisen about whether or not Mirrahimov was the first to raise such concerns, with authors such as Mirzorakhmatov (2011, p. 41) claiming that other writers, for example the more established philosopher Akbar Tursunov, had already published about the need to promote Tajik language and culture. As Mirzorakhmatov admits, however, any such publications were “academic” and read “only by a very few in the republic.” Mirrahim (2011), moreover, has argued that Mirzorakhmatov is “lying” and that no such articles existed prior to his own.

¹⁹ In part, Khodžaev was accused in February 1988 of allowing articles that “made sweeping accusations against perceived opponents in the republic and elsewhere about their disdain for Tajik history and culture, lowering the significance of the Tajik nation, and so forth.” This was very similar to the content of Mirrahimov’s articles from earlier in the year (Anonymous, 1988b).

²⁰ Rastokhez does not appear to have ever kept an official count of its members, and accounts of who, exactly, led the movement can differ significantly depending on who is recounting events. Standard figures include Mirbobo Mirrahimov and Tohir Abdudžabborov; other individuals, including Abdunaby Sattorov (Sattorzoda) or Askar Hakim are also frequently

broader calls for economic development and political reform espoused by Gorbachev and others in Moscow: it advocated greater independence for local enterprises, cited the broader “economic and political crisis” faced by Soviet society, and noted with approval that “Perestroika... has been called upon to provide for the rebirth of all nations, including the Tajik nation” (Programma, 1990, p. 115).

Yet Rastokhez’s Programme also went further than the central Soviet government may have approved of, advocating for a broad recalculation of republics’ “national product” (*nacional’nyj dokhod*) and the ways that funds were allocated from local coffers to the federal Soviet budget. In part, Rastokhez argued for fully removing the Soviet receipt tax (*nalog s obo-rota*), which had been long used to partially balance the costs to the Soviet budget of subsidising foodstuffs and other goods (*ibid.*, p. 123). Together, these two steps were reflective of a broader debate in Tajikistan about the role of the local economy in the broader Soviet system.²¹ As per the established calculation of republican national product, the value allocated to each Soviet republic was based upon the retail price (in Soviet rubles) paid for the total production of that republic. In the case of Tajikistan, where the economy was dominated by the production of cotton and other raw goods, this meant only the total amount paid to Tajik enterprises by other Soviet enterprises that purchased the raw cotton for sale on the world market or the production of finished goods in the USSR. Tajikistan’s final “national product” did not include any percentage of the export price of cotton grown in the republic nor the final value of the clothes produced with its cotton – only the much lower value provided for the raw material. In addition, receipt taxes, which were added to the cost of consumer goods, were also calculated based on the cost of the final product – and any tax revenues from the receipt tax left on the local level were provided to the region where the final product was produced. These policies, along with

(but not always) mentioned. For diverging accounts, see: Šodiev & Khumajro, 2014; Mirrahim, 1998.

²¹ This debate preceded perestroika but gained in urgency as the Soviet economy began to unravel during the final years of the USSR. Arguments continued throughout about the total value of agricultural goods (primarily cotton) grown in Tajikistan and sold on the world market by the USSR and their comparative value against the total amount of finished goods sent to Tajikistan from elsewhere in the USSR. For a selection of the arguments made in this vein about Tajikistan and Central Asia, see: Mukomel’, 1989; Nišanov, 2012, p. 246; Kalinovsky, 2014.

the centralised collection of taxes and redistribution to the republics, had long undervalued the contribution of the Tajik SSR to the Soviet budget, overemphasised its “subsidised” nature, and lowered access to social and economic development funds.²² From the perspective of a number of Tajik economists, including Abdudžabborov, the Tajik economy had long been left without its fair share of resources as a result of policies that undervalued raw goods in favour of finished products and left Tajik agricultural workers underpaid and with little choice but to pay more for the goods that were brought into Tajikistan from elsewhere.²³

Beyond economic reforms, moreover, Rastokhez began to hint at certain nationalist tendencies in its Programme and other public statements. Its official Charter called for a certain level of Tajik independence, arguing that “The Tajik SSR should be a sovereign state and should independently resolve issues related to the political, economic, social, and cultural development of the republic.” In addition to calls to promote the use of the Tajik language in the public sphere, Rastokhez also advocated to end the “overwhelming migration of people to Tajikistan” from outside the republic, which was taken as a threat to the republic’s independence and national values (Ustav, 1990, p. 133; Programma, 1990, p. 129).²⁴ Language,

²² The Soviet State Statistics Committee calculated that for 1989 the state had spent 900 million rubles in the Tajik SSR above the amount of the national product produced in the republic, thus making Tajikistan one of the USSR’s more “subsidised” regions. At the same time, however, the Committee admitted that “as a result of the particularities of price formation in the productive spheres, notable significance is rendered on the relation between produced and spent national incomes by the placement of extraction or processing activities for material or energy and fuel goods, along with the production of final products, on the territory of one or another republic (...) a notable gap exists between prices on the world market and the internal bulk prices used for the same goods during inter-republican exchanges (for fuels and raw goods they are lower than worldwide prices, while for consumer goods they are higher).” Thus the debate about recalculating figures of national product had by 1989 reached the highest echelons of the USSR (GARF, F. 5446, Op. 162, D. 176, L. 27-29).

²³ Tajik workers, like most in the Soviet agricultural sector, were underpaid in comparison to the average industrial or service-sector Soviet worker. Analyses of Soviet wages from the late 1980s consistently fixed average Tajik salaries (agricultural or otherwise) at approximately 82% of the Soviet average (Lyčagina & Čamkin, 1989, p. 14; Morozova, 1989, p. 76).

²⁴ It might be noted that migration to Tajikistan by non-Tajiks was hardly a significant issue in the late 1980s – in fact, non-Tajik Soviet citizens had been leaving Tajikistan for years. This had led to a drop in the number of skilled workers in the republic and was considered in both Moscow and Dushanbe to be a serious threat to the republic’s economic development (Umarov & Matkupov, 1989; Narzikulov, 1991).

however, remained one of Rastokhez's central issues, and it returned again and again to the need to replace the Soviet Tajik Cyrillic alphabet with the classical Persian script, to establish Tajik as the state language of the Tajik SSR, and to return the language to its previous status as a language of literature, culture, and government. While the Tajik language had remained well established in rural areas and the majority of the Tajik population was fluent in no language other than Tajik,²⁵ Dushanbe had over the decades developed into a Russian-speaking city, and one in which the majority of daily life and interactions with the government occurred primarily, if not exclusively, in Russian (Kalinovsky, 2014; Alimov & Saidov, 1991, p. 39). This was the gap that Rastokhez's founders targeted over the summer of 1989, for which they were rewarded in July 1989 with the passage by the Supreme Soviet of the Tajik SSR of the Law "On Language," which enshrined Tajik as the republic's state language.

Following the passage of the Tajik Law on Language, Rastokhez continued to use all accessible means to lobby the republican government for further change. Although its attempt to register as a "public organisation" (*obšestvennaâ organizaciâ*) was essentially ignored, it continued to hold small-scale protests and appeal to the Tajik Supreme Soviet on issues of cultural, economic, and political independence.²⁶ Its representatives continued to publish widely in the Tajik language press, including in the newspaper *Adabiët va San'at*, which was the official organ of the Tajik Writers' Union. This newspaper quickly became dominated by Rastokhez acolytes and made marked gains during 1989. By the end of the year it had reached 83,000 subscribers, a more than two-fold increase since 1986; its subscriber base would reach 100,000 by 1990.²⁷ Thanks to the efforts of Rastokhez members, moreover, the Tajik Union of Journalists was also granted its own newspaper, *Sukhan*, the first issue of which was published in February 1990 under the editorship of Mirrahimov (Hammer, 1998, p. 45). Later in 1990, moreover, Mirrahimov and others in Rastokhez would also go on to found and edit two independent papers, *Rastokhez* and *Dunië*.

²⁵ Survey data from 1986-1987 showed that only 28-29% of Tajik citizens could claim fluency in Russian (Kalandarov, 1989, p. 112; Ermolaeva, 1987, pp. 98-99).

²⁶ Information about Rastokhez's activities during the latter part of 1989 is limited, but the journalist Oleg Panfilov (1996) has reported such meetings during the final months of the year.

²⁷ RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 155, D. 2180, L. 14; F. 17, Op. 159, D. 1706, L. 40.

By the end of 1989 Rastokhez had well established itself within the small world of political parties in Dushanbe. Other than the Communist Party of the Tajik SSR, in fact, it was then the only significant political force: other “movements” and “public organisations” had been founded over the course of 1988 and 1989, but none gathered the same support or mobilised the same number of followers as Rastokhez. In December 1989, moreover, a number of smaller organisations, including “Èhëi Khudžand,” “Vakhdat” (from Ura-Tûbe), and the Kulâb-based “Oškoro” joined the Rastokhez platform, thus essentially becoming part of the larger organisation (Sultanov, 2014, p. 117). Finally, by early 1990 Ru ba Ru had essentially run its course, and was unofficially shut down, ironically not that long after it was first officially recognised by the political leadership of the republic in September and October (Anonymous, 1989c). Other political parties had yet to be founded – the Tajik Democratic Party and Tajik branch of the Islamic Rebirth Party would only come together in 1990²⁸ – and as the year came to a close, Rastokhez would have presented itself as the lone opposition movement in the republic of any significance. It was from this position, moreover, that the movement had begun to campaign for the February 1990 elections to the Tajik Supreme Soviet.

February 1990

While elections to the Tajik Supreme Soviet were held as planned in February 1990, they were overshadowed by a week of protests, looting, and violence that struck Dushanbe on February 11-18. Initially set off by rumours attesting to the arrival of thousands of Armenian refugees from Baku (where ethnic pogroms against the Armenian population had occurred in January 1990) and the provision of scarce housing by the state to these refugees, the originally peaceful protest of February 11 quickly turned violent. Shots were fired on February 12 by troops guarding the Central Committee building in Dushanbe, and by February 14, more than twenty civilians had been killed, thousands of stores and businesses looted by marauding packs of rioters, and the Tajik leadership seemed paralyzed by

²⁸ The modern Party of the Islamic Rebirth of Tajikistan claims that it was founded in 1973 by a group of mullahs who gathered surreptitiously until the late 1980s. In terms of formal party structures, however, the Islamic Rebirth Party of the USSR was first founded in Astrakhan in June 1990, with the Tajik branch of the party holding its foundational congress on October 8, 1990 in the village of Chortut outside of Dushanbe (Tolz, 1990).

inaction.²⁹ Taking advantage of the government's paralysis, the thousands-strong crowd, which had for days refused to leave the square in front of the Central Committee of the Tajik Communist Party's headquarters, elected a "Committee of 17" to negotiate with the authorities; many members of the committee were Rastokhez founders and acolytes.³⁰ On the evening of February 14, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, Mahkamov, the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan, Pallaev, and the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Haëev, agreed in negotiations with the "Committee of 17" to quit their posts and hand power in the republic over the Committee. Although the leadership's resignation was announced late that night on republican television and printed in at least one newspaper the next morning, Mahkamov, Pallaev, and Haëev later refused to officially resign during an extended unscheduled meeting of the Communist Party of Tajikistan held on February 15-16. Their hand had been strengthened by the arrival of additional internal troops on the morning of the 15th, and although protests and meetings continued through February 18, order was slowly established in the city and the leadership retained their positions.

The events of February 11-18, 1990 became controversial immediately after they were over; accounts of the week vary radically depending on the source. This includes both those responsible for the civilian deaths that occurred during the first days of unrest, the sequence of events leading up to and following the Tajik leadership's partial resignation on February 14, and those involved in organising the initial protests that grew out of hand. At the time, Rastokhez was blamed by the Tajik party and government leadership as one of the meeting organisers, something that its founders

²⁹ The events of February 11-18, 1990 have been described very differently by various parties. For a selection of viewpoints and descriptions, see Šabdolov, 1990; Helsinki Watch, 1991; as well as the *Soobšenie Komissii prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta Tadžikskoj SSR po proverke sobytij 12-14 fevralâ 1990 g. v g. Dušanbe*, as held in the personal archive of Buri Karimov, Moscow, Russian Federation. Today, these events remain so controversial that in conversation no one in Dushanbe will admit to having even been present on the square during this week, further complicating the task of verifying events and their ordering (author's interviews with former Rastokhez members and journalists, Dushanbe, 2015).

³⁰ Of the committee members, at least seven can be identified as Rastokhez founders or close associates, including: Bozor Sobir, Askar Khakim, Tohir Abdudžabborov, Kh. Khomidov, Mirbobo Mirrahimov, and A. Kholikov (*Protokoli masvaratii bainitarafaini rohbariâti džumkhuri va sozmoni mardumi az 14.2.1990*, as held in the personal Archive of Buri Karimov, Moscow, Russian Federation).

both then and now deny.³¹ For its part, Rastokhez and the members of the “Committee of 17” accused the Soviet and Tajik security services of starting the meeting and arming the criminals who roamed the city for days committing crimes and looting (for supporting accounts see Mâlo & Gončarov, 1990; Ganelin, 1990; Davlatov & Mamadšoev, 2012). Today these remain the standard narratives of the events, and are largely repeated wholesale in most contemporary accounts.

No matter the content or outcome of the February events, however, the week of violence in February 1990 can in many ways be seen as the apogee of Rastokhez’s political influence and mobilisation. Although the movement went to great efforts to deny its involvement in the protests’ organisation – going as far as to send a note to Mahkamov on February 12 back-dated to February 9 claiming that “they had no relationship” to the events in the city³² – there is a great deal of evidence showing their involvement from the very first days. Rastokhez members were both identified amongst the politicians giving speeches to the crowd on February 11 (Karimov, 2015, 94), and were very active in the “Committee of 17.” Some of its members even went as far as to write letters to the Congress of People’s Deputies in Moscow explaining the situation in Dushanbe and signing off as members of this committee.³³ While it remains difficult to determine to what degree they were involved in the organisation of the protests, the members of Rastokhez at the very least quickly took advantage of their standing with the population to organise the crowd and place themselves at the front of its politicisation.

Following the collapse of the “Committee of 17’s” attempt to affect political change in the republic and the protests’ end, however, Rastokhez began to fade as a political movement. Accused of organising what had become a week of violence in the capital, many of its members began to find themselves pressured by the authorities. While the movement officially continued to exist through 1992, its activities during 1990 and 1991 were relatively limited beyond lobbying the Tajik SSR to pass a declaration of sovereignty in the fall of 1990. Other political parties, including the Tajik

³¹ For the government’s position at the time, see: RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 159, D. 1710, L. 16-17. Comparable accounts can also be found in Ponomarov, 1990; Kobilova, 2007.

³² RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 159, D. 1695, L. 8.

³³ GARF, F. 9654, Op. 6, D. 176, L. 21-22.

Democratic Party and Tajik branch of the Islamic Rebirth Party, were founded and became active in 1990; over the years a number of key Rastokhez members also joined these parties, leaving the movement behind.

The February 1990 elections to the Tajik Supreme Soviet were also something of a disappointment for Rastokhez. From amongst its leaders, only Tohir Abdudžabborov and Bozor Sobir were elected, two members of the small minority of non-Communists to make it into the new parliament. The new Supreme Soviet quickly gained a pro-government reputation, insofar as it was dominated not only by party members, but by those “who had drunk from the up of high office,” in the words of Asliddin Sohibnazar (1997, v. 1, p. 18), a parliament deputy and future founder of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan. In fact, 216 out of the 230 new Supreme Soviet deputies were members of the Communist Party, the vast majority of whom had previously held party and government posts.³⁴ This result has long been explained by Rastokhez sympathisers as the intended consequence of the February riots: by instigating a week of violence in Dushanbe, which was then blamed on Rastokhez and other opposition groups, the Communist Party of Tajikistan and the republican security services managed to denigrate and discredit the movement in the eyes of the population. In other words, the February events are best understood as a political move aimed at retaining control of the Supreme Soviet at any cost (Davlat, 2015d; Mirrahim, 1998, pp. 152-153; Davlatov, 2015; Karimov, 2015, pp. 14, 67).

This line of argument, however, makes two central assumptions that are worth verifying for their accuracy. First, it assumes that Rastokhez (perhaps along with other opposition groups) was popular enough throughout Tajikistan in February 1990 to win a significant portion or majority of the seats in the Tajik Supreme Soviet. Second, moreover, it takes as granted that the Tajik government was worried enough about the influence of Rastokhez in the first months of 1990 to go as far as to instigate a weeklong series of riots to deny their access to power. Upon close scrutiny, however, evidence for both assumptions begins to seem limited. Sociological surveys from late 1989 and early 1990 have shown that prior to the February events Rastokhez in fact had very little social recognition in Tajikistan, and that it was only after February 1990 that most people in

³⁴ Statističeskij otčet o sostave Verkhovnogo Soveta, Prezidiuma, komitetov i postoânnykh komissij Verkhovnogo Soveta Tadžikskoj SSR, GARF, F. 9654, Op. 10, D. 100, L. 227.

the republic had even heard of the movement (Alimov & Saidov, 1991, p. 102). In conversation, moreover, the former head of Rastokhez's regional office in the southern border town of Panj has admitted that political agitation in the regions was especially difficult for the movement.³⁵ From the government's perspective, the early concern over the direction taken by Ru ba Ru seems to have waned by late 1989, and by the beginning of 1990 almost no attention was being directed towards Rastokhez. At a republican-level meeting held for Tajik ideological workers on "coordinating with independent and social organisations" in the first days of February 1990, for example, no mention was made of Rastokhez or any of its members.³⁶ Following the February 1990 events, moreover, comment has been frequently made about Rastokhez's supposed links to the Baltic "Peoples' Fronts" (*nardonye fronty*), which were said to heighten the threat they presented in the eyes of the Soviet authorities.³⁷ Yet this, too, is questionable: actual evidence for coordination or even contact between the Baltic Fronts and political organisations in Dushanbe is overwhelmingly dated after the February events, not before.³⁸ Ultimately, given that Rastokhez's overall name recognition and fame grew as the result of the February events, it seems difficult to affirm the claim that the February riots would have been seen as an effective tool for the Soviet authorities to "retain control at any cost."³⁹ That there was a clear attempt to blame Rastokhez for the riots

³⁵ Author's interview with Khikmatullo Saifullozoda, Dushanbe, February 2015.

³⁶ RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 159, D. 1709, L. 10.

³⁷ By and large this argument seems to have been used by opponents of Rastokhez to demonstrate the dangers it presented (see for example Kobilova, 2007, p. 20; Sultanov, 2014, p. 119) or its sympathisers to emphasise the supposed level of support for the organisation (Dudoignon, 1998; Davlatov, 2015).

³⁸ Evidence supporting the supposed links between Rastokhez and the Baltic Fronts is limited to an unsourced 1990 Radio Liberty dispatch about a supposed 1988 trip by Bozor Sobir to the Sajudis in Lithuania (Crow, 1990), a tapped 1990 phone call from Rastokhez member Khalikov to a certain low-level Sajudis member (TadžikTA, 1990), and the printing of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan's newspaper by the Sajudis in late 1990 (Merezhnikova, 1990). There is no evidence that the Sajudis or any other Baltic Fronts assisted Rastokhez or other political parties in Tajikistan before September 1990, even as they were working directly with Birlik in Uzbekistan and other regional parties. For more on the Baltics' lack of attention to Tajikistan, see Muiznieks, 1995; Beissinger, 2002, p. 85.

³⁹ Since the fall of the USSR, a story has developed about the use of force against organised crowds and violent pogroms over the course of 1989-1990 that paints these events as an attempt by the centre to "discredit the opposition" and "re-establish centralised control." While the use of military force in the Caucasus (Tbilisi, Baku) or Central Asia (Ferghana, Osh, Dushanbe) during this period may have temporarily re-established Moscow's authority,

and denigrate the organisation's reputation as a result does not necessarily mean – as Rastokhez members have later argued – that the entire scheme was premeditated (Mirrahim, 1998, pp. 152-153).

It does remain difficult to judge Rastokhez's overall level of popular support prior to the February 1990 events. Some sources sympathetic to the movement have claimed that it "rapidly won popular support" (for example Dudoignon, 1998, p. 58) and that by January 1990 "hardly anyone doubted" Rastokhez's victory in the upcoming elections to the Tajik Supreme Soviet (Davlatov, 2015). Rastokhez members, most notably Mirrahimov, have argued that the organisation was truly "national" (*millatī*), with support throughout the republic (Mirrahim, 1998, p. 50). Other evidence, however, paints a less one-sided picture. While many people in Dushanbe seem to have been sympathetic to Rastokhez's arguments in favour of economic independence and cultural development – one study from 1990 (Kul'čik *et al.*, p. 34) estimated that the movement likely had approximately 10,000 "sympathisers" in Dushanbe – it remained a relatively small and urban organisation dominated by university professors and other intelligentsia representatives (Olimov & Olimova, 1991, p. 101). This had been the case since its formation under the auspices of Ru ba Ru, where nearly 75% of all members were university students, teachers, or academics (Davlat, 2015b), and it remained true for Rastokhez's core throughout its existence. During protests and other times of strife, the core members of Rastokhez were frequently joined by masses of "students who had recently arrived from rural areas," but whose concerns differed from the movement's leaders and who easily shifted political camps when it was convenient to do so (Kul'čik *et al.*, 1990, p. 35). Even the supposed fame the movement had won by pushing through the Tajik Law on Language is in fact less obvious than is often presented. According to Asliddin Sohibnazar (1997, v. 1, pp. 14-15), the ultimate decision for the law's passage was made in Moscow and had little reference to the meetings held in Dushanbe in 1989. Sohibnazar argues that Kahhor Mahkamov, concerned about the passage of similar laws elsewhere in the USSR, called Mikhail Gorbachev to discuss the issue in July 1989. Gorbachev advised Mahkamov to have such a law passed, since Tajikistan's failure to do so might be seen as a sign of its

in the long run, all of these acts were ultimately used by opposition and pro-independence movements against Moscow, making them very ineffective tools indeed if that was their original purpose.

“backwardness.” Former members of Rastokhez have also noted the Law on Language’s lack of resonance with the general population:

We went back to our districts and people looked at us funny.

‘Why do we need this law?’ they asked – ‘we already speak in Tajik anyways.’⁴⁰

Conclusion

While it may be challenging to determine with any accuracy Rastokhez’s level of popular support in 1989 and 1990, with the advantage of hindsight some comment can at least be made about the importance of its early political mobilisation for the Tajik political sphere as a whole. In contrast to the smaller organisations that were founded in 1988 and early 1989, Rastokhez, through both its early incarnation as Ru ba Ru and during its later political lobbying, began to act as a real political force. No matter the ultimate level of influence its lobbying and meetings had on political decision-making in Dushanbe, it represented the first exclusively political organisation in the Tajik SSR outside of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. It was also the first organisation in the republic to effectively motivate and mobilise citizens to political action, whether this was gathering on the street in support of the Tajik language or writing letters to political leaders. Tajik Soviet citizens statistically wrote letters to the central authorities with one of the lowest frequencies of any republic in the Union – any letter writing at all, such as was recorded in and around the February events, represented some element of politicisation.⁴¹ This experience of political organisation would then be applied by many of Rastokhez’s leaders and members who would later join other Tajik political parties on both sides of the spectrum and help to foment the rapid development of parties and factions that came to quickly dominate Tajik politics after its declaration of full independence from the USSR in September 1991.

Tracking the development of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez from February 1989 to February 1990, moreover, provides a unique perspective from which to consider the political mobilisation taking place in the Tajik SSR during perestroika. At the beginning of 1989, economic concerns were

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with Khikmatullo Saifullozoda, Dushanbe, February 2015.

⁴¹ In 1989, for example, only 0.7% of all letters sent to the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Moscow had originated in the Tajik SSR (RGANI, F. 100, Op. 1, D. 286, LL. 2-7, 177-181).

clearly at the fore. While questions about the status of the Tajik language and “cultural rebirth” were given more media attention, nearly everyone involved in the decision to found Ru ba Ru was fundamentally worried about the economy. This included the future founders of Rastokhez. The Chairman of Rastokhez, Tohir Abdudžabborov, remained throughout an economist, concerned about Tajikistan’s place in the shifting Soviet economy.⁴² Even Mirrahimov, often seemingly focused on cultural and linguistic issues, never lost sight of the economy. Mere days before the February 1989 protest, he took part in an academic roundtable in Moscow, where he explicitly linked interethnic relations and cultural development in Tajikistan to the republic’s imbalanced economic relations with Moscow (Mirrahimov, 1989, p. 84). The leaders of the Tajik SSR were equally concerned, understanding, as this article has shown, that the students on the streets were expressing a set of largely economic concerns. Surprisingly few contemporary politicians or journalists bothered to ask those gathered on the street what their frustrations actually constituted. Those who did, however, frequently received answers about the lack of jobs or housing in the republic.⁴³ The fragile balance of the Tajik economy, which had long been known for some of the lowest standards of living in the USSR, had been pushed over the edge by perestroika’s economic reforms, leading to higher unemployment, greater difficulties with housing, and in many cases, even lower wages for those who retained their jobs. These conditions unsurprisingly led to an outpouring of frustration and anger amongst the masses of young and either unemployed or underemployed men from Dushanbe and its surroundings, who made up the majority of those responding to calls to meet and protest against the current leadership of the Tajik SSR.

The political genius of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez, however, was to provide a space in which the economic frustrations of perestroika in Tajikistan could metamorphose into a political movement with contours greater than the economic downturn that had caused its rise. In the meetings held under the auspices of Ru ba Ru, the leaders of the Tajik SSR were criticised not only for their economic policies – but just as much for their stances on cultural and national issues or their supposed opposition to change. Once

⁴² For a fuller discussion of Abdudžabborov’s evolving economic views, see Kalinovsky, 2014.

⁴³ RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 159, D. 1710, L. 16-17; also Alimov & Saidov, 1991, pp. 95, 103.

founded as an official movement, Rastokhez lobbied not only for economic independence, but also against the leadership of the republic, in favour of the Tajik language, and against the infamous Sixth Article of the Soviet Constitution, which was later thrown out as an afterthought during Gorbachev's election as President of the USSR during the Third Congress of People's Deputies in March 1990. Economic opposition solidified into opposition writ large: the members of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez began to see themselves as representatives of a strictly political movement, and one that was capable of expressing concerns that went beyond the state of the Tajik economy in its fight against the neocolonial rule of the USSR. Ultimately, Rastokhez was able to at least temporarily overcome the gap between the national intelligentsia in Dushanbe and the villages from which it had grown distant. It managed to mobilise the more rural elements of Tajik youth and redirect their initially economic frustrations towards its own cultural and political ends.⁴⁴

The development of a political movement out of what seemed to be a series of unconnected and undirected economic concerns appears to have taken the leadership of the Tajik SSR by complete surprise. Mirbobo Mirrahimov is reported to have said that Goibnazar Pallaev, the Chairman of the Tajik Supreme Soviet, "could not believe it" when the movement first attempted to register itself in 1989; this was "like a thunderbolt" for him and the rest of the party heads (Šodiev & Khumajro, 2014). From the perspective of the Tajik Communist Party, the economic concerns of those protesting in the streets needed to be listened to, taken into consideration, and dealt with economically – for which Ru ba Ru had been called upon to provide an initial platform. That this platform could lead to the development of an independent political movement that would begin to demand more than just economic reforms does not seem to have been taken into consi-

⁴⁴ Socially and economically, the Tajik national intelligentsia had for decades been isolated from the cultural life of the villages from whence its members had originally been drawn. In part, this was due to the long-term consequences of the early Soviet policy of *korenizaciâ*, which had in part given preference to Tajik applicants for higher education. Over time, the number of Tajiks with university degrees (and especially humanities degrees) increased, whereas the number with technical or scientific degrees decreased. Since the main area of employment for Tajiks with higher humanitarian degrees was at universities or other city-based institutions, the concentration of Tajik intelligentsia in Dushanbe and other cities increased notably. In the villages, on the other hand, there was a clear level of "intellectual hunger." This imbalance was noted with increasing frequency in the latter years of perestroika (Nazaršoev, 1989, p. 6; Anonymous, 1989a).

deration. Given the events occurring across the USSR at the time, including the formation of national fronts in the Baltics, strikes in Russia, riots in neighbouring Uzbekistan, and many other similar disturbances, the lack of concern on the part on Mahkamov and other Tajik leaders is somewhat surprising. Given the history of the Tajik SSR, however, it is also understandable: up until 1989 political unrest had been simply unknown in the republic, and cultural and political concerns seemed the least immediate of citizens' concerns. By 1989 nearly everyone in the republic – including the party and state leaderships – had grown focused on the state of the local economy and its ongoing collapse; political mobilisation seemed a far less immediate worry.

Under the auspices of *Ru ba Ru* and *Rastokhez*, however, the economic problems of perestroika became a platform for mobilisation and political opposition on cultural, linguistic, and nationalist grounds, which together set the scene for the Tajik SSR's last two years in the Soviet Union. It remains important, moreover, to ground the study of this mobilisation within the context and base from which it arose. While recent scholarship has tended to focus on the role of nationalism and linguistic issues in driving political mobilisation in late Soviet Central Asia, the case of *Ru ba Ru* and *Rastokhez* help to demonstrate the underlying economic content of most citizens' complaints and motivations. In line with models demonstrated elsewhere, disappointed economic expectations quickly came to bleed into broader political anger and a rejection of the political system writ large (Davies, 1974; Gurr, 2010; for an application to the USSR, see Češko, 1993, pp. 32-33). In Tajikistan, this early model of political mobilisation would remain significant, even as *Rastokhez* itself would fade in political weight in the years following 1990. During the final years of the USSR, other political parties would harness the frustrations of the many increasingly out of work and underemployed rural workers for their own political purposes. Together with elements of the regional and central national intelligentsia, for example, these workers would also make up the core of protests held in August and September 1991 that led to the ouster of Kakhhor Mahkamov as President of Tajikistan. Thus the stage was set for political struggle.

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- RGASPI Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, Moscow
- RGANI Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, Moscow

Abstract

Over the course of the year between February 1989 and February 1990, Dushanbe underwent a political activation. The capital of the Tajik SSR saw the development of an independent and antagonistic political club, Ru ba Ru, which with time developed into the national movement Rastokhez. Through a detailed analysis of Ru ba Ru and Rastokhez's development and actions during the period of 1989-1990, this article demonstrates the ways in which these groups were able to harness the Tajik Soviet citizens' economic and social concerns and mobilise them into a movement for political and cultural change.

Keywords: Tajikistan, political mobilisation, perestroika, glasnost, economic reform, Soviet Union.

Résumé

De février à février et de Ru ba Ru à Rastokhez. Mobilisation politique au Tadjikistan soviétique finissant (1989-1990)

Tout au long de l'année allant de février 1989 à février 1990, Douchanbé a connu une période d'activisme politique. La capitale de la RSS tadjike a vu se développer un club indépendant d'opposition politique, Ru ba Ru, qui se transforma progressivement en mouvement national Rastokhez. À travers une analyse détaillée du développement et des actions menées par Ru ba Ru et Rastokhez sur la période, cet article montre la manière dont ces groupes ont été en mesure d'exploiter les préoccupations économiques et sociales des citoyens tadjiks soviétiques et de les mobiliser autour d'un mouvement pour le changement politique et culturel.

Mots clés : Tadjikistan, mobilisations politiques, perestroïka, glasnost, réformes économiques, Union soviétique.

Аннотация

От февраля к февралю и от «Ру ба Ру» к «Растокhez». Политическая мобилизация в Таджикистане в преддверии распада СССР (1989-1990)

Первые независимые политические движения в Таджикской ССР появились на социальной авансцене в период с февраля 1989 по февраль 1990 гг. Среди них особенно выделялись политический клуб «Ру ба Ру» и сформировавшееся на его встречах национальное движение «Растокhez». Детально анализируя развитие и деятельность обеих организаций, данный очерк раскрывает процесс, в ходе которого негодования граждан Таджикской ССР относительно экономического спада были направлены на пользу культурных и политических перемен.

Ключевые слова: Таджикистан, СССР, политические движения, экономические реформы, гласность, перестройка.