**The Struggle for Kushtau: The Movement**

**to Protect a Mountain in Russia**

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Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April 1-3, 2021.

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**Abstract**

It appears that the movement to protect Kushtau has achieved success. Kushtau is a small mountain in Bashkortostan, a republic in Russia. After the Bashkir Soda Company received approval for mining in that mountain, a movement among some citizens in that republic sought to protect Kushtau from the exploitation that eventually would have destroyed it. After dramatic clashes of the supporters and opponents of such mining, the chief executive of Bashkortostan reversed his position and promised protected status for Kushtau. The activity of that movement had been rewarded with forceful intervention by the president of Russia.

This paper suggests tentative insights that might be gained from the story of the struggle over that mountain. What characteristics of the movement to protect Kushtau contributed to its success? It is likely that the nature of that movement’s network building and issue framing were important. Also, the central goal of the movement was clearly defined and narrowly focused. The movement to defend Kushtau offers an example of the kind of protesting that has been termed “rightful resistance.” This paper argues that narrowly focused movements may be particularly important under a semi-authoritarian political regime, and it reports that the horizontal diffusion of the influence of locally based movements is a familiar phenomenon in Russia today.

**The Confrontation on the Mountain**

Kushtau is a mountain that is surrounded by the steppe west of the Urals in the Republic of Bashkortostan in Russia. That mountain has an elevation of 374 meters, and is about four kilometers long.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the Russian language, a mountain of that type is termed a *shikhan*. Historically, there were four shikhany in Bashkiriia, and those mountains were regarded as sacred in the tradition of the Bashkir people.[[2]](#footnote-2) Those mountains are the residues of reefs in an ancient sea; each of them was formed about 230 million years ago. Each of the shikhany is rich in limestone, and one of them, Shakhtau, has been mined so extensively since the 1950s that it has been completely destroyed. The place where that mountain stood is now the site of a quarry. As the Bashkir Soda Company (BSK) saw the potential for taking limestone from that site coming to an end, it sought permission to mine another shikhan. Originally it hoped to mine on Toratau, but opposition to activity that eventually would destroy that mountain led BSK to request authorization to exploit Kushtau instead.[[3]](#footnote-3)

That request aroused a controversy that would grow increasingly heated. In March 2019 the federal Council on Human Rights and Civil Society (SPCh) held a session in Bashkortostan and reached the conclusion that allowing a commercial company to exploit Kushtau would violate federal laws.[[4]](#footnote-4) In addition, the federal Ministry of Natural Resources and Protection of the Environment (Minprirody) recommended that Kushtau be made an Especially Protected Natural Territory (OOPT) of federal designation.[[5]](#footnote-5) Nevertheless, Radii Khabirov, who had been chosen as the Head of Bashkortostan in October 2018, had signed documents in December 2018 authorizing mining on Kushtau.[[6]](#footnote-6) In December 2019 territorial administrations of federal ministries gave permission for mining on that mountain.[[7]](#footnote-7) Khabirov expressed a strong personal commitment to the extraction of minerals from Kushtau, affirming that the work of mining on that mountain would proceed “no matter what,” and insisting, “it is useless to try to break me, or to twist my arm.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Even though a movement based in Bashkiriia sought to prevent the work that Khabirov had authorized, an “information blockade” in the mass media prevailed, as major media outlets refrained from covering the controversy about Kushtau.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In August 2020 that controversy came into the open in a dramatic fashion. In the early part of that month, some people who were in the vicinity of Kushtau discovered that workers had come to that mountain to start cutting down trees in preparation for the beginning of mining operations.[[10]](#footnote-10) By August 3, local residents were confronting those workers, and on August 4 some of those defending the mountain set up tents. During the following days the number of tents grew, and people from nearby towns gathered to join the ecological activists. Late at night on August 9, a force of 300 or more Ch. O. P. (private security personnel, or in this case, hired thugs) arrived, brought in by buses to threaten or attack the men and women who were in the tents.[[11]](#footnote-11) Soon a flashmob of 3,000 to 5,000 people assembled to join in the defense of the mountain, displaying a very long flag of Bashkortostan, and chanting slogans, including “Kushtau, Zhivi!” (“Kushtau, Live!”) and “Kushtau Nash!” (“Kushtau Is Ours!”). Soon the private security people were joined by OMON police (riot police), members of the Russian Guard, and men who were not uniform, regarded by some journalists as *titushki*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Violent clashes took place frequently. Officers of the regular police arrested from 70 to 100 of those defending the mountain but did not arrest anyone from the other side.[[13]](#footnote-13) Those who arrived to join in the defense of Kushtau continued to increase, perhaps reaching 10,000 in number, and coming from various districts in the republic and even outside its boundaries.[[14]](#footnote-14) Protests in foreign countries by emigrants from Bashkortostan also brought attention to the conflict on Kushtau.[[15]](#footnote-15)

As the conflict on Kushtau became more violent and grew in scale, it attracted the attention of the national media of Russia, reportedly evoking sympathy among wider circles in society across the country.[[16]](#footnote-16) Among those who voiced support for the activists defending Kushtau were famous performers, including Iurii Shevchuk, who had grown up in Bashkortostan.[[17]](#footnote-17) As the conflict over Kushtau acquired significance at the federal level,[[18]](#footnote-18) it moved to the agenda of the national government.[[19]](#footnote-19) One journalist remarked wryly that Putin, “putting it mildly, does not love it when local problems rise to the federal level,”[[20]](#footnote-20) because such a situation pressures him to get involved. Also, the leaders in Moscow might have seen the potential for the conflict over a shikhan to provoke open tension between different ethnic groups; another journalist suggested that “political and inter-nationality risks forced a correction of position.”[[21]](#footnote-21) As a result, the federal authorities, and President Putin personally, intervened in the conflict over the fate of Kushtau.[[22]](#footnote-22)

It seems very likely that Radii Khabirov, the Head of Bashkortostan, was directed by the federal center to put an end to that conflict as soon as possible.[[23]](#footnote-23) He went to the mountain to meet with the activists who were defending it, and promised that work on Kushtau would be suspended until a compromise would be reached.[[24]](#footnote-24) Apparently Khabirov soon realized that no compromise was possible; on August 21 he announced that Kushtau would be given the status of a nature monument and would not be mined.[[25]](#footnote-25) He flatly said, “the history with Kushtau is closed. Mining it is impossible.”[[26]](#footnote-26) On August 24 he requested that the federal ministry of nature and the environment (Minprirody) make Kushtau an especially protected natural territory (OOPT) of regional designation, which would give it further protection from commercial exploitation.[[27]](#footnote-27) Toward the end of August, Khabirov even criticized the transaction of 2013 that had transferred a majority of the shares in the Bashkir Soda Company from the government of Bashkiriia to private owners, and he demanded the return of those shares to the Republic of Bashkortostan.[[28]](#footnote-28) He charged that the privatization of majority ownership in that company had damaged the budget of the republic, costing it “several tens of millions of rubles.”[[29]](#footnote-29) More evidence of the change in direction by Khabirov was provided when he chose Andrei Nazarov as the new premier of Bashkortostan. Although Nazarov was not a newcomer in the government of that republic, it is notable that when he moved into his new position, he wasted no time in expressing support for protests by environmentalists.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Most remarkably, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, harshly criticized the Bashkir Soda Company, saying that it had carried out “the uncontrolled pumping out of money without any obligations connected with investments.”[[31]](#footnote-31) After he detailed the great disparity between the large amount of profit received by that company and the meager amount it devoted to investments, he posed the rhetorical question, “Where is the money?” And he answered, “It is known where—in offshores,” adding that much of that money flows to where the shareholders live. Putin was repeating almost exactly what a reporter for the independent newspaper *Novaia gazeta* had revealed earlier;[[32]](#footnote-32) most of the shares in the Bashkir Soda Company were held by Bashkhim, which has belonged to a company in Cyprus, whose owners live in France and own land there. The activists who sought to protect Kushtau had been saying the same things about those companies.[[33]](#footnote-33) Putin announced that he would ask the procurator to investigate the legality of the deal in 2013 in which the government of Bashkortostan gave the controlling share in the Bashkir Soda Company to the private company, Bashkhim.[[34]](#footnote-34) It is unusual for Putin to disclose embarrassing information about a company, and even more unusual for him to reopen the question of the legality of a commercial transaction that took place several years earlier. Evidently Putin was very unhappy with the performance of some of the leaders of the Bashkir republic.[[35]](#footnote-35)

**Strengths of the Movement to Protect Kushtau**

One comparative generalization based on the study of social movements suggests that the recruitment of participants in a movement is facilitated if previously existing social networks are available to assist in performing that task.[[36]](#footnote-36) A full exploration of the means by which people were attracted to take part in the movement to defend Kushtau would require further research. Yet it is possible to offer some preliminary, tentative observations. It seems that a major role, and perhaps the primary role, in recruiting and directing those who took part in that movement was played by local nationalist (ethnically or regionally based) organizations. A number of those organizations had existed in Bashkiriia for many years; some of those that were linked with Bashkir identity had been tolerated or even had received some encouragement from the leadership of the republic at an earlier time.[[37]](#footnote-37) Stanislav Shkel’ has said that during the years before 2020, the “Bashkir national movement” developed a more independent base of support, as it “gained a horizontal character, a network structure, and a new agenda,” so that “its lower support increased strongly.”[[38]](#footnote-38) In his view, that movement acquired “a mass, non-elite character,” making it difficult for members of the elite to control it. Thus it is not surprising that Bashkort, probably the most prominent nationalist organization in Bashkiriia by 2020, was not viewed favorably by the leadership of that republic. In May 2020 the Supreme Court of Bashkortostan declared that Bashkort was an “extremist organization.”[[39]](#footnote-39) That decision reflected a trend that had come from the central government since at least 2017. A leader of Bashkort has said that his organization had been trying to defend the shikhany at least since 2014.[[40]](#footnote-40) The importance of Bashkort in the movement to defend Kushtau was suggested by the fact that, when Khabirov invited the top activists in that movement to confer with him, several of those who were chosen by that movement to represent it were officers of Bashkort; according to the republic’s leadership, that made such a meeting impossible.[[41]](#footnote-41) It is significant that, as Paul Goble has noted, the movement to defend Kushtau “combines both ecological and ethnic concerns, with those opposing the construction convinced that they are defending not only the environment but their national dignity.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Since the values of that movement blended in themes from local nationalism, with the shikhany traditionally regarded as sacred by the Bashkir people, there was all the more reason for Russia’s national leadership to be careful in dealing with that movement.

It seems likely that organizations from outside Bashkortostan, whether on the level of Russia as whole or of a transnational scope, played only a marginal role in the efforts to protect Kushtau. One commentator has said, “the factor of outside participation” in the protests to defend that mountain “was minimal.”[[43]](#footnote-43) The transnational environmentalist organization Greenpeace did bring a suit to the procurator of Russia alleging violations of legality,[[44]](#footnote-44) but there were no reports that it recruited participants on the ground in the vicinity of Kushtau. The only example of major activity on behalf of the defenders of that mountain came after scores of them were arrested in August 2020, when lawyers from federal human rights organizations provided services to those defendants, including consultation and representation in local courts.[[45]](#footnote-45) While that assistance must have been valuable, those organizations had played no apparent role in the protests before that time. It also seems clear that political parties made no significant contribution to the mobilization of activists to protect Kushtau. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation did not become involved in the effort to defend that mountain until September of 2020, after that struggle had passed through its climax,[[46]](#footnote-46) and no other parties were mentioned at all in journalists’ accounts of that story.[[47]](#footnote-47) In short, it is likely that the organizational core of the movement to prevent mining on Kushtau consisted of nationalist organizations within Bashkortostan, and it was favorable for that movement that those organizations had been in existence for years and had experience in advocating the preservation of the mountains in their republic.

Some features of the frame adopted by the movement to defend Kushtau also enhanced its chance of success. For scholars who have developed theory about social movements, a frame is a framework of interpretation of an event, condition, or problem. According to David Snow and Robert Benford, social movements “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The movement to protect Kushtau had a clear, narrowly focused goal: to save that mountain from the mining that would destroy it.[[49]](#footnote-49) The activists in that movement sought a resolution by the republic or the national government that would satisfy their demand.[[50]](#footnote-50) At one point they addressed their request directly to the President of Russia, asking him to declare Kushtau an Especially Protected Natural Territory.[[51]](#footnote-51) By appealing to Vladimir Putin, they made it clear that they acknowledged his authority rather than challenging it. The protests by the defenders of that shikhan are an example of the kind of activity that some scholars have called “rightful resistance.”[[52]](#footnote-52) People who engage in rightful resistance seek changes that will solve problems that are troubling them, while they show that they are fundamentally loyal to the national regime. They appeal to national leaders to intervene on their behalf by reversing the harmful decisions of local officials or private companies. They craft their demands as requests that actions at the local level comply with the statements of national leaders or laws that have been adopted at the national level. The strategy of the movement to protect Kushtau had those characteristics. Thus it is understandable that a leader of that movement could say, “our position is ecological, and not political.”[[53]](#footnote-53) The people who sought to protect that mountain did not ask for change in the nature of the political regime of their country, and eventually their request was satisfied when the President of Russia intervened to satisfy their main demand.

The frame to which the defenders of Kushtau adhered emphasized the symbolic importance of the shikhany. That perspective was grounded in the traditions of the Bashkir people, which considered those mountains to be sacred.[[54]](#footnote-54) However, the leaders of the movement to protect Kushtau had to be careful not to appeal only to those of Bashkir nationality, since the population of Bashkortostan is multiethnic, with Russians the largest group in that republic, Bashkirs second, and Tatars third in number.[[55]](#footnote-55) Therefore it is not surprising that the leaders of the defense of Kushtau asserted that those who took part in their efforts included people of various nationalities and religions.[[56]](#footnote-56) The movement to protect that mountain portrayed itself as representing the people of Bashkortostan and not just the members of the Bashkir nationality.[[57]](#footnote-57) And as we have see, that movement mixed the theme of the defense of a distinctive regional heritage with an emphasis on the value of preserving a beautiful natural environment. Thus regional patriotism was blended with environmentalism.[[58]](#footnote-58) That combination of themes helped to make it possible to recruit activists who were committed to the defense of the shikhans of the Bashkir republic.

The base of support for the movement to defend Kushtau suddenly became broader after events in August 2020, though, as a new frame became associated with that movement. It seems apparent that the number of people who sympathized with the activists on Kushtau increased rapidly because of the massive use of force against them at the mountain in August.[[59]](#footnote-59) As one observer has said, “that was the breakthrough moment, when an enormous number of people decisively declared their position.”[[60]](#footnote-60) At that time, several thousand people who previously had not been involved in the movement to defend Kushtau flocked to the mountain to rally to its defense. One of the slogans that crowd chanted was “Kushtau Nash!” (“Kushtau Is Ours!”), echoing the Russian nationalist slogan of 2014, “Krym Nash!” (“Crimea Is Ours!”), which had evoked a powerful feeling of national pride. The new frame of the movement to protect Kushtau was one that depicted its participants as members of the people of Bashkortostan (and Russia) who were the victims of brutality that was carried out at the behest of selfish interests. In that case, a dramatic increase in the harshness of repression provoked support for resistance by a larger circle in the population.[[61]](#footnote-61)

**The Political Opportunity Structure**

We have argued that the movement to defend the shikhany of Bashkortostan enjoyed the assets of an established organizational core and frames that resonated with a wide base in the population of that republic. Yet we should emphasize that such advantages do not guarantee that a social movement will achieve success in relation to its goals, particularly if it seeks change in the policies of government on any level. It is not uncommon for a movement in Russia with effective networking and popular goals to fail to produce changes in policies. Changes in policies can only come about through decisions by the officials in the state who wield authority. Scholars who study social movements typically argue that one condition that favors success for a movement is division in the political elite.[[62]](#footnote-62) If members of the elite are divided in their degree of support for an existing policy, there may be a chance for a group in the leadership to show some sympathy for the goals of a movement for change.

Though it is impossible to find reliable evidence on the relationships among groups in Russia’s political leadership, some information that is available implies that certain divisions eventually proved important for the fate of Kushtau. The first top leader of Bashkortostan after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was Murtaza Rakhimov, who served as the president of that republic from 1993 to 2010. In 2010 he was replaced by Rustem Khamitov, who is a Bashkir but had been serving in office outside the republic, so he was viewed as an outsider, or a *variag* (Varangian) in Russian slang. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has said of that transition, “the Kremlin appointed a republican leader who was not closely tied to the republican political system and was brought from outside the republic.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Cameron Ross and Petr Panov report that since Khamitov was not chosen by Rakhimov as his successor, Khamitov “was unable to inherit the political machine created by his predecessor.”[[64]](#footnote-64) According to Sharafutdinova, after the new leader of Bashkortostan took office, that republic “entered a more turbulent political era characterized by a conflict” between Rakhimov and Khamitov.[[65]](#footnote-65) Stanislav Shkel’ argues that Khamitov was not successful in building support for himself among local officials in Bashkortostan.[[66]](#footnote-66) It is significant that Khamitov made a commitment to preserve all three of the remaining shikhany,[[67]](#footnote-67) and apparently he was perceived as defending those mountains.[[68]](#footnote-68) In 2018 Dmitrii Kozak, a figure in the central leadership who is closely associated with Vladimir Putin, headed a commission that decided on a compromise for the shikhany; Toratau would be left untouched, while mining on Kushtau would be permitted.[[69]](#footnote-69) Radii Khabirov, as the new Head of the Bashkir Republic, the replacement for Rustem Khamitov, would be responsible for carrying out the commission’s decision.[[70]](#footnote-70) Natal’ia Zubarevich, a prominent scholar, has said that Khamitov had not allowed the exploitation of the shikhany, but when Rakhimov arrived he was committed to allowing that activity.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Khabirov is a native of Bashkiriia, and had served in the administration of Murtaza Rakhimov. Some sources report that when Khabirov worked under Rakhimov, a conflict between them developed, and that Vladislav Surkov, a high-ranking official in the central leadership, defended Khabirov.[[72]](#footnote-72) Around the time when Rakhimov was replaced, Khabirov was called to Moscow, where he worked in the central leadership, reportedly with Surkov as his patron.[[73]](#footnote-73) After several years of work in the central government, Khabirov served as the mayor of a suburb of Moscow. Thus, when he was appointed as the Head of the Republic of Bashkortostan in October 2018 (and elected in December 2019), he probably was viewed by people in that republic as a protégé of the central leadership in Moscow.[[74]](#footnote-74) We should note that Vladislav Surkov’s star has fallen in recent years, and currently he is not part of Russia’s top elite. Some sources assert that the current leaders of Bashkortostan under Radii Khabirov regard Rakhimov’s “clan” as its main enemy.[[75]](#footnote-75) We have seen that Khabirov emphatically supported the decision to allow mining on Kushtau. According to Dmitrii Mikhailichenko, that decision “was taken at the very top,”[[76]](#footnote-76) in the central leadership. That decision aroused bitter opposition from the very start among some people in Bashkiriia.

The difference between Khabirov and Khamitov in relation to the preservation of Kushtau implied that there was a division in the elite of Bashkortostan on that issue. The declaration by the national Council on Human Rights and Civil Society in favor of protecting Kushtau from development must have raised some doubt about the degree of unity in the leadership in Moscow on that subject. Ultimately, when violence between opposing forces broke out on that mountain in August 2020 and the central leadership pressured Khabirov to reverse his position, it became clear that the highest decision makers were not firmly committed to allowing the Bashkir Soda Company to exploit the mineral resources of that shikhan. The bluntness with which Vladimir Putin denounced that company, copying the language of those who opposed the mining of Kushtau, was exceptional. Usually the Kremlin protects cozy relationships between government officials and privately owned companies, since such relationships are an essential part of the system over which Putin presides. But in this case, divisions within the political elite of Russia, generating tension between national and regional leaders and within the elite of a republic, may have created a favorable opportunity for the success of a movement that sought a specific change in policy.

**The Diffusion of Examples of Successful Movements**

It has been known for some time that most of the movements that give rise to protests in Russia are focused on problems that groups of people experience in their daily lives.[[77]](#footnote-77) Such movements concentrate their attention on issues that are narrowly defined and are important to their supporters, and that call for changes in specific policies rather than the transformation of the political regime of their country. Laura Henry aptly has said that most ecological activism in Russia today expresses “the environmentalism of everyday life.”[[78]](#footnote-78) In her words, “these initiatives are focused on tangible problems that occur in close proximity to citizens, presenting daily frustrations.” We might also observe that movements of that type fit the characteristics of “rightful resistance,” as they ask higher leaders to intervene in order to enforce the norms that the political regime has explicitly endorsed. It might be easy to dismiss such movements as insignificant, since they might be seen as being motivated by NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) goals in resisting developments. Yet this paper argues that students of comparative politics should devote attention to movements in Russia that seek changes in specific policies, since movements of that type have a better chance of winning support from substantial numbers of Russian citizens, and they also may be subjected to less repression by the political authorities.[[79]](#footnote-79) That is an especially important consideration now, since Putin’s regime has tightened the limits on nongovernmental organizations and protests during the last several years.[[80]](#footnote-80) Also, we should be aware that even though protests about specific issues do not directly challenge the legitimacy of the nation’s political system, they do criticize violations of citizens’ rights, inevitably suggesting that the process of governing has been unjust.[[81]](#footnote-81) In addition, there is a growing body of evidence of the potential for horizontal diffusion of the examples of locally based protests in Russia. And finally, movements that arise from the grassroots and call for improvement in the performance of the state sometimes do have a impact on policies on a wide scale.[[82]](#footnote-82)

The movement to defend Kushtau has been inspired to a striking degree by the success of the movement that concentrated its attention on Shies in the far north. Shies is the location of a railway station in Arkhangel’sk region that had been chosen for a landfill, which eventually would have stored a huge amount of garbage from Moscow. Protesters erected a camp of tents at that site, and their bitter opposition to the creation of that landfill was eventually successful in bringing the abandonment of that plan.[[83]](#footnote-83) The turmoil that such protests had caused even led to the replacement of the governor of the Arkhangel’sk region and the head of the neighboring Komi Republic. Shies had become the symbol of a successful movement that had opposed a plan with powerful political backing.[[84]](#footnote-84) That symbol was openly invoked by the people who took part in the movement to save Kushtau. In February 2020 protesters at Kushtau proclaimed that “the residents of Shies have been celebrated throughout the whole country.”[[85]](#footnote-85) At that time some of the activists who had protested at Shies went to Bashkiriia to show their support for those who strove to defend Kushtau.[[86]](#footnote-86) The protesters from Shies shared lessons from their experiences with those participating in the movement to protect Kushtau.[[87]](#footnote-87) Those who had organized the camp at Shies could draw on their experience in handling the practical tasks of maintaining their camp, confronting the forces commanded by the authorities, and gaining popular support.[[88]](#footnote-88) In short, their advice for the leaders of the movement in Bashkiriia contributed to a transfer of strategy from one location to another. In the contemporary world, communication like that between the protesters in Arkhangel’sk and those in Bashkortostan can be facilitated greatly by social media. Some of those in the movement to protect Kushtau referred to the events at that mountain as constituting a “new Shies,” a “Bashkir Shies,” or a “second Shies, only in Bashkiriia.”[[89]](#footnote-89) A primary reason that the movement to defend Shies is an appealing example is that it achieved victory.[[90]](#footnote-90) As an example of specific influence, the activists who sought to protect Kushtau created a camp of tents, “according to the model of Shies” (*po obraztsu Shiesa)*.[[91]](#footnote-91) That language suggests that the leaders of the movement to defend Kushtau regarded the experience of those who had opposed the creation of a landfill at Shies as providing a model (*obrazets*), or an example that could guide them.[[92]](#footnote-92)

In turn, after the movement against mining on Kushtau achieved a successful result, its example inspired groups that used protests to protect the environment in other parts of Bashkortostan. One commentator has said that the victory of activists at Kushtau “awakened the protest agenda in the republic,”[[93]](#footnote-93) and another has asserted, “the effect of Kushtau is being disseminated.”[[94]](#footnote-94) Issues concerning damage to the environment arose in several places; as one source put it, “in our republic . . . everywhere are ecological problems, and those questions are fairly sharp.”[[95]](#footnote-95) One of the most controversial issues was created by the proposal of a subsidiary of the Bashkir Copper Company (BMK) to start mining for copper in the Abzelilovskii District.[[96]](#footnote-96) One journalist reported that at first, people at that location were afraid to speak up, but movements elsewhere, including that at Kushtau, “aroused hope” for them.[[97]](#footnote-97) Protesters at Abzelilovskii asked for a status for the Kryktytaty ridge analogous to that which had been granted for Kushtau,[[98]](#footnote-98) and organized a flashmob to support their demand.[[99]](#footnote-99) Azat Badranov, who at that time was still the vice premier of the republic, went to Abzelilovskii to meet with local residents to discuss the issue.[[100]](#footnote-100) Finally RMK announced its decision to leave Bashkiriia and abandon its hope for extracting copper in Abzelilovskii.[[101]](#footnote-101)

Recently there have been other examples of environmental movements in Bashkortostan. On September 27 a meeting of citizens adopted a resolution against the construction of a factory for zink in Sibai.[[102]](#footnote-102) Around the same time, residents of villages in the Baimakskii District met to oppose mining for gold in a quarry near Lake Talkas.[[103]](#footnote-103) An activist who took part in the defense of Kushtau, Ruslan Nurtdinov, has asserted enthusiastically that in his republic, “after Kushtau a real boom in civil self-consciousness (*grazhdanskoe samosoznanie*) took place.”[[104]](#footnote-104) But the influence of the protests to protect Kushtau also has been felt outside the borders of Bashkortostan. A movement in the city of Cheliabinsk has developed a relationship with the activists in Abzelilovskii.[[105]](#footnote-105) Most strikingly, activists who recently have voiced their opposition to construction projects in Moscow that are planned by the company Tashir have made a film that is titled “Moskovskii Kushtau” (Moscow’s Kushtau), which explains why some Muscovites are dissatisfied with those plans.[[106]](#footnote-106) Also, in December 2020 a representative of an “initiative group” which strives to defend the Troitskii Forest in Moscow from proposed road construction observed, “there are successful examples of the defense of natural territories, for example, Shies or the Shikhans.”[[107]](#footnote-107) So the experience of the movement to defend Kushtau has even become a positive example for some residents in the capital of Russia.

**Conclusion**

After the Soviet Union broke up, the leaders of some environmentalist groups in Russia had a high degree of professional expertise and enjoyed the benefit of strong connections with Western environmentalists. However, in recent years, no new generation of similar professionals has come along to replace those environmentalists.[[108]](#footnote-108) Also, the government of Russia has accused groups who advocate greater protection for the environment of serving foreign powers who seek to undermine Russia’s national interests, and many citizens of that country have found such accusations to be plausible.[[109]](#footnote-109) In that context, it is important that the movement to defend a mountan in Bashkortostan can be described as an expression of *local patriotism*. It is a movement that appeals to the pride of people who identify with the region in which they live, and that depicts distinctive mountains as cherished symbols of their pride. The leaders of movement to defend Kushtau charge that decision makers have shown a lack of respect for the dignity of the people of Bashkortostan and have launched actions that would humiliate the local community by showing indifference toward its wishes. We might note that the themes of dignity, humiliation, and a deficit of consultation are similar to those in many other movements that organize protests against the decisions of governments on various levels in Russia.

An appeal to local patriotism can enhance the resonance of the frame that a movement has adopted, and therefore help to build a broader base of support in the local population, reaching beyond a small stratum of highly educated and Western-oriented environmentalists. In addition, a perspective that is colored by local patriotism reverses the direction of the allegation that environmentalists serve foreign masters who want to damage Russia’s national interests. The defenders of Kushtau argue that decision makers who serve selfish groups have taken a course of action that damages the interests of the people of Bashkiriia. So in that case, the environmentalists strive to defend the local homeland from threats that come from above. Remarkably, Vladimir Putin’s words, suggesting that those who would have profited from the destruction of Kushtau are a few wealthy men who live in a comfortable setting in France, reinforce the allegations of the activists who have sought to protect Kushtau.[[110]](#footnote-110) Many other movements that are driven by various forms of local patriotism have emerged in Russia recently. There is good reason to regard the large-scale protests in Ingushetiia in 2018 and 2019[[111]](#footnote-111) and the persistent protests in Khabarovsk that began in 2020 as manifestations of the power of local patriotism (although in those cases, discontent was focused on political issues from the beginning and sometimes presented direct challenges to the highest national leaders, and therefore could not be classified as rightful resistance). One of the slogans that protesters have chanted in Khabarovsk is “*Eto nash krai!*” (“This is our territory!”)[[112]](#footnote-112) And, as we have learned, a crowd at Kushtau declared “*Kushtau nash!*” The local community that protesters seek to defend may be on the scale of an entire republic; it may be no larger than a rural village or a neighborhood in a city; or it may consist only of the residents in one apartment building. In each case the movement to defend that community is generated domestically and from the grassroots, and is not imported from abroad or introduced from above.

The example of the movement to protect Kushtau also shows that a movement which might seem to have little importance because of its narrowly focused objectives can have broader implications, because it raises essential questions about the relationship between citizens and the authorities, its frame resonates with groups in society, and finally because of the potential for *horizontal diffusion* of the influence of a movement that emerges in one region or in one part of society. The success of the activists who opposed the creation of a large landfill at Shies served as an inspiration for activists in Bashkiriia. Further, the movement that focused on Shies has become a model that appeals to the leaders of environmentalist movements in other parts of Russia, and the example of the movement to protect Kushtau also encourages other protesters. Horizontal communication makes it possible to transfer strategies for change across physical distances. Of course, the model developed at Shies is attractive to activists in other locations because it ultimately achieved a high degree of success. It won! And the fact that its victory is highly respected in other parts of Russia implies that it is unusual for any social movement in that country to reach its goals when it is battling against powerful, entrenched interests. The conditions that opened the way for victory for the defenders of Kushtau are not present in every instance, and perhaps not in most cases. As was noted earlier in this paper, success in bringing a change in policy depends not only on the characteristics and strategy of a movement, but also on factors that are beyond the control of that movement.

Movements that articulate interests infused with local patriotism present a challenge to the performance of the political regime in Putin’s Russia. The political institutions that have taken shape in that country are not well suited to respond to grassroots movements that demand changes in policies. The channels for representing groups of citizens are weak, and the institutions that wield authority are clumsy in responding to conflicts that arise from society.[[113]](#footnote-113) As Nadezhda Ermolaeva has observed about the conflict over Kushtau, “the release mechanism for that was social protest,” while “for many years the juridical resolution of the question was spinning its wheels (*buksovalo*).”[[114]](#footnote-114) Scholars who study protests that have the character of rightful resistance point out that the participants in those protests want to persuade the decision makers to engage in bargaining with them. [[115]](#footnote-115) Dmitrii Mikhailichenko argues that in Russia, “society wants dialogue and mutual respect, and not manipulation and insults.”[[116]](#footnote-116) When protesters encounter manipulation, insults, and repression until the highest leader in Russia steps in to resolve the issue, it is evident that lower level mechanisms for dialogue and bargaining are inadequate.

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8. Anastasiia Mel’nikova, “Vladimir Vladimirovich ne liubit, kogda mestnye problemy masshtabiruiutsia na federal’nyi uroven’,” *Znak.com*, September 8, 2020, <https://www.znak.com/2020-09-08/istochnik_glava_bashkirii_osenyu_mozhet_byt_otpravlen_v_otstavku_posle_skandala_s_kushtau>, accessed September 9, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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70. Egorova, “Soda ili priroda.” [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Quoted in Ramil’ Rakhmatov, “Natal’ia Zubarevich ob ekonomike Bashkirii: ‘Vy tratili kak podorvaannye,’” *Profu.ru*, December 23, 2020, <https://proufu.ru/news/economika/99919-natalya_zubarevich_vy_tratili_kak_podorvannye/>, accessed December 24, 2020. That assessment is supported by another scholar, Stanislav Shkel’, as quoted in *Klub regionov*. “Politolog Shkel’: protesty vokrug shikhana Kushtau stali ser’eznoi problemoi dlia glavy Bashkirii Khabirova,” August 13, 2020, <http://club-rf.ru/02/detail/4415>, accessed December 16, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Mel’nikova, “Vladimir Vladimirovich ne liubit”; see also Ildar Gabdafrikov and Henry Hale, “Bashkortostan’s Democratic Moment? Patronal Presidentialism, Regional Regime Change, and Identity in Russia,” in *Reconstruction and Interaction of Slavic Eurasia and Its Neighboring Worlds*, ed. Osamu Ieda and Tomohiko Uyama (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2006), 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Mel’nikova, “Vladimir Vladimirovich ne liubit”; Sharafutdinova, “Elite Management,” 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Gorbacheva, “Vstali goroi.” [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. *ProUfu.ru*, “Bashkirii vystupili ocherednoi feik o sem’e Murtazy Rakhimova,” February 24, 2021, <https://proufu.ru/news/novosti/102264-vlasti_bashkirii_vypustili_ocherednoy_feyk_o_seme_murtazy_rakhimova/>, accessed February 24, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. In Rakhmatov, “Glavnaia oshibka.’’ [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Alfred B. Evans, Jr., “Civil Society and Protest,” in *Putin’s Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, ed. Stephen K. Wegren (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Laura A. Henry, “Russian Environmentalism after the Foreign Agent Law,” Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Chicago, IL, November 2017, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. That is not to say that there are no attempts by the authorities to intimidate citizens who take part in movements of that sort in Russia. In fact, some protesters are attacked physically, and the leaders of such actions are often arrested, fined, and harassed in other ways. But Russia’s political regime is much more determined to suppress movements that strive for basic political change. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Geir Flikke “Resurgent Authoritarianism: The Case of Russia’s New NGO Legislation,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2016): 103-111; Leah Gilbert, “Crowding Out Civil Society: State Management of Social Organisations in Putin’s Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 68, no. 9 (2016): 1553-1578; Kirsti Stuvøy, “ ‘The Foreign Within’: State-Society Relations in Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 72, no. 7 (2020): 1103-1124. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Evans, “Civil Society and Protest,” 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. In the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, local movements against the building of incinerators for trash became widespread, and eventually helped to produce changes in policy that decreased reliance on burning waste and led to a greater emphasis on recycling. Edward J. Walsh, Rex Warland, and D. Clayton Smith, *Don’t Burn It Here: Grassroots Challenges to Trash Incinerators* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). Recently in Russia, protests have been followed by an effort by the national government to encourage more recycling of trash and limit the expansion of landfills. In practice that reform is not going well at all (Oleg Ian, “Do musornogo kollapsa ostaiutsia mesiatsy. Pochemu reforma ne rabotaet?” *MBKh media*, September 29, 2020, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/do-musornogo-kollapsa-ostayutsya-mesyacy/>, accessed September 29, 2020), but at least protests have helped to bring the issue to the attention of the media and toput it on the agenda of national political leaders. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Irina Andrionova, “The Shies Camp: How Moscow’s Trash Became Treasure for a Group of Environmental Protestors,” *Bellona*, January 21, 2020, <https://bellona.org/news/industrial-pollution/2020-01-the-shies-camp-how-moscows-trash-became-treasure-for-a-group-of-environmental-protestors>, accessed October 10, 2020; Liubov’ Poryvaeva and Evgenii Kaliukov, “Sud predpisal snesti postroiki musornogo poligona v Shiese,” *RBK*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/09/01/2020/5e17109a9a794721432ced28>, accessed September 27, 2020; Nataliia Anisimova, “Glava Arkhangel’skoi oblast’ vystupil protiv musornogo poligona v Shiese,” *RBK*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/04/2020/5e980b659a7947b7648ab9b6>, accessed September 27, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. We should not assume that the success of the movements focused on Shies and Kushtau can be regarded as complete and final. In many cases in Russia, commercial development infringes on territories that supposedly are protected by law, either because the status of those territories is changed formally or because of development that violates laws. Presumably the defenders of Shies and Kushtau are aware of that reality, and they know that they need to keep their guard up. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Nadezhda Valitova, “V Bashkirii v aktsii ‘Zhivaia tsep’ Kushtau’ priniali uchastie aktivisty Shiesa,” *Mkset.ru*, February 24, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/04/2020/5e980b659a7947b7648ab9b6>, accessed September 26, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Andras Toth-Czifra, “The Voice of the Regions,” *No Yardstick*, September 23, 2020, <http://www.noyardstick.com/?p=772>, accessed September 25, 2020: “Kushtau protesters were inspired by the protest movement in Shies, [and] established contacts with Shies protesters, who shared their experiences with them as well as advice on how to deal with provocateurs.” [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Gorbacheva, “Kakie uroki Bashkiriia izvlekla.” [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Oleg Zurman, “Bez ‘Sodovoi’, pozhaluista. Kak ekoaktivisty otstoiali shikhan Kushtau.” *Mediazona*, August 17, 2020, <https://zona.media/article/2020/8/16/kushtau>, accessed September 21, 2020; Gorbacheva, “Vstali goroi”; Nikita Telizhenko, “Skladyvaetsia vpechatlenie, chto oni sami uzhe vse nareshali,” *Znak.com*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.znak.com/2020-08-20/u_kushtau_proshla_taynaya_vstrecha_zachitnikov_shihana_sredi_aktivistov_proizoshel_raskol>, accessed August 20, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Varlamov,ru, “Kushtau—novyi russkii Shies,” *Live Journal*, August 15, 2020, <https://varlamov.ru/3997095.html?mediahttps://varlamov.ru/3997095.html?media>, accessed September 18, 2020. We should point out that the movement opposing the creation of a landfill at Shies might have been influenced by the previous, well-publicized experiences of groups in other places in Russia that had protested against the problems caused by landfills near their towns. Evans, “Civil Society and Protest,” 100-101; Laura A. Henry, “Will a Garbage Revolt Threaten Putin?” *The Conversation*, June 7, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/will-a-garbage-revolt-threaten-putin-95704>, accessed July 18, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Andrei Pertsev, “Pokhishchenie gory,” *Meduza*, August 16, 2020, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/08/17/pohischenie-gory>, accessed August 17, 2020; Telizhenko, “Skladyvaetsia vpechatlenie”; Mel’nikova, “Vladimir Vladimirovich ne liubit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. In the language of scholars studying social movements, the example of the movement against a landfill at Shies served as a master frame to be used by other movements. However, as we have suggested, that master frame actually was developed in a series of movements. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Kirill Zotov, “Shikhan Kushtau razbudil protestnuiu povestku v Bashkirii,” *Regnum IA*, September 17, 2020, <https://regnum.ru/analytics/author/kirill_zotov.html>, accessed September 20, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Pavlova, “S chuvstvom glubokogo bureniia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Almaev, “‘Lageria net’”; see also Askarova, “Protestnoe nastroenie zhitelei,” and *Proufu.ru*, “‘Podkhodim k zaboru kombinata, a tam zaitsy ogromnye, svetiatsia.’ V Salavate obnaruzhili 100-kratnoe pevyshenie PDK serovoroda,” March 11, 2021, <https://proufu.ru/news/economika/102765-podkhodim_k_zaboru_kombinata_a_tam_zaytsy_ogromnye_svetyatsya_v_salavate_obnaruzhili_100_kratnoe_pre/>, acccessed March 11, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Gorbacheva, “Vstali goroi”; Timur Rakhmatullin, “Byt’ li mednomu rudniku v Zaural’e? Na iugo-vostoke Bashkirii zreet novyi ekoprotest,” *Real’noe vremia*, September 2, 2020, https://realnoevremya.ru/articles/185982-v-zaschitu-salavat-sovhoza-v-bashkirii-nazrel-novyy-ekologicheskiy-protest, accessed September 23, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Rakhmatullin, “Byt’ li mednomu rudniku.” [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Pavlova, “S chuvstvom glubokogo bureniia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. *Mkset.ru*, “V Bashkirii sostoialsia fleshmob protiv razrabotki mestorozhdeniia medi,” September 5, 2020, <https://mkset.ru/video/general/05-09-2020/v-bashkirii-sostoyalsya-fleshmob-v-znak-protesta-razrabotki-mestorozhdeniya-medi>, accessed September 26, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. “‘Esli nado, kost’iami liazhem.’ Vlasti Bashkirii vstretilis’ s sovetom zashchity Kryktytaty,” *Mkset.ru*, September 11, 2020, <https://mkset.ru/news/politics/11-09-2020/esli-nado-kostmi-lyazhem-vlasti-bashkirii-vstretilis-s-sovetom-zaschity-kryktytau>, accessed September 26, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Minzalia Askarova, “‘Russkaia Mednaia Kompaniia’ ukhodit iz Bashkirii. Chto govoriat ekologi i ekonomisti,” *Mkset,ru*, September 21, 2020, https://mkset.ru/news/economy/21-09-2020/russkaya-mednaya-kompaniya-uhodit-iz-bashkirii-chto-govoryat-ekologi-i-ekonomisty, accessed September 21, 2020; Pavlova, “S chuvstvom glubokogo bureniia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Anna Kononova, “V Bashkirii aktivisty priniali rezoliutsiiu protiv stroitel’stva tsinkogo zavoda v Sibae,” *Mkset.ru*, September 28, 2020, <https://mkset.ru/news/society/28-09-2020/v-bashkirii-aktivisty-prinyali-rezolyutsiyu-protiv-stroitelstva-tsinkovogo-zavoda-v-sibae>, accessed September 28, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. “‘Nam ne nuzhno zoloto’: kak zhiteli Bashkirii pytaiutsia spasti chisteishee Talkas ot oligarkhikov,” *Profu.ru*, September 28, 2020, <https://proufu.ru/news/society/96805-nam_ne_nuzhno_zoloto_kak_zhiteli_bashkirii_pytayutsya_spasti_chisteyshee_ozero_talkas_ot_oligarkhov/>, accessed September 28, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Artur Asaf’ev, “Etim razgonom nas ne napugali, a, naoborot, tol’ko razzadorili,” *Idel.Realii*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/31157603.html>, accessed March 19, 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Pavlova, “S chuvstvom glubokogo bureniia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Lora Suslova, “‘Moskovskii Kushtau’: Pochemu moskvichi protestuiut protiv stroek ‘Tashira,’” *MBKh Media*, October 6, 2020, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/moskovskij-kushtau/>, accessed October 7, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Dar’ia Alifanova, “V Novoi Moskve mogut unichtozhit’ desiatki gektarov Troitskogo lesa,” *Moskovskaia gazeta*, December 24, 2020, <https://mskgazeta.ru/obshchestvo/v-novoj-moskve-mogut-unichtozhit-desyatki-gektarov-troickogo-lesa-6657.html>, accessed December 24, 2020. The person who was quoted is Ol’ga Slastunina. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Henry, “Russian Environmentalism,” 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Maria Tysiachniouk, Svetlana Tulaeva, and Laura A. Henry, “Civil Society under the Law ‘On Foreign Agents’: NGO Strategies and Network Transformation,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 70, no. 4 (2018): 621, 631, 634. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Putin’s statement also implied that, if the owners of the Bashkir Soda Company had invested more of their profits into the modernization of its technology, their company could have continued to produce soda from sources other than the limestone in the shikhany. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, “Thousands Rally in Ingushetia To Protest Chechnya Land Swaps,” March 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/thousands-rally-in-ingushetia-to-protest-chechnya-land-swaps/29843003.html>, accessed October 21, 2020; *Moscow Times*, “Violent Clashes Erupt between Protesters and Security Forces in Russia’s Ingushetia,” March 27, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/03/27/violent-clashes-erupt-between-protesters-and-security-forces-in-russias-ingushetia-a64971>, accessed October 21, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Svetlana Chekanova, “Sto dnei protestov v Khabarovske: ot mitingov do pokhishchenii,” *MBKh media*, October 17, 2020, <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/region/sto-dnej-protestov-v-xabarovske/>, accessed October 19, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Of course, protests also take place in other types of political systems, including democracies. But under a democratic political regime there are other channels for articulating demands, and citizens can also use those channels, often in connection with protest demonstrations. We also should recognize that even in a democracy, features of the society or the political institutions may prevent those channels from achieving results that satisfy some demands. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Taimasov and Ermolaeva, “‘Kushtau—gora pravovykh voprosov.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Alfred Evans, “Property and Protests: The Struggle over the Renovation of Housing in Moscow,” *Russian Politics*, vol. 3, no. 4 (2018): 548-576. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. In Rakhmatov, “Glavnaia oshibka.” [↑](#footnote-ref-116)