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Premium

Hosting the BRICS summit: Why Kazan in Tatarstan matters in Putin's Russia

Originally built in the early 16th century, Kul Sharif was burnt down by Ivan the Terrible during the Siege of Kazan, which led to the fall of the Khanate of Kazan and brought Tatarstan under Muscovite control in 1552.

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A view shows a banner with the logo of the annual BRICS summit next to the Kazan Kremlin in Kazan, Russia October 22, 2024. (Image source: REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in Russia for the 16th BRICS summit, which China's President Xi Jinping and South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa are also attending, besides the host, President Vladimir Putin.

The [host city, Kazan](#), is among Russia's largest and wealthiest cities, deriving its prosperity from a robust petrochemicals and military industry, as well as a fast-growing information technology sector. In 2009, it was branded Russia's third capital after Moscow and the cultural capital St Petersburg. Kazan is also one of the country's cities of the future — in the sense that it already anticipates some of the significant demographic changes that are contributing to Russia's evolving national identity.

Russia and Russian

The country Russia is the homeland of the Russian people, the largest Slavic ethnic group, who speak Russian as their mother tongue. Since most ethnic Russians are

Orthodox Christians, religion too has been central to the imagination of who is Russian.

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But this definition does not capture the socio-cultural diversity of the world's largest country. Sprawled from Finland to its west to Alaska to its east, Russia is a transcontinental, multi-ethnic giant straddling Europe and Asia, and all but touching America.

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More than 80 per cent of its population is ethnic Russian, but it also comprises as many as 193 ethnic groups and 21 national republics, which are home to specific ethnic minorities. The minority groups have been historically sidelined and repressed by the ethnic Russian majority.

But this could be about to change. The proportion of ethnic Russians and Slavs in the population has been declining, and this trend will likely accelerate. The birth rate among ethnic Russians (1.3 children per woman) is significantly lower than that among Muslim ethnicities (2.3), and the share of Muslim ethnic minorities in Russia's population could, in coming decades, triple from the current 10%.

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Besides becoming ethnically less Russian and religiously more diverse, Russia's population will likely also be smaller. Official data published last month showed the country recorded its lowest birth rate since 1999 in the first six months of 2024, Reuters reported. To offset the population decline, Russia is expected to allow more migration, with the bulk of new migrants being Muslims belonging to Turkic and Asiatic ethnic groups.

East & West city

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Kazan is especially relevant to this discussion on Russia's demography. Located roughly 900 km to the east of Moscow at the confluence of the rivers Volga and Kazanka, this city of 1.2 million is the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan, the homeland of the Tatar people, the second largest ethnic group in the country after Russians. The Tatars are a predominantly Muslim Turkic ethnic group with their own language and distinct culture.

The population of Kazan is split roughly equally among ethnic Russians (48.6%) and ethnic Tatars (47.6%). This makes Kazan a symbol of the kind of nation Russia is gradually evolving into: a blend of Europe and Asia, a melting pot of diverse ethnicities and religions.

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Commentators have noted evidence of Kazan's diversity in the neighbourhood of the city kremlin, the fortified complex that lies at the heart of many Russian cities. Next to the official buildings stands the Orthodox Annunciation Cathedral and the Kul Sharif Mosque — among the largest in Europe — with its distinctive white tiles and turquoise dome and minarets.

Originally built in the early 16th century, Kul Sharif was burnt down by Ivan the Terrible during the Siege of Kazan, which led to the fall of the Khanate of Kazan and brought Tatarstan under Muscovite control in 1552. The mosque was rebuilt with Saudi and UAE help in 2005.

Tatars under Putin

President Putin has sought to play a balancing game in his dealings with Russia's ethnic minorities. He has tried hard to incorporate ethnic minorities into the mainstream, reconcile differences, and championed a nationalism that proclaims the greatness of Russia, not ethnic Russians. But he has dealt with secessionist sentiments with an iron hand, as his approach towards the Chechens shows.

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Putin's persecution of Crimean Tatars following the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the devolution of powers and status from the leader of Tatarstan in 2021 have been sore points. Bringing the BRICS summit to Kazan has been seen as a conciliatory step.



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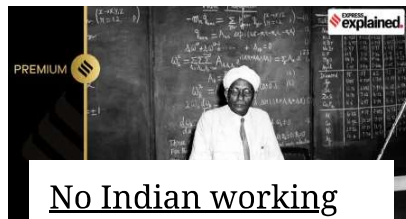
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