

Re-Imagining the Contours of the Russian State
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Introduction

Covering eleven time zones, encompassing 89 subnational units, and serving as home to over 100 distinct ethnic groups, the Russian state would face a host of governing challenges even if it were not undergoing a simultaneous political and economic transition. The dual transition, however, has clearly exacerbated the natural cleavages that cut across the Russian expanse. In this short essay, I explore these cleavages and attempt to provide some insight into why they have come to the forefront of Russia's post-Soviet politics.

Aside from the recurrent Chechen conflict, Russia's post-Soviet rulers have endured a number of challenges from newly empowered regional governments since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Indeed, the 1990's were an absolutely crucial decade in the reform of the shape and nature of the Russian state, and center-periphery relations in particular. In the space of approximately a decade, Russia moved from an unquestionably unitary state under Communist Party rule, to a "hyper-federation" operating within the context of an unruly democracy and halting economic transition to market economics.

As the Soviet system began to unravel in the late 1980's so too did the two main bulwarks of its vertical system of central control over the periphery – the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the command economy. Their undoing was in part hastened by the holding of free elections to regional legislatures) in the spring of 1990, thus loosening the strangle hold of the CPSU on the machinery of government.

The gradual erosion of the power of central ministries over the economy was brought about initially through a series of half-baked reforms under Mikhail Gorbachev also in the late 1980's. Throughout the late 1980s the staffs of the huge bureaucracies that controlled all economic decision making were slashed and the ministries were subjected to a series of ill-conceived reorganizations. This led to a reduced role for planning agencies and federal bureaucracies in regional economies, and contributed to the emerging independent authority of powerful enterprise directors and as importantly newly elected regional governments.

Beyond the disintegration of the CPSU and the command economy, however, Boris Yeltsin's political jockeying with Gorbachev in 1990 and 1991 for Russia's supremacy over the unraveling USSR also undoubtedly hastened the devolution of power from USSR to Russian Republic and from Russian Republic to its constituent provinces. Yeltsin's now infamous exhortation to regional leaders within Russia to "take as much autonomy as you can swallow" paralleled his own struggles against Union supremacy and Gorbachev's desperate attempts in 1991 to hold the Soviet Union together.

The 89 units that comprise the renewed Russian Federation vary tremendously in geographic size – with for example the republic of Sakha-Yakutia spanning an area greater than the size of modern France, while the Chechen Republic is about half the size

of the state of Rhode Island. Population size also varies dramatically among the constituent parts of Russia such that the city of Moscow counts about 8.6 million inhabitants while the Evenk Autonomous Okrug includes approximately 19, 000.

Given the diversity of its land and people, the complex and complicated heritage of the Soviet system, and the added complication of a simultaneous economic and political transition initiated in 1992, it is perhaps not surprising that post-Soviet Russian center-periphery relations quickly became contentious and in some instances, highly conflictual. The two Chechen campaigns are particularly stark examples of the difficult relationships Moscow has had with many of its constituent units. Yet the Chechen experience is not representative of the ways in which territorial disputes have been resolved through the 1990's. Indeed, where Chechnia's demands for increased autonomy from Moscow devolved into violent conflict, several other ethnically non-Russian republics pursued non-violent means to gain increased policy-making autonomy from Moscow.

The cleavages within the Russian Federation cut in a number of ways – center versus peripheries, ethnic Russian regions versus ethnically non-Russian regions, and wealthy regions versus poor regions. There is no single cause for these lines of cleavage. Rather, a number of causes have contributed to the awkward shaping and reshaping of Russia's federal relations and these have produced complex and contradictory pictures of the renewed Russian state.

Re-Imagining Russia

Even in the years leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in December, 1991 a fundamental clash of views developed concerning the shape of Russian federal relationships. The central authorities, borrowing from the Soviet system, preferred a federal system where the center was clearly preeminent while many regional political officials pushed hard for a far more decentralized system. This clash of views is evident in the peculiar institutional and constitutional framework that developed to manage center-periphery relations in Russia. Undoubtedly also, the introduction of competitive elections did a great deal to force devolution from center to periphery in that elections made regional officials accountable to local interests rather than distant officials in Moscow. This served to seriously damage and eventually destroyed the pre-existing system of vertical integration and central control that existed during Soviet rule. The institutions that developed to manage Russian territorial politics have proven weak and ineffective, however.

The tug of war between the central government and the provinces that characterized the period (1990-1993) leading up to the adoption of the Russian Constitution illustrates the conflicting views regarding what kind of institutional framework would arise to manage Russian territorial conflict. While Moscow sought to impose a national federal system -- that is, a system imposed from above, with the central government being the clear leading power -- the provinces advocated a more "contractual" federal system, where each subnational unit would agree to enter the federation on a negotiated, contractual basis and where the central government's power would be de-emphasized relative to that of the federation's constituent parts. As a result

of this clash of “re-imaginings” regarding the shape of the Russian state produced a contradictory and ineffective institutional framework that ultimately satisfied neither side. The central government attempted to install Soviet-style institutions to bring unruly regional governments to heel, while regional governments built up institutions to actively oppose central rule.

Undoubtedly, the introduction of competitive elections at the regional level launched Russia on a more complex path of reform. The 1990 elections of regional soviets (legislatures) injected the notion of political accountability into subnational politics. If elected officials were now going to be held responsible by their electorates for local conditions, then they naturally demanded increased control over matters of prime importance at the subnational level. The regional activism in this early period was also, in part, an immediate reaction to the extreme centralization of the past (where Moscow controlled all trade and most interregional contacts). Under the old unitary system, many regions were not able to benefit from their natural material resources (like oil and gas) because effectively they were treated as colonies of the central Soviet state. The proceeds from mineral extraction, for example, went straight to Moscow with the region and its inhabitants deriving practically no benefit. As their regions suffered from cuts in funding from Moscow, and an increase in policy responsibilities, new regional leaders found this situation intolerable. Finally, the surge in regional demands for more control during this period may also have been a result of the fact that many old Communist Party bosses, who sometimes found themselves still in office following the 1990 elections, wanted increased control in order to enrich themselves and protect their own preferred status in the new political and emerging economic order.

The assertiveness at the level of the twenty one ethnic republics of Russia (Tatarstan and Chechnia among them) was accompanied by a “war of laws” between the Russian Federation government in Moscow and several republics (where republics would pass legislation directly contravening Moscow’s edicts), as well as the financially crippling and widespread withholding of tax revenues from Moscow by both oblast and krai, as well as republic level governments.

This was despite the fact that in 1991, in a failed attempt to avoid the erosion of central authority in the provinces, President Yeltsin introduced the office of presidential representative.

Re-Imagining Institutions of Central Control

The position of presidential representative was an overt attempt by Moscow to reintroduce central executive control over the provinces and has been thrice reformed since its inception in 1992. Within a month of his first being elected president of Russia in June, 1991, Yeltsin announced his intention to appoint an envoy to every region. This was to ensure that presidential decisions would be reliably implemented and to provide reliable information about the political situation in each region. Although he reformed the office in 1997 in an attempt to strengthen it, ultimately it came to have little influence over regional politics and policy.

President Vladimir Putin, reformed this office yet again in 2000 in a renewed attempt to regain control over Russia’s restive provinces. Putin installed new presidential representatives in each of seven newly created “super districts” (each encompassing

approximately 12-15 oblasts, krajs, republics or autonomies). As with the two previous iterations of this office under Yeltsin, the new representatives of the federal executive have poorly defined responsibilities. It is unclear, for example, to what degree they are supposed to oversee the actions of regional governments in general or merely federal bureaucrats in the regions. Indeed, this institutional solution to the center's problems in the regions appears to have merely created a further layer of the Russian state without actually enhancing its abilities to govern at the regional level. It also may be an attempt to resurrect a system of vertical integration reminiscent more of the Soviet era than of a developing federal democracy. Thus, Putin's re-imagining of the Russian state appears to draw heavily on old Soviet institutional frameworks.

The clash of "reimaginings" of the shape of the Russian state is also evident in the Constitution signed in 1993. Although it was intended to address some of the vagaries of the Russian federal system, it probably did more to complicate the already complicated patchwork of center-periphery relations. It contained two articles (71 and 72) that assigned policy jurisdiction to the various levels of government. Article 71 lists the powers exclusively allotted to the federal government in Moscow, while Article 72 enumerates those areas in which responsibility is to be shared between Moscow and the constituent units of the Federation. Article 71 is so exhaustive, however, that there are few powers left to share with the regions. Indeed, there is no section in the constitution of the Russian Federation which specifically enumerates the powers reserved exclusively for subnational governments, raising the question as to whether the Russian basic law actually constitutes the country as a federation at all.

As a result, some regions and republics attempted to claim some exclusive powers through alternative means. Tatarstan's stubbornness in this regard and its success in extracting from Moscow additional jurisdictional rights led to the establishment of a dangerous precedent in center-periphery relations. This deal initiated a series of similar agreements signed between Moscow and both oblasts and republics and further sustained the principle of Moscow's unequal treatment of units of the federation.

The examples of the special agreement the center had made with Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and other republics in 1994 gave rise to further asymmetries in Russian federal relations as 46 other regions demanded and achieved bilateral treaties and agreements for themselves by 1998.

The treaties [*dogovora*] themselves were relatively general statements regarding the nature of the division of powers and shared powers between the particular subject of the federation and federal institutions. All the treaties were slightly different, although they contained some common elements. They were accompanied by a series of agreements [*soglasheniye*], which could be signed any time after the conclusion of the treaties.

The agreements were far more detailed than the treaties with respect to specific policy purviews and were, therefore, rather wildly different for each region depending on particular policy concerns and resource endowments.

But the treaties and agreements, despite central government declarations to the contrary, were not always based on the constitution and supportive of the principles of the supremacy of federal law, and the establishment of a single political and economic expanse. They served to establish Russia's federal relations more on a contractual than on a national-constitutional basis, carving out far more freedom of action for the subjects of

the Federation than the drafters of the 1993 constitution had likely intended. On one level or another, some treaties contradicted the constitution rather directly. Indeed, the treaties and agreements in general contradicted the declared intention of the constitution to render all subjects of the Federation equal to one another. Their inconsistencies are emblematic of the clash of “re-imaginings” at the heart of center-regional relations in Russia today.

Although the treaties may have served to calm the more rebellious and demanding regions of Russia (Tatarstan and Sverdlovsk oblast chief among them) in some respects, this came at considerable cost to the federal government. The economic crisis stemming from the August, 1998 financial collapse served to underscore the fact that many regions in practice exercised autonomy beyond what was provided for in either the bilateral agreements, the constitution or existing federal law. That is, the treaties were far from definitive in terms of lending predictability to center-periphery relations, nor in ensuring implementation of and adherence to central policy at the provincial level. Thus, if the treaties were a federal strategy intended to restrain further grabs for regional autonomy, or to lend more predictability to center-periphery power relations, then that strategy failed.

More significantly, however, the available empirical evidence from the regional level indicates that the treaties were not the sole means by which regions gained increased autonomy over policy – not infrequently it was simply taken by republics and oblasts alike. Regions were punished infrequently by central authorities for doing so, although the possible pattern to punishing transgressions requires further study. Throughout the 1990’s, there were abundant examples of regions legislating in direct opposition to federal law and the constitution. These examples range widely across regions of Russia, across time, and across policy areas. For example, in 1996, the Ministry of Justice reported that of the 44,000 regional legal acts it reviewed, including gubernatorial orders, it found that nearly half [that is almost 22,000!] of them did not correspond with the Constitution of the Russian Federation. A similar report was issued indicating that in the first three-quarters of 1998, 30% of regional acts were found to violate the constitution and federal law. In a speech on May 17, 2000 President Putin reported that in the first few months of 2000, the Ministry of Justice reported that 20,000 regional laws (or 20% of all regional laws passed in the first quarter of that year) violated the constitution or federal law.

President Putin, almost immediately after coming to power in the spring of 2000 decreed that many of the more egregious regional contradictions of federal law be reversed, but many others remained. Beyond the reform of the office of presidential representative, Putin also initiated legislation that was later adopted by the State Duma enabling the Russian president to dismiss regional heads of administrations (presidents of republics and governors of oblasts) and regional legislatures deemed by the courts to have passed legislation that violates either the constitution of the Russian Federation or federal law. Although this is an undoubtedly powerful instrument on paper, in practice it may prove difficult to use since Putin would face the unpopular scenario of having to dismiss elected authorities in the provinces. This tool is not likely to be used often, if at all, as a result. Further, Putin’s threats and new policy instruments have not gone far in curbing the persistent transgressions of federal authority on the part of many oblasts and particularly republics of Russia. Well into 2001, reports of violations persist. Moreover, the pervasiveness and persistence over time of these violations, and their rather sweeping

nature indicate that the institutional framework that is supposed to govern Russian federal relations is problematic at best.

What should be evident, is how weak many of these new institutions are in ensuring the smooth functioning of shared authority between center and periphery and ameliorating ethnic differences by extension. For despite the signing of many bilateral treaties between Moscow and more than half of the constituent units of the Federation, there remains a tremendous amount of unpredictability in center-periphery relations. What seems clear is that formal institutional arrangements are routinely disregarded or reshaped. The malleability of key institutions designed to govern center-periphery relations (like for example the constitution of 1993) is undoubtedly an important cause of the central state's problems in the periphery. Poorly or underspecified institutions designed (like the presidential representative) are also clearly a cause of Russia's difficulties. Further, the constitution, for example, fails to clearly outline what shared jurisdiction actually means in practice and so regions have taken it upon themselves to breathe life into the meaning of this section, although not in any uniform way. Relatedly, the system of bilateral treaties Moscow signed with half, but not all, of Russia's constituent units produced contradictions in federal relations as well as institutionalizing huge asymmetries in regional power. Finally, a weak system of judicial review and poor implementation of legal decisions, has contributed to the difficulties Moscow has faced in taming the periphery.

Beyond these institutional factors, however, important non-institutional factors share a role in shaping center-periphery conflict. Although some of these are common to all 89 regions of Russia, others are a result of the specific histories of relationships between Moscow and particular regions.

Moscow's troubled relationship with Chechnia, for example, is conditioned by historical, geographical, economic, cultural and international factors. The Chechen people have a long and unfortunate history of struggle against Russian rulers stemming back to Imperial Russia. Their fractious relations with Moscow continued through the Soviet period with mass deportations under Stalin. Perhaps it should not be surprising, given this history, therefore, that Chechnia remains a hot spot in the post-Soviet era. Geographically and economically, Chechnia is also a special case. It is one of a few Russian republics located on an outer border, which makes it more difficult for Moscow to regulate its trading (particularly arms trading) activities.

Nonetheless, the set of circumstances under which Chechnia's troubled relations with Moscow have unfolded is largely distinct from Moscow's experiences with the other non-Russian republics within its borders. The roots of Moscow's conflicts with the republics of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Yakutia, for example, are both cultural and economic in nature. Each of these republics can lay a reasonable claim to a clear and distinct non-Russian ethnic heritage. Thus, part of their conflict with Moscow has undoubtedly been a result of their leaderships' genuine desire to forge a culturally distinct ethnic identity that was long-suppressed under Soviet rule.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that this is the only clear cause of their assertiveness vis-à-vis Moscow. For all three of these republics also have in common vast mineral resources (oil and gas in Tatarstan, oil in Bashkortostan and diamonds in Sakha).

Sakha, for example, is the seat of the Russian diamond industry (and Russia is second in the world in its mining of precious stones), while Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are absolutely key centers for Russia's oil and gas industry. Much of the desire for autonomy in each of these republics has been driven by the desire of their leaderships to reap greater benefit from what lies beneath their soil after years of exploitation under Soviet rule. The pattern of regional activism throughout the 1990's provides support for this interpretation of at least the force behind some of Russia's nationalist revival. That is, those regions that have the most valuable economic resource endowments have proven most active in making claims for increased policy autonomy.

Other less well-endowed republics of Russia, however, have also been relatively aggressive in their pursuit of increased autonomy, although none have been as aggressive as Chechnia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan and Sakha. Buriatia and Tuva, for example, are among the two poorest of Russia's twenty-one republics, yet both of them have signed bilateral treaties with Moscow and both have passed constitutions fraught with clauses that contradict the Russian constitution and strongly challenge the sovereign right of Russia to legislate on their territories. The sources of their autonomy drives would appear to be more cultural than economic therefore – with Tuva having a greater than 63 percent indigenous population, and a distinctive set of cultural, religious and linguistic attributes (indeed, part of its population is comprised of nomadic herders living as their ancestors have for thousands of years). Buriatia, is similarly culturally distinct from the rest of Russia with a significant part of the population claiming the Buddhist religion for example.

Aside from the non-Russian republics, even ethnically Russian regions have doggedly sought to challenge Moscow's authority. Unlike some of the republics, these claims are more clearly based in economics rather than in culture or language. There is at least preliminary evidence that the basis for regional activism among ethnically non-Russian regions is economic rather than primordial nationalism in that regional leaders who were of the titular nationality were not significantly more likely to press separatist demands than those who were Russian.

Beyond common institutional problems, or particularistic historical or cultural causes, Russia's territorial politics are clearly deeply affected by the fact that as the country undergoes a political transition and the evolution of new political institutions, it is simultaneously of course undergoing key economic changes. In particular, the shift in property rights from public to increasingly private has had a direct impact on how center-periphery relations have played out in the recent past and how they will likely continue in future.

The Impact of the Dual Transition on Re-Imaginations of the Russian State

Elsewhere I have argued that the root of this variation and of regional activism more generally is the simultaneity of the economic and political aspects of Russia's transition. That is, the economic transition — and in particular the transfer of property rights regimes from public to private through the late 1980s and early 1990s engendered new social forces that were not incorporated into new institutional frameworks. These interests are untamed and directly challenge what the central state can accomplish. Resistance to central policies then comes not from elected public officials alone in republics and oblasts of the Russian Federation, but also from the small circles of

business interests by whom they have been captured and to whom they have often become accountable. These early “winners” from the transition have little interest in promoting central state regulation of their activities. In order to protect their early financial and property gains, they have effectively carved up and captured parts of the state -- particularly at the regional level -- for personal financial advantage.

As a result, we see regional governments in both republics and oblasts of Russia passing legislation that contradicted the constitution predominantly in ways that affect economic conditions in their regions. For example, the underlying cause of a region establishing a citizenship requirement for voters, or language requirements for elected officials in contradiction to the federal constitution, is undoubtedly to limit and control who is entitled to select regional leaders and also who those regional leaders can be. Regional violations of housing and privatization policies are also designed to ensure that regional interests control regional assets. Restructuring of judiciaries is another strategy to control mechanisms by which ownership disputes might be resolved, ensuring once again that regional interests are protected and advantaged. The imposition of illegal tariffs and taxes on goods entering many regions is another strategy to ensure that local goods and services are privileged over those from outside the region. Restrictions on freedom of movement through the residence permit system that persists in many regions is a strategy for limiting factor mobility in local production facilities and maintaining the prevailing economic balance of power. Finally, declarations of regional ownership of natural resources are further mechanisms by which regional governments, under the influence of regional economic interests, aim to ensure they benefit the most from what lies under their soil.

Concluding Thoughts

In sum, in the course of a decade, much imagining and re-imagining of the Russian state has taken place. Often, the views of officials in the center have come into serious conflict with the perspectives of popularly elected regional officials. The conflictual relations with the provinces, and the steady erosion of the power of the central state in the post-Soviet period is in stark contrast to the shape of its Soviet predecessor and undoubtedly would defy even the wildest imaginings of its former leadership.